THE COMPLETE WITCHER

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ANDRZEJ SAPKOWSKI

TRANSLATED BY
DANUSIA STOK AND DAVID FRENCH

The Complete Witcher: The Last Wish, Sword of Destiny, Blood of Elves, Time of Contempt, Baptism of Fire, The Tower of the Swallow, The Lady of the Lake and Seasons of Storms

Andrzej Sapkowski

Orion (Oct 2020)

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The Complete Witcher

The Last Wish
Sword of Destiny
Blood of Elves
Time of Contempt
Baptism of Fire
The Tower of the Swallow
The Lady of the Lake
Season of Storms

Andrzej Sapkowski

The Last Wish, Blood of Elves translated by Danusia Stok

Sword of Destiny, Time of Contempt, Baptism of Fire, The Tower of the Swallow, The Lady of the Lake, Season of Storms translated by David French

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THE VOICE OF REASON 1

She came to him towards morning.

She entered very carefully, moving silently, floating through the chamber like a phantom; the only sound was that of her mantle brushing her naked skin. Yet this faint sound was enough to wake the witcher – or maybe it only tore him from the half-slumber in which he rocked monotonously, as though travelling through fathomless depths, suspended between the sea bed and its calm surface amidst gently undulating strands of seaweed.

He did not move, did not stir. The girl flitted closer, threw off her mantle and slowly, hesitantly, rested her knee on the edge of the large bed. He observed her through lowered lashes, still not betraying his wakefulness. The girl carefully climbed onto the bedclothes, and onto him, wrapping her thighs around him. Leaning forward on straining arms, she brushed his face with hair which smelt of chamomile. Determined, and as if impatient, she leant over and touched his eyelids, cheeks, lips with the tips of her breasts. He smiled, very slowly, delicately, grasping her by the shoulders, and she straightened, escaping his fingers. She was radiant, luminous in the misty brilliance of dawn. He moved, but with pressure from both hands, she forbade him to change position and, with a light but decisive movement of her hips, demanded a response.

He responded. She no longer backed away from his hands; she threw her head back, shook her hair. Her skin was cool and surprisingly smooth. Her eyes, glimpsed when her face came close to his, were huge and dark as the eyes of a water nymph.

Rocked, he sank into a sea of chamomile as it grew agitated and seethed.

THE WITCHER

I

Later, it was said the man came from the north, from Ropers Gate. He came on foot, leading his laden horse by the bridle. It was late afternoon and the ropers', saddlers' and tanners' stalls were already closed, the street empty. It was hot but the man had a black coat thrown over his shoulders. He drew attention to himself.

He stopped in front of the Old Narakort Inn, stood there for a moment, listened to the hubbub of voices. As usual, at this hour, it was full of people.

The stranger did not enter the Old Narakort. He pulled his horse further down the street to another tavern, a smaller one, called The Fox. Not enjoying the best of reputations, it was almost empty.

The innkeeper raised his head above a barrel of pickled cucumbers and measured the man with his gaze. The outsider, still in his coat, stood stiffly in front of the counter, motionless and silent.

'What will it be?'

'Beer,' said the stranger. His voice was unpleasant.

The innkeeper wiped his hands on his canvas apron and filled a chipped earthenware tankard.

The stranger was not old but his hair was almost entirely white. Beneath his coat he wore a worn leather jerkin laced up at the neck and shoulders.

As he took off his coat those around him noticed that he carried a sword – not something unusual in itself, nearly every man in Wyzim carried a weapon – but no one carried a sword strapped to his back as if it were a bow or a quiver.

The stranger did not sit at the table with the few other guests. He remained standing at the counter, piercing the innkeeper with his gaze. He drew from the tankard.

'I'm looking for a room for the night.'

'There's none,' grunted the innkeeper, looking at the guest's boots, dusty and dirty. 'Ask at the Old Narakort.'

'I would rather stay here.'

'There is none.' The innkeeper finally recognised the stranger's accent. He was Rivian.

‘I’ll pay.’ The outsider spoke quietly, as if unsure, and the whole nasty affair began. A pockmarked beanpole of a man who, from the moment the outsider had entered had not taken his gloomy eyes from him, got up and approached the counter. Two of his companions rose behind him, no more than two paces away.

‘There’s no room to be had, you Rivian vagabond,’ rasped the pockmarked man, standing right next to the outsider. ‘We don’t need people like you in Wyzim. This is a decent town!’

The outsider took his tankard and moved away. He glanced at the innkeeper, who avoided his eyes. It did not even occur to him to defend the Rivian. After all, who liked Rivians?

‘All Rivians are thieves,’ the pock-marked man went on, his breath smelling of beer, garlic and anger. ‘Do you hear me, you bastard ?’

‘He can’t hear you. His ears are full of shit,’ said one of the men with him, and the second man cackled.

‘Pay and leave!’ yelled the pocked man.

Only now did the Rivian look at him.

‘I’ll finish my beer.’

‘We’ll give you a hand,’ the pockmarked man hissed. He knocked the tankard from the stranger’s hand and simultaneously grabbing him by the shoulder, dug his fingers into the leather strap which ran diagonally across the outsider’s chest. One of the men behind him raised a fist to strike. The outsider curled up on the spot, throwing the pockmarked man off balance. The sword hissed in its sheath and glistened briefly in the dim light. The place seethed. There was a scream, and one of the few remaining customers tumbled towards the exit. A chair fell with a crash and earthenware smacked hollowly against the floor. The innkeeper, his lips trembling, looked at the horribly slashed face of the pocked man, who, clinging with his fingers to the edge of the counter, was slowly sinking from sight. The other two were lying on the floor, one motionless, the other writhing and convulsing in a dark, spreading puddle. A woman’s hysterical scream vibrated in the air, piercing the ears as the innkeeper shuddered, caught his breath, and vomited.

The stranger retreated towards the wall, tense and alert. He held the sword in both hands, sweeping the blade through the air. No one moved. Terror, like cold mud, was clear on their faces, paralysing limbs and blocking throats.

Three guards rushed into the tavern with thuds and clangs. They must have been close by. They had truncheons wound with leather straps at the ready, but at the sight of the corpses, drew their swords. The Rivian pressed his back against the wall and, with his left hand, pulled a dagger from his boot.

‘Throw that down!’ one of the guards yelled with a trembling voice. ‘Throw that down, you thug! You’re coming with us!’

The second guard kicked aside the table between himself and the Rivian.

‘Go get the men, Treska!’ he shouted to the third guard, who had stayed closer to the door.

‘No need,’ said the stranger, lowering his sword. ‘I’ll come by myself.’

‘You’ll go, you son of a bitch, on the end of a rope!’ yelled the trembling guard. ‘Throw that sword down or I’ll smash your head in!’

The Rivian straightened. He quickly pinned his blade under his left arm and with his right hand raised towards the guards, swiftly drew a complicated sign in the air. The clout-nails which studded his tunic from his wrists to elbows flashed.

The guards drew back, shielding their faces with their arms. One of the customers sprang up while another darted to the door. The woman screamed again, wild and ear-splitting.

‘I’ll come by myself,’ repeated the stranger in his resounding, metallic voice. ‘And the three of you will go in front of me. Take me to the castellan. I don’t know the way.’

‘Yes, sir,’ mumbled the guard, dropping his head. He made towards the exit, looking around tentatively. The other two guards followed him out backwards, hastily. The stranger followed in their tracks, sheathing his sword and dagger. As they passed the tables the remaining customers hid their faces from the dangerous stranger.

II

Velerad, castellan of Wyzim, scratched his chin. He was neither superstitious nor faint-hearted but he did not relish the thought of being alone with the white-haired man. At last he made up his mind.

'Leave,' he ordered the guards. 'And you, sit down. No, not there. Further away, if you please.'

The stranger sat down. He no longer carried his sword or black coat.

'I am Velerad, castellan of Wyzim,' said Velerad, toying with a heavy mace lying on the table. 'And I'm listening. What do you have to say to me, you brigand, before you are thrown into the dungeon? Three killed and an attempted spell-casting; not bad, not bad at all. Men are impaled for such things in Wyzim. But I'm a just man, so I will listen to you, before you are executed. Speak.'

The Rivian unbuttoned his jerkin and pulled out a wad of white goat leather.

'You nail this crossways, in taverns,' he said quietly. 'Is what's written here true?'

'Ah.' Velerad grunted, looking at the runes etched into the leather. 'So that's it. And I didn't guess at once. Yes, it's true. It's signed by Foltest, King of Temeria, Pontar and Mahakam, which makes it true. A proclamation is a proclamation, witcher, but law is law – and I take care of law and order in Wyzim. I will not allow people to be murdered! Do you understand?'

The Rivian nodded to show he understood. Velerad snorted with anger.

'You carry the witcher's emblem?' The stranger reached into his jerkin once more and pulled out a round medallion on a silver chain. It pictured the head of a wolf, baring its fangs. 'And do you have a name? Any name will do, it's simply to make conversation easier.'

'My name is Geralt.'

'Geralt, then. Of Rivia I gather, from your accent?'

'Of Rivia.'

'Right. Do you know what, Geralt? This,' Velerad slapped the proclamation, 'let it go. It's a serious matter. Many have tried and

failed already. This, my friend, is not the same as roughing up a couple of scoundrels.'

'I know. This is my job, Velerad. And that proclamation offers a three thousand oren reward.'

'Three thousand,' Velerad scowled. 'And the princess as a wife, or so rumour says, although gracious Foltest has not proclaimed that.'

'I'm not interested in the princess,' Geralt said calmly. He was sitting motionless, his hands on his knees. 'Just in the three thousand.'

'What times,' sighed the castellan. 'What foul times! Twenty years ago who would have thought, even in a drunken stupour, that such a profession as a witcher would exist? Itinerant killers of basilisks; travelling slayers of dragons and vodniks! Tell me, Geralt, are you allowed beer in your guild?'

'Certainly.'

Velerad clapped his hands.

'Beer!' he called. 'And sit closer, Geralt. What do I care?'

The beer, when it arrived, was cold and frothy.

'Foul times,' Velerad muttered, drinking deep from his tankard. 'All sorts of filth has sprung up. Mahakam, in the mountains, is teeming with bogeymen. In the past it was just wolves howling in the woods, but now it's kobolds and spriggans wherever you spit, werewolves or some other vermin. Fairies and rusalkas snatch children from villages by the hundreds. We have diseases never heard of before; it makes my hair stand on end. And now, to top it all, this!' He pushed the wad of leather back across the table. 'It's not surprising, Geralt, that you witchers' services are in demand.'

'The king's proclamation, castellan,' Geralt raised his head. 'Do you know the details?'

Velerad leant back in his chair, locked his hands over his stomach.

'The details? Yes, I know them. Not first-hand perhaps, but from a good source.'

'That's what I want.'

'If you insist, then listen.' Velerad drank some beer and lowered his voice. 'During the reign of old Medell, his father, when our gracious king was still a prince, Foltest showed us what he was capable of, and he was capable of a great deal. We hoped he would

grow out of it. But shortly after his coronation Foltest surpassed himself, jaw-droppingly: he got his own sister with child. Adda was younger and they were always together, but nobody suspected anything except, perhaps, the queen . . . To get to the point: suddenly there is Adda with a huge belly, and Foltest talking about getting wed to his sister. The situation was made even more tense because Vizimir of Novigrad wanted his daughter, Dalka, to marry Foltest and had already sent out his envoys. We had to restrain Foltest from insulting them, and lucky we did, or Vizimir would have torn our insides out. Then, not without Adda's help – for she influenced her brother – we managed to dissuade the boy from a quick wedding.

'Well, then Adda gave birth. And now listen, because this is where it all starts. Only a few saw what she bore, but one midwife jumped from the tower window to her death and the other lost her senses and remains dazed to this day. So I gather that the royal bastard – a girl – was not comely, and she died immediately. No one was in a hurry to tie the umbilical cord. Nor did Adda, to her good fortune, survive the birth.

'But then Foltest stepped in again. Wisdom dictated that the royal bastard should have been burned or buried in the wilderness. Instead, on the orders of our gracious king, she was laid to rest in a sarcophagus in the vaults beneath the palace.'

'It's too late for your wisdom now.' Geralt raised his head. 'One of the Knowing Ones should have been sent for.'

'You mean those charlatans with stars on their hats? Of course. About ten of them came running later, when it became known what lay in the sarcophagus. And what scrambled out of it at night. Though it didn't start manifesting straight away. Oh, no. For seven years after the funeral there was peace. Then one night – it was a full moon – there were screams in the palace, shouting and commotion! I don't have to tell you, this is your trade and you've read the proclamation. The infant had grown in the coffin – and how! – grown to have incredible teeth! In a word, she became a striga.'

'Pity you didn't see the corpses, as I did. Had you, you'd have taken a great detour to avoid Wyzim.'

Geralt was silent.

'Then, as I was saying,' Velerad continued, 'Foltest summoned a whole crowd of sorcerers. They all jabbered at the same time and almost came to blows with those staffs they carry – to beat off the

dogs, no doubt, once they've been set loose on them. And I think they regularly are. I'm sorry, Geralt, if you have a different opinion of wizards. No doubt you do, in your profession, but to me they are swindlers and fools. You witchers inspire greater confidence in men. At least you are more straightforward.'

Geralt smiled, but didn't comment.

'But, to the point.' The castellan peered into his tankard and poured more beer for himself and the Rivian. 'Some of the sorcerers' advice didn't seem so stupid. One suggested burning the striga together with the palace and the sarcophagus. Another advised chopping her head off. The rest were keen on driving aspen stakes into her body during the day, when the she-devil was asleep in her coffin, worn out by her night's delights. Unfortunately one, a jester with a pointed hat and a bald pate, a hunch-backed hermit, argued it was magic: the spell could be undone and the striga would turn into Foltest's little daughter, as pretty as a picture. Someone simply had to stay in the crypt throughout the night, and that would be that. After which – can you imagine such a fool? – he went to the palace for the night. Little of him was left in the morning, only, I believe, his hat and stick. But Foltest clung to his idea like a burr to a dog's tail. He forbade any attempt to kill the striga and brought in charlatans from all corners of Wyzim to reverse the spell and turn her into a princess. What colourful company! Twisted women, cripples, dirty and louse-ridden. It was pitiful.

'They went ahead and cast spells – mainly over a bowl and tankard. Of course some were quickly exposed as frauds by Foltest or the council. A few were even hung on the palisades, but not enough of them. I would have hung them all. I don't suppose I have to say that the striga, in the meantime, was getting her teeth into all sorts of people every now and again and paying no attention to the fraudsters and their spells. Or that Foltest was no longer living in the palace. No one lived there anymore.'

Velerad paused, drank some beer, and the witcher waited in silence.

'And so it's been for seven years, Geralt, because she was born around fourteen years ago. We've had a few other worries, like war with Vizimir of Novigrad – fought for real, understandable reasons – over the border posts, not for some princess or marriage alliance. Foltest sporadically hints at marriage and looks over portraits from neighbouring courts, which he then throws down the privy. And every now and then this mania seizes hold of him again, and he sends horsemen out to look for new sorcerers. His promised reward,

the three thousand, has attracted any number of cranks, stray knights, even a shepherd known throughout the whole region as a cretin, may he rest in peace. But the striga is still doing well. Every now and again she gets her teeth into someone. You get used to it. And at least those heroes trying to reverse the spell have a use – the beast stuffs herself on the spot and doesn't roam beyond her palace. Foltest has a new palace, of course, quite a fine one.'

'In seven years,' Geralt raised his head, 'in seven years, no one has settled the matter?'

'Well, no.' Velerad's gaze penetrated the witcher. 'Because the matter can't be settled. We have to come to terms with it, especially Foltest, our gracious and beloved ruler, who will keep nailing these proclamations up at crossroads. Although there are fewer volunteers now. There was one recently, but he insisted on the three thousand in advance. So we put him in a sack and threw him in the lake.'

'There is still no shortage of fraudsters then.'

'No, far from it,' the castellan agreed without taking his eyes off the witcher. 'That's why you mustn't demand gold in advance when you go to the palace. If you go.'

'I'll go.'

'It's up to you. But remember my advice. As we're talking of the reward, there has been word recently about the second part of it. I mentioned it to you: the princess for a wife. I don't know who made it up, but if the striga looks the way they say then it's an exceptionally grim joke. Nevertheless there's been no lack of fools racing to the palace for the chance of joining the royal family. Two apprentice shoemakers, to be precise. Why are shoemakers so foolish, Geralt?'

'I don't know. And witchers, castellan? Have they tried?'

'There were a few. But when they heard the spell was to be lifted and the striga wasn't to be killed they mostly shrugged and left. That's one of the reasons why my esteem for witchers has grown, Geralt. And one came along, younger than you – I forget his name, if he gave it at all. He tried.'

'And?'

'The fanged princess spread his entrails over a considerable distance.'

Geralt nodded. 'That was all of them?'

'There was one other.'

Velerad remained silent for a while, and the witcher didn't urge him on.

'Yes,' the castellan said finally. 'There was one more. At first, when Foltest threatened him with the noose if he killed or harmed the striga, he laughed and started packing his belongings. But then —' Velerad leaned across the table, lowered his voice to almost a whisper. '—then he undertook the task. You see, Geralt, there are some wise men in Wyzim, in high positions, who've had enough of this whole affair. Rumour has it these men persuaded the witcher, in secret, not to fuss around with spells but to batter the striga to death and tell the king the spell had failed, that his dear daughter had been killed in self-defence – an accident at work. The king, of course, would be furious and refuse to pay an oren in reward. But that would be an end to it. The witty witcher replied we could chase strigas ourselves for nothing. Well, what could we do? We collected money, bargained . . . but nothing came of it.'

Geralt raised his eyebrows.

'Nothing,' repeated Velerad. 'The witcher didn't want to try that first night. He trudged around, lay in wait, wandered about the neighbourhood. Finally, they say, he saw the striga in action, as she does not clamber from her crypt just to stretch her legs. He saw her and scarpered that night. Without a word.'

Geralt's expression changed a little, in what was probably supposed to be a smile.

'Those wise men,' he said, 'they still have the money, no doubt? Witchers don't take payment in advance.'

'No doubt they still do,' said Velerad.

'Does the rumour say how much they offer?'

Velerad bared his teeth in a smile. 'Some say eight hundred—'

Geralt shook his head.

'Others,' murmured the castellan, 'talk of a thousand.'

'Not much when you bear in mind that rumour likes to exaggerate. And the king is offering three thousand.'

'Don't forget about the betrothal,' Velerad mocked. 'What are you talking about? It's obvious you won't get the three thousand.'

'How's it obvious?'

Velerad thumped the table. 'Geralt, do not spoil my impression of witchers! This has been going on for more than seven years! The

striga is finishing off up to fifty people a year, fewer now people are avoiding the palace. Oh no, my friend, I believe in magic. I've seen a great deal and I believe, to a certain extent, in the abilities of wizards and witchers. But all this nonsense about lifting the spell was made up by a hunch-backed, snotty old man who'd lost his mind on his hermit's diet. It's nonsense which no one but Foltest believes. Adda gave birth to a striga because she slept with her brother. That is the truth, and no spell will help. Now the striga devours people – as strigas do – she has to be killed, and that is that. Listen: two years ago peasants from some God-forsaken hole near Mahakam were plagued by a dragon devouring their sheep. They set out together, battered the dragon to death with stanchions, and did not even think it worth boasting about. But we in Wyzim are waiting for a miracle and bolting our doors every full moon, or tying our criminals to a stake in front of the palace, praying the beast stuffs herself and returns to her sarcophagus.'

'Not a bad method,' the witcher smiled. 'Are there fewer criminals?'

'Not a bit of it.'

'Which way to the palace, the new one?'

'I will take you myself. And what about the wise men's suggestion? '

'Castellan,' said Geralt, 'why act in haste? After all, I really could have an accident at work, irrespective of my intentions. Just in case, the wise men should be thinking about how to save me from the king's anger and get those fifteen hundred orens, of which rumour speaks, ready.'

'It was to be a thousand.'

'No, Lord Velerad,' the witcher said categorically. 'The witcher who was offered a thousand ran at the mere sight of the striga, without bargaining. So the risk is greater than a thousand. Whether it is greater than one and a half remains to be seen. Of course, I will say goodbye beforehand.'

'Geralt?' Velerad scratched his head. 'One thousand two hundred ?'

'No. This isn't an easy task. The king is offering three, and sometimes it's easier to lift a spell than to kill. But one of my predecessors would have done so, or killed the striga, if this were simple. You think they let themselves be devoured out of fear of the king?'

‘Then, witcher,’ Velerad nodded wistfully, ‘our agreement stands. But a word of advice – say nothing to the king about the danger of an accident at work.’

III

Foltest was slim and had a pretty – too pretty – face. He was under forty, the witcher thought. The king was sitting on a dwarf-armchair carved from black wood, his legs stretched out toward the hearth, where two dogs were warming themselves. Next to him on a chest sat an older, powerfully-built man with a beard. Behind the king stood another man, richly dressed and with a proud look on his face. A magnate.

'A witcher from Rivia,' said the king after the moment's silence which fell after Velerad's introduction.

'Yes, your Majesty.' Geralt lowered his head.

'What made your hair so grey? Magic? I can see that you are not old. That was a joke. Say nothing. You've had a fair amount of experience, I dare presume?'

'Yes, your Majesty.'

'I would love to hear about it.'

Geralt bowed even lower. 'Your Majesty, you know our code of practice forbids us to speak of our work.'

'A convenient code, witcher, very convenient. But tell me, have you had anything to do with spriggans?'

'Yes.'

'Vampires, leshys?'

'Those too.'

Foltest hesitated. 'Strigas?'

Geralt raised his head, looking the king in the eyes. 'Yes.'

Foltest turned his eyes away. 'Velerad!'

'Yes, Gracious Majesty?'

'Have you given him the details?'

'Yes, your Gracious Majesty. He says the spell cast on the princess can be reversed.'

'I have known that for a long time. How, witcher ? Oh, of course, I forgot. Your code of practice. All right. I will make one small comment. Several witchers have been here already. Velerad, you have told him? Good. So I know that your speciality is to kill, rather than to reverse spells. This isn't an option. If one hair falls from my

daughter's head, your head will be on the block. That is all. Ostrit, Lord Segelin, stay and give him all the information he requires. Witchers always ask a lot of questions. Feed him and let him stay in the palace. He is not to drift from tavern to tavern.'

The king rose, whistled to his dogs and made his way to the door, scattering the straw covering the chamber floor. At the door he paused.

'If you succeed, witcher, the reward is yours. Maybe I will add something if you do well. Of course, the nonsense spread by common folk about marrying the princess carries not a word of truth. I'm sure you don't believe I would give my daughter's hand to a stranger?'

'No, your Majesty. I don't.'

'Good. That shows you have some wisdom.'

Foltest left, closing the door behind him. Velerad and the magnate, who had been standing all the while, immediately sat at the table. The castellan finished the king's half-full cup, peered into the jug and cursed. Ostrit, who took Foltest's chair, scowled at the witcher while he stroked the carved armrests. Segelin, the bearded man, nodded at Geralt.

'Do sit, witcher, do sit. Supper will soon be served. What would you like to know? Castellan Velerad has probably already told you everything. I know him, he has sooner told you too much than too little.'

'Only a few questions.'

'Ask.'

'The castellan said that, after the striga's appearance, the king called up many Knowing Ones.'

'That's right. But don't say striga, say princess. It makes it easier to avoid making a mistake in the king's presence – and any consequent unpleasantness.'

'Was there anyone well-known among the Knowing Ones? Anyone famous?'

'There were such, then and later. I don't remember the names. Do you, Lord Ostrit?'

'I don't recall,' said the magnate. 'But I know some of them enjoyed fame and recognition. There was much talk of it.'

'Were they in agreement that the spell can be lifted?'

‘They were far from any agreement,’ smiled Segelin, ‘on any subject. But such an opinion was expressed. It was supposed to be simple, not even requiring magical abilities. As I understand it, it would suffice for someone to spend the night – from sunset to the third crowing of the cock – by the sarcophagus.’

‘Simple indeed,’ snorted Velerad.

‘I would like to hear a description of the . . . the princess.’

Velerad leapt up from his chair. ‘The princess looks like a striga!’ he yelled. ‘Like the most strigish striga I have heard of! Her Royal Highness, the cursed royal bastard, is four cubits high, shaped like a barrel of beer, has a maw which stretches from ear to ear and is full of dagger-like teeth, has red eyes and a red mop of hair! Her paws, with claws like a wild cat’s, hang down to the ground ! I’m surprised we’ve yet to send her likeness to friendly courts! The princess, plague choke her, is already fourteen. Time to think of giving her hand to a prince in marriage!’

‘Hold on, Velerad,’ frowned Ostrit, glancing at the door. Segelin smiled faintly.

‘The description, although vivid, is reasonably accurate, and that’s what you wanted, isn’t it, witcher? Velerad didn’t mention that the princess moves with incredible speed and is far stronger for her height and build than one would expect. And she is fourteen years old, if that is of any importance.’

‘It is,’ said the witcher. ‘Do the attacks on people only occur during the full moon?’

‘Yes,’ replied Segelin, ‘if she attacks beyond the old palace. Within the palace walls people always die, irrespective of the moon’s phase. But she only ventures out during the full moon, and not always then.’

‘Has there been even one attack during the day?’

‘No.’

‘Does she always devour her victims?’

Velerad spat vehemently on the straw.

‘Come on, Geralt, it’ll be supper soon. Pish! Devours, takes a bite, leaves aside, it varies – according to her mood, no doubt. She only bit the head from one, gutted a couple, and a few more she picked clean to the bone, sucked them dry, you could say. Damned mother’s—!’

‘Careful, Velerad,’ snarled Ostrit. ‘Say what you want about the striga but do not insult Adda in front of me, as you would not dare in the king’s presence!’

‘Has anyone she’s attacked survived?’ The witcher asked, apparently paying no special attention to the magnate’s outburst.

Segelin and Ostrit looked at each other.

‘Yes,’ said the bearded man. ‘At the very beginning, seven years ago, she threw herself at two soldiers standing guard over the crypt. One escaped—’

‘And then,’ interrupted Velerad, ‘there was another, the miller she attacked near the town. You remember . . . ?’

IV

The following day, late in the evening, the miller was brought to the small chamber above the guardhouse allocated to the witcher. He was led in by a soldier in a hooded coat.

The conversation did not yield any significant results. The miller was terrified; he mumbled and stammered, and his scars told the witcher more than he did. The striga could open her jaws impressively wide and had extremely sharp teeth, including very long upper fangs – four of them, two on each side. Her claws were sharper than a wildcat's, but less curved. And it was only because of that the miller had managed to tear himself away.

Having finished his examination Geralt nodded to the miller and soldier, dismissing them. The soldier pushed the peasant through the door and lowered his hood. It was Foltest himself.

'Sit, do not get up,' said the king. 'This visit is unofficial. Are you happy with the interview? I heard you were at the palace this morning.'

'Yes, your Majesty.'

'When will you set about your task?'

'It is four days until the full moon. After that.'

'You prefer to have a look at her yourself beforehand?'

'There is no need. But having had her fill the—the princess will be less active.'

'Striga, master witcher, striga. Let us not play at diplomacy. She will be a princess afterwards. And that is what I have come to talk about. Answer me unofficially, briefly and clearly: will it work or not? Don't hide behind your code.'

Geralt rubbed his brow.

'I confirm, your Majesty, that the spell might be reversed. And, unless I am mistaken, it can be done by spending the night at the palace. The third crowing of the cock, as long as it catches the striga outside her sarcophagus, will end the spell. That is what is usually done with strigas.'

'So simple?'

'It is not simple. First you have to survive the night. Then there are exceptions to the rule, for example, not one night but three.

Consecutively. There are also cases which are . . . well . . . hopeless.'

'Yes,' Foltest bristled. 'I keep hearing that from some people. Kill the monster because it's an incurable case. Master witcher, I am sure they have already spoken to you. Am I right? Hack the man-eater to death without any more fuss, at the beginning, and tell the king nothing else could be done. I won't pay, but they will. Very convenient. And cheap. Because the king will order the witcher beheaded or hanged and the gold will remain in their pockets.'

'The king unconditionally orders the witcher to be beheaded?' Geralt grimaced.

Foltest looked the Rivian in the eyes for a long while.

'The king does not know,' he finally said. 'But the witcher should bear such an eventuality in mind.'

Geralt was silent for a moment. 'I intend to do what is in my power,' he said. 'But if it goes badly I will defend my life. Your Majesty, you must also be prepared for such an eventuality.'

Foltest got up. 'You do not understand me. It's obvious you'll kill her if it becomes necessary, whether I like it or not. Because otherwise she'll kill you, surely and inevitably. I won't punish anyone who kills her in self-defence. But I will not allow her to be killed without trying to save her. There have already been attempts to set fire to the old palace. They shot at her with arrows, dug pits and set traps and snares, until I hung a few of her attackers. But that is not the point. Witcher, listen!'

'I'm listening.'

'After the third crowing of the cock, there will be no striga, if I understand correctly. What will there be?'

'If all goes well, a fourteen-year-old girl.'

'With red eyes? Crocodile's teeth?'

'A normal fourteen-year-old. Except that . . .'

'Well ?'

'Physically.'

'I see. And mentally? Every day, a bucket of blood for breakfast? A little girl's thigh?'

'No. Mentally . . . There is no telling. On the level, I think, of a three- or four-year-old child. She'll require loving care for a long

while.'

'That's obvious. Witcher?'

'I'm listening.'

'Can it happen to her again? Later on?'

Geralt was silent.

'Aha,' said the king. 'It can. And what then?'

'Should she die after a long swoon lasting several days, her body will have to be burned. Quickly.'

Foltest grew gloomy.

'I do not think it will come to that,' added Geralt. 'Just to be sure, I will give you some instructions, your Majesty, to lessen the danger.'

'Right now? Is it not too soon, master witcher? And if—'

'Right now,' interrupted the Rivian. 'Many things may happen, your Majesty. It could be that you'll find a princess in the morning, the spell already broken, and my corpse.'

'Even so? Despite my permission to defend yourself? Which, it seems, wasn't that important to you.'

'This is a serious matter, your Majesty. The risk is great. That is why you must listen: the princess should always wear a sapphire around her neck, or better, an inclusion, on a silver chain. Day and night.'

'What is an inclusion?'

'A sapphire with a pocket of air trapped within the stone. Aside from that, every now and then you should burn juniper, broom and aspen in the fireplace of her chamber.'

Foltest grew pensive. 'I thank you for your advice, witcher. I will pay heed if—And now listen to me carefully. If you find the case is hopeless, kill her. If you undo the spell but the girl is not . . . normal. If you have a shadow of a doubt as to whether you have been entirely successful, kill her. Do not worry, you have nothing to fear from me. I'll shout at you in front of others, banish you from the palace and the town, nothing more. Of course I won't give you the reward, but maybe you'll manage to negotiate something from you know who.'

They were both quiet for a while.

'Geralt.' For the first time Foltest called the witcher by his name.

‘Yes.’

‘How much truth is there in the rumour that the child is as she is because Adda was my sister?’

‘Not much. A spell has to be cast, they don’t cast themselves. But I think your congress with your sister was the reason the spell was cast, and this is the result.’

‘As I thought. That is what some of the Knowing Ones said, although not all of them. Geralt? Where do such things come from? Spells, magic?’

‘I don’t know, your Majesty. Knowing Ones study the causes of such phenomena. For us witchers the knowledge that concentrated will can cause such phenomena is enough. That and the knowledge to fight them.’

‘And kill them?’

‘Usually. Besides, that is what we’re usually paid for. Only a few demand the reversal of spells, your Majesty. As a rule, people simply want to defend themselves from danger. If the monster has men on its conscience then revenge can also come into play.’

The king got up, took a few paces across the chamber, and stopped in front of the witcher’s sword hanging on the wall.

‘With this?’ he asked, not looking at Geralt.

‘No. That is for men.’

‘So I heard. Do you know what, Geralt? I’m going to the crypt with you.’

‘Out of the question.’

Foltest turned, his eyes glinted. ‘Do you know, sorcerer, that I have not seen her? Neither after she was born, nor later. I was afraid. I may never see her, am I not right? At least I have the right to see my daughter while you’re murdering her.’

‘I repeat, it’s out of the question. It is certain death. For me as well as you. If my attention, my will falters—No, your Majesty.’

Foltest turned away, started towards the door. For a moment Geralt thought he would leave without a word, without a parting gesture, but the king stopped and looked at him.

‘You inspire trust,’ he said, ‘although I know what a rogue you are. I was told what happened at the tavern. I’m sure you killed those thugs solely for word to spread, to shock people, to shock me.

It's obvious that you could have dealt with them without killing. I'm afraid I'll never know whether you are going there to save my daughter, or to kill her. But I agree to it. I have to agree. Do you know why?'

Geralt did not reply.

'Because I think,' said the king, 'I think that she is suffering. Am I not right?'

The witcher fixed his penetrating eyes on the king. He didn't confirm it, didn't nod, didn't make the slightest gesture, but Foltest knew. He knew the answer.

V

Geralt looked out of the palace window for the last time. Dusk was falling rapidly. Beyond the lake the distant lights of Wyzim twinkled. There was a wilderness around the old palace – a strip of no-man's land with which, over seven years, the town had cut itself off from this dangerous place, leaving nothing but a few ruins, rotten beams and the remains of a gap-toothed palisade which had obviously not been worth dismantling and moving. As far away as possible – at the opposite end of the settlement – the king had built his new residence. The stout tower of his new palace loomed black in the distance, against the darkening blue of the sky.

In one of the empty, plundered chambers, the witcher returned to the dusty table at which he was preparing, calmly and meticulously. He knew he had plenty of time. The striga would not leave her crypt before midnight.

On the table in front of him he had a small chest with metal fittings. He opened it. Inside, packed tightly in compartments lined with dried grass, stood small vials of dark glass. The witcher removed three.

From the floor, he picked up an oblong packet thickly wrapped in sheep's skins and fastened with a leather strap. He unwrapped it and pulled out a sword with an elaborate hilt, in a black, shiny scabbard covered with rows of runic signs and symbols. He drew the blade, which lit up with a pure shine of mirror-like brightness. It was pure silver.

Geralt whispered an incantation and drank, one after the other, the contents of two vials, placing his left hand on the blade of the sword after each sip. Then, wrapping himself tightly in his black coat, he sat down on the floor. There were no chairs in the chamber, or in the rest of the palace.

He sat motionless, his eyes closed. His breathing, at first even, suddenly quickened, became rasping and tense. And then stopped completely. The mixture which helped the witcher gain full control of his body was chiefly made up of veratrum, stramonium, hawthorn and spurge. The other ingredients had no name in any human language. For anyone who was not, like Geralt, inured to it from childhood, it would have been lethal poison.

The witcher turned his head abruptly. In the silence his hearing, sharpened beyond measure, easily picked out a rustle of footsteps

through the courtyard overgrown with stinging nettles. It could not be the striga. The steps were too light. Geralt threw his sword across his back, hid his bundle in the hearth of the ruined chimney-place and, silent as a bat, ran downstairs.

It was still light enough in the courtyard for the approaching man to see the witcher's face. The man, Ostrit, backed away abruptly; an involuntary grimace of terror and repulsion contorted his lips. The witcher smiled wryly – he knew what he looked like. After drinking a mixture of banewart, monk's hood and eyebright the face takes on the colour of chalk, and the pupils fill the entire iris. But the mixture enables one to see in the deepest darkness, and this is what Geralt wanted.

Ostrit quickly regained control.

'You look as if you were already a corpse, witcher,' he said. 'From fear, no doubt. Don't be afraid. I bring you reprieve.'

The witcher did not reply.

'Don't you hear what I say, you Rivian charlatan? You're saved. And rich.' Ostrit hefted a sizeable purse in his hand and threw it at Geralt's feet. 'A thousand orens. Take it, get on your horse and get out of here!'

The Rivian still said nothing.

'Don't gawp at me!' Ostrit raised his voice. 'And don't waste my time. I have no intention of standing here until midnight. Don't you understand? I do not wish you to undo the spell. No, you haven't guessed. I am not in league with Velerad and Segelin. I don't want you to kill her. You are simply to leave. Everything is to stay as it is.'

The witcher did not move. He did not want the magnate to realise how fast his movements and reactions now were. It was quickly growing dark. A relief, as even the semi-darkness of dusk was too bright for his dilated pupils.

'And why, sir, is everything to remain as it is?' he asked, trying to enunciate each word slowly.

'Now, that,' Ostrit raised his head proudly, 'should really be of damn little concern to you.'

'And what if I already know?'

'Go on.'

'It will be easier to remove Foltest from the throne if the striga

frightens the people even more? If the royal madness completely disgusts both magnates and common folk, am I right? I came here by way of Redania and Novigrad. There is much talk there that there are those in Wyzim who look to King Vizimir as their saviour and true monarch. But I, Lord Ostrit, do not care about politics, or the successions to thrones, or revolutions in palaces. I am here to accomplish my task. Have you never heard of a sense of responsibility and plain honesty? About professional ethics?'

'Careful to whom you speak, you vagabond!' Ostrit yelled furiously, placing his hand on the hilt of his sword. 'I have had enough of this. I am not accustomed to hold such discussions! Look at you – ethics, codes of practice, morality?! Who are you to talk? A brigand who's barely arrived before he starts murdering men? Who bends double to Foltest and behind his back bargains with Velerad like a hired thug? And you dare to turn your nose up at me, you serf? Play at being a Knowing One? A Magician? You scheming witcher! Be gone before I run the flat of my sword across your gob!'

The witcher did not stir. He stood calmly.

'You'd better leave, Lord Ostrit,' he said. 'It's growing dark.'

Ostrit took a step back, drew his sword in a flash.

'You asked for this, you sorcerer. I'll kill you. Your tricks won't help you. I carry a turtle-stone.'

Geralt smiled. The reputation of turtle-stone was as mistaken as it was popular. But the witcher was not going to lose his strength on spells, much less expose his silver sword to contact with Ostrit's blade. He dived under the whirling blade and, with the heel of his hand and his silver-studded cuff, hit him in the temple.

VI

Ostrit quickly regained consciousness and looked around in the total darkness. He noticed that he was tied up. He did not see Geralt standing right beside him. But he realised where he was and let out a prolonged, terrifying howl.

‘Keep quiet,’ said the witcher. ‘Otherwise you’ll lure her out before her time.’

‘You damned murderer! Where are you? Untie me immediately, you louse! You’ll hang for this, you son-of-a-bitch!’

‘Quiet.’

Ostrit panted heavily.

‘You’re leaving me here to be devoured by her! Tied up?’ he asked, quieter now, whispering a vile invective.

‘No,’ said the witcher. ‘I’ll let you go. But not now.’

‘You scoundrel,’ hissed Ostrit. ‘To distract the striga?’

‘Yes.’

Ostrit didn’t say anything. He stopped wriggling and lay quietly.

‘Witcher ?’

‘Yes.’

‘It’s true that I wanted to overthrow Foltest. I’m not the only one. But I am the only one who wanted him dead. I wanted him to die in agony, to go mad, to rot alive. Do you know why?’

Geralt remained silent.

‘I loved Adda. The king’s sister. The king’s mistress. The king’s trollop. I loved her—Witcher, are you there?’

‘I am.’

‘I know what you’re thinking. But it wasn’t like that. Believe me, I didn’t cast any spells. I don’t know anything about magic. Only once in anger did I say . . . Only once. Witcher? Are you listening?’

‘I am.’

‘It’s his mother, the old queen. It must be her. She couldn’t watch him and Adda—It wasn’t me. I only once, you know, tried to persuade them but Adda—Witcher! I was besotted, and said ... Witcher? Was it me? Me?’

‘It doesn’t matter anymore.’

‘Witcher? Is it nearly midnight?’

‘It’s close.’

‘Let me go. Give me more time.’

‘No.’

Ostrit did not hear the scrape of the tomb lid being moved aside, but the witcher did. He leant over and, with his dagger, cut the magnate’s bonds. Ostrit did not wait for the word. He jumped up, numb, hobbled clumsily, and ran. His eyes had grown accustomed enough to the darkness for him to see his way from the main hall to the exit.

The slab blocking the entrance to the crypt opened and fell to the floor with a thud. Geralt, prudently behind the staircase balustrade, saw the misshapen figure of the striga speeding swiftly and unerringly in the direction of Ostrit’s receding footsteps. Not the slightest sound issued from the striga.

A terrible, quivering, frenzied scream tore the night, shook the old walls, continued rising and falling, vibrating. The witcher couldn’t make out exactly how far away it was – his sharpened hearing deceived him – but he knew that the striga had caught up with Ostrit quickly. Too quickly.

He stepped into the middle of the hall, stood right at the entrance to the crypt. He threw down his coat, twitched his shoulders, adjusted the position of his sword, pulled on his gauntlets. He still had some time. He knew that the striga, although well fed after the last full moon, would not readily abandon Ostrit’s corpse. The heart and liver were, for her, valuable reserves of nutrition for the long periods spent in lethargic sleep.

The witcher waited. By his count, there were about three hours left until dawn. The cock’s crow could only mislead him. Besides, there were probably no cocks in the neighbourhood.

He heard her. She was trudging slowly, shuffling along the floor. And then he saw her.

The description had been accurate. The disproportionately large head set on a short neck was surrounded by a tangled, curly halo of reddish hair. Her eyes shone in the darkness like an animal’s. The striga stood motionless, her gaze fixed on Geralt. Suddenly she opened her jaws – as if proud of her rows of pointed white teeth – then snapped them shut with a crack like a chest being closed. And

leapt, slashing at the witcher with her bloodied claws.

Geralt jumped to the side, spun a swift pirouette. The striga rubbed against him, also spun around, slicing through the air with her talons. She didn't lose her balance and attacked anew, mid-spin, gnashing her teeth fractions of an inch from Geralt's chest. The Rivian jumped away, changing the direction of his spin with a fluttering pirouette to confuse the striga. As he leapt away he dealt a hard blow to the side of her head with the silver spikes studding the knuckles of his gauntlet.

The striga roared horribly, filling the palace with a booming echo, fell to the ground, froze and started to howl hollowly and furiously.

The witcher smiled maliciously. His first attempt, as he had hoped, had gone well. Silver was fatal to the striga, as it was for most monsters brought into existence through magic. So there was a chance: the beast was like the others, and that boded well for lifting the spell, while the silver sword would, as a last resort, assure his life.

The striga was in no hurry with her next attack. She approached slowly, baring her fangs, dribbling repulsively. Geralt backed away and, carefully placing his feet, traced a semi-circle. By slowing and quickening his movements he distracted the striga, making it difficult for her to leap. As he walked the witcher unwound a long, strong silver chain, weighted at the end.

The moment the striga tensed and leapt the chain whistled through the air and, coiling like a snake, twined itself around the monster's shoulders, neck and head. The striga's jump became a tumble, and she let out an ear-piercing whistle. She thrashed around on the floor, howling horribly with fury or from the burning pain inflicted by the despised metal. Geralt was content – if he wanted he could kill the striga without great difficulty. But the witcher did not draw his sword. Nothing in the striga's behaviour had given him reason to think she might be an incurable case. Geralt moved to a safer distance and, without letting the writhing shape on the floor out of his sight, breathed deeply, focused himself.

The chain snapped. The silver links scattered like rain in all directions, ringing against the stone. The striga, blind with fury, tumbled to the attack, roaring. Geralt waited calmly and, with his raised right hand, traced the Sign of Aard in front of him.

The striga fell back as if hit by a mallet but kept her feet,

extended her talons, bared her fangs. Her hair stood on end and fluttered as if she were walking against a fierce wind. With difficulty, one rasping step at a time, she slowly advanced. But she did advance.

Geralt grew uneasy. He did not expect such a simple Sign to paralyse the striga entirely but neither did he expect the beast to overcome it so easily. He could not hold the Sign for long, it was too exhausting, and the striga had no more than ten steps to go. He lowered the Sign suddenly, and sprung aside. The striga, taken by surprise, flew forward, lost her balance, fell, slid along the floor and tumbled down the stairs into the crypt's entrance, yawning in the floor.

Her infernal scream reverberated from below.

To gain time Geralt jumped on to the stairs leading to the gallery. He had not even climbed halfway up when the striga ran out of the crypt, speeding along like an enormous black spider. The witcher waited until she had run up the stairs after him, then leapt over the balustrade. The striga turned on the stairs, sprang and flew at him in an amazing ten-metre leap. She did not let herself be deceived by his pirouettes this time; twice her talons left their mark on the Rivian's leather tunic. But another desperately hard blow from the silver spiked gauntlet threw the striga aside, shook her. Geralt, feeling fury building inside him, swayed, bent backwards and, with a mighty kick, knocked the beast off her legs.

The roar she gave was louder than all the previous ones. Even the plaster crumbled from the ceiling.

The striga sprang up, shaking with uncontrolled anger and lust for murder. Geralt waited. He drew his sword, traced circles with it in the air, and skirted the striga, taking care that the movement of his sword was not in rhythm with his steps. The striga did not jump. She approached slowly, following the bright streak of the blade with her eyes.

Geralt stopped abruptly, froze with his sword raised. The striga, disconcerted, also stopped. The witcher traced a slow semi-circle with the blade, took a step in the striga's direction. Then another. Then he leapt, feigning a whirling movement with his sword above her head.

The striga curled up, retreated in a zigzag. Geralt was close again, the blade shimmering in his hand. His eyes lit up with an ominous glow, a hoarse roar tore through his clenched teeth. The striga backed away, pushed by the power of concentrated hatred, anger

and violence which emanated from the attacking man and struck her in waves, penetrating her mind and body. Terrified and pained by feelings unknown to her she let out a thin, shaking squeak, turned on the spot and ran off in a desperate, crazy escape down the dark tangle of the palace's corridors.

Geralt stood quivering in the middle of the hall. Alone. It had taken a long time, he thought, before this dance on the edge of an abyss, this mad, macabre ballet of a fight, had achieved the desired effect, allowed him to psychically become one with his opponent, to reach the underlayers of concentrated will which permeated the striga. The evil, twisted will from which the striga was born. The witcher shivered at the memory of taking on that evil to redirect it, as if in a mirror, against the monster. Never before had he come across such a concentration of hatred and murderous frenzy, not even from basilisks, who enjoyed a ferocious reputation for it.

All the better, he thought as he walked toward the crypt entrance and the blackness that spread from it like an enormous puddle. All the better, all the stronger, was the blow received by the striga. This would give him a little more time until the beast recovered from the shock. The witcher doubted whether he could repeat such an effort. The elixirs were weakening and it was still a long time until dawn. But the striga could not return to her crypt before first light, or all his trouble would come to nothing.

He went down the stairs. The crypt was not large; there was room for three stone sarcophagi. The slab covering the first was half pushed aside. Geralt pulled the third vial from beneath his tunic, quickly drank its contents, climbed into the tomb and stretched out in it. As he had expected, it was a double tomb – for mother and daughter.

He had only just pulled the cover closed when he heard the striga's roar again. He lay on his back next to Adda's mummified corpse and traced the Sign of Yrden on the inside of the slab. He laid his sword on his chest, stood a tiny hourglass filled with phosphorescent sand next to it and crossed his arms. He no longer heard the striga's screams as she searched the palace. He had gradually stopped hearing anything as the true-love and celandine began to work.

VII

When Geralt opened his eyes the sand had passed through the hourglass, which meant his sleep had been even longer than he had intended. He pricked up his ears, and heard nothing. His senses were now functioning normally.

He took hold of his sword and, murmuring an incantation, ran his hand across the lid of the sarcophagus. He then moved the slab slightly, a couple of inches.

Silence.

He pushed the lid further, sat, holding his weapon at the ready, and lifted his head above the tomb. The crypt was dark but the witcher knew that outside dawn was breaking. He struck a light, lit a miniature lamp and lifted it, throwing strange shadows across the walls of the crypt.

It was empty.

He scrambled from the sarcophagus, aching, numb, cold. And then he saw her. She was lying on her back next to the tomb, naked and unconscious.

She was rather ugly. Slim with small pointed breasts, and dirty. Her hair – flaxen-red – reached almost to her waist. Standing the lamp on the slab he knelt beside her and leant over. Her lips were pale and her face was bloody where he had hit her cheekbone. Geralt removed his gloves, put his sword aside and, without any fuss, drew up her top lip with his finger. Her teeth were normal. He reached for her hand which was buried in her tangled hair. Before he took it he saw her open eyes. Too late.

She swiped him across the neck with her talons, cutting him deeply. Blood splashed on to her face. She howled, striking him in the eyes with her other hand. He fell on her, grabbing her by the wrists, nailing her to the floor. She gnashed her teeth – which were now too short – in front of his face. He butted her in the face with his forehead and pinned her down harder. She had lost her former strength; she could only writhe beneath him, howling, spitting out blood – his blood – which was pouring over her mouth. His blood was draining away quickly. There was no time. The witcher cursed and bit her hard on the neck, just below the ear. He dug his teeth in and clenched them until her inhuman howling became a thin, despairing scream and then a choking sob – the cry of a hurt fourteen-year-old girl.

He let her go when she stopped moving, got to his knees, tore a piece of canvas from his sleeve pocket and pressed it to his neck. He felt for his sword, held the blade to the unconscious girl's throat, and leant over her hand. The nails were dirty, broken, bloodied but . . . normal. Completely normal.

The witcher got up with difficulty. The sticky-wet greyness of early morning was flooding in through the crypt's entrance. He made a move towards the stairs but staggered and sat down heavily on the floor. Blood was pouring through the drenched canvas onto his hands, running down his sleeve. He unfastened his tunic, slit his shirt, tore and ripped rags from it and tied them around his neck, knowing that he didn't have much time, that he would soon faint . . .

He succeeded. And fainted.

In Wyzim, beyond the lake, a cock, ruffling his feathers in the cold damp, crowed hoarsely for the third time.

VIII

He saw the whitened walls and beamed ceiling of the small chamber above the guardroom. He moved his head, grimacing with pain, and moaned. His neck was bandaged, thickly, thoroughly, professionally.

‘Lie still, witcher,’ said Velerad. ‘Lie, do not move.’

‘My ... sword ...’

‘Yes, yes. Of course, what is most important is your witcher’s silver sword. It’s here, don’t worry. Both the sword and your little trunk. And the three thousand orens. Yes, yes, don’t utter a word. It is I who am an old fool and you the wise witcher. Foltest has been repeating it over and over for the last two days.’

‘Two—’

‘Oh yes, two. She slit your neck open quite thoroughly. One could see everything you have inside there. You lost a great deal of blood. Fortunately we hurried to the palace straight after the third crowing of the cock. Nobody slept in Wyzim that night. It was impossible, you made a terrible noise. Does my talking tire you?’

‘The prin . . . cess?’

‘The princess is like a princess. Thin. And somewhat dull-witted. She weeps incessantly and wets her bed. But Foltest says this will change. I don’t think it’ll change for the worse, do you, Geralt?’

The witcher closed his eyes.

‘Good. I take my leave now. Rest.’ Velerad got up. ‘Geralt? Before I go, tell me: why did you try to bite her to death? Eh? Geralt?’

The witcher was asleep.

THE VOICE OF REASON 2

I

‘Geralt.’

He raised his head, torn from sleep. The sun was already high and forced blinding golden rays through the shutters, penetrating the chamber with tentacles of light. The witcher shaded his eyes with his hand in an unnecessary, instinctive reflex which he had never managed to shake off – all he needed to do, after all, was narrow his pupils into vertical slits.

‘It’s late,’ said Nenneke, opening the shutters. ‘You’ve slept in. Off with you, Iola.’

The girl sat up suddenly and leant out of bed to take her mantle from the floor. Geralt felt a trickle of cool saliva on his shoulder, where her lips had been a moment ago.

‘Wait ...’ he said hesitantly. She looked at him, quickly turned away.

She had changed. There was nothing of the water nymph in her any more, nothing of the luminous, chamomile-scented apparition she had been at dawn. Her eyes were blue, not black. And she had freckles – on her nose, her neckline, her shoulders. They weren’t unattractive, they suited her complexion and reddish hair. But he hadn’t seen them at dawn, when she had been his dream. With shame he realised he felt resentment towards her, resentment that she hadn’t remained a dream, and that he would never forgive himself for it.

‘Wait,’ he repeated. ‘Iola . . . I wanted—’

‘Don’t speak to her, Geralt,’ said Nenneke. ‘She won’t answer you anyway. Off with you, Iola.’

Wrapped in her mantle the girl pattered towards the door, her bare feet slapping the floor – troubled, flushed, awkward. No longer reminding him, in any way, of—

Yennefer.

‘Nenneke,’ he said, reaching for his shirt. ‘I hope you’re not annoyed that—You won’t punish her, will you?’

‘Fool,’ the priestess snorted. ‘You’ve forgotten where you are. This is neither a hermitage nor a convent. It’s Melitele’s temple. Our goddess doesn’t forbid our priestesses anything. Almost.’

‘You forbade me to talk to her.’

‘I didn’t forbid you. But I know it’s pointless. Iola doesn’t speak.’

‘What?’

‘She doesn’t speak. She’s taken a vow. It’s a sort of sacrifice through which . . . Oh, what’s the point of explaining, you wouldn’t understand anyway. You wouldn’t even try to understand, I know your views on religion. No, don’t get dressed yet. I want to check your neck.’

She sat on the edge of the bed and skilfully unwound the linen bandages wrapped thickly around the witcher’s neck. He grimaced in pain.

As soon as he had arrived in Ellander, Nenneke had removed the painfully thick stitches of shoemaker’s twine with which they had stitched him in Wyzim, opened the wound and dressed it again. The results were clear: he had arrived at the temple almost cured, if perhaps a little stiff. Now he was sick again, and in pain. But he didn’t protest. He’d known the priestess for years and knew how great was her knowledge of healing, how rich and comprehensive her pharmacy was. A course of treatment at Melitele’s temple could do nothing but good.

Nenneke felt the wound, washed it and began to curse. He already knew this routine by heart. She had started on the very first day, and had never failed to moan when she saw the marks left by the princess of Wyzim’s talons.

‘It’s terrible! To let yourself be slashed like this by an ordinary striga. Muscles, tendons – she only just missed your carotid artery! Great Melitele! Geralt, what’s happening to you? How did she get so close to you? What did you want with her? To mount her?’

He didn’t answer, and smiled faintly.

‘Don’t grin like an idiot.’ The priestess rose and took a bag of dressings from the chest of drawers. Despite her weight and low stature she moved swiftly and gracefully. ‘There’s nothing funny about it. You’re losing your reflexes, Geralt.’

‘You’re exaggerating.’

‘I’m not exaggerating at all.’ Nenneke spread a greenish mush smelling sharply of eucalyptus over the wound. ‘You shouldn’t have allowed yourself to get wounded, but you did, and very seriously at that. Fatally even. And even with your exceptional powers of regeneration it’ll be months before your neck is fully mobile again. I warn you, don’t test your strength by fighting an agile opponent

during that time.'

'Thank you for the warning. Perhaps you could give me some advice, too: how am I supposed to live in the meantime? Rally a few girls, buy a cart and organize a travelling house of ill-repute?'

Nenneke shrugged, bandaging his neck with quick, deft movements. 'Am I supposed to give you advice and teach you how to live? Am I your mother or something? Right, that's done. You can get dressed. Breakfast's waiting for you in the refectory. Hurry up or you'll have to make it yourself. I don't intend to keep the girls in the kitchen to midday.'

'Where will I find you later? In the sanctuary?'

'No.' Nenneke got up. 'Not in the sanctuary. You're a welcome guest here, witcher, but don't hang around in the sanctuary. Go for a walk, and I'll find you myself.'

'Fine.'

II

Geralt strolled – for the fourth time – along the poplar alley which led from the gate to the dwellings by the sanctuary and main temple block, which merged into the sheer rock. After brief consideration he decided against returning to shelter, and turned towards the gardens and outbuildings. Umpteen priestesses, clad in grey working garments, were toiling away, weeding the beds and feeding the birds in the henhouses. The majority of them were young or very young, virtually children. Some greeted him with a nod or a smile in passing. He answered their greetings but didn't recognise any of them. Although he often visited the temple – once or even twice a year – he never saw more than three or four faces he knew. The girls came and went – becoming oracles in other temples, midwives and healers specialising in women's and children's diseases, wandering druids, teachers or governesses. But there was never a shortage of priestesses, arriving from all over, even the remotest regions. Melitele's temple in Ellander was well-known and enjoyed well-earned fame.

The cult of Melitele was one of the oldest and, in its day, one of the most widespread cults from time immemorial. Practically every pre-human race and every primordial nomadic human tribe honoured a goddess of harvest and fertility, a guardian of farmers and gardeners, a patroness of love and marriage. Many of these religions merged into the cult of Melitele.

Time, which was quite pitiless towards other religions and cults, effectively isolating them in forgotten, rarely visited little temples and oratories buried amongst urban buildings, had proved merciful to Melitele. She did not lack either followers or sponsors. In explaining the popularity of the goddess, learned men who studied this phenomenon used to hark back to the pre-cults of the Great Mother, Mother Nature, and pointed to the links with nature's cycle, with the rebirth of life and other grandiloquently named phenomena. Geralt's friend, the troubadour Dandilion, who enjoyed a reputation as a specialist in every possible field, looked for simpler explanations. Melitele's cult, he deduced, was a typical woman's cult. Melitele was, after all, the patroness of fertility and birth; she was the guardian of midwives. And a woman in labour has to scream. Apart from the usual cries – usually promising never to give herself to any bloody man ever again in her life – a woman in labour has to call upon some godhead for help, and Melitele was perfect. And since women gave birth, give birth and will continue

to give birth, the goddess Melitele, the poet proved, did not have to fear for her popularity.

‘Geralt.’

‘Nenneke. I was looking for you.’

‘Me?’ The priestess looked at him mockingly. ‘Not Iola?’

‘Iola, too,’ he admitted. ‘Does that bother you?’

‘Right now, yes. I don’t want you to get in her way and distract her. She’s got to get herself ready and pray if something’s to come of this trance.’

‘I’ve already told you,’ he said coldly, ‘I don’t want any trance. I don’t think a trance will help me in any way.’

‘While I,’ Nenneke winced, ‘don’t think a trance will harm you in any way.’

‘I can’t be hypnotised, I have immunity. I’m afraid for Iola. It might be too great an effort for a medium.’

‘Iola isn’t a medium or a mentally ill soothsayer. That child enjoys the goddess’s favour. Don’t pull silly faces, if you please. As I said, your view on religion is known to me, it’s never particularly bothered me and, no doubt, it won’t bother me in the future. I’m not a fanatic. You’ve a right to believe that we’re governed by Nature and the Force hidden within her. You can think that the gods, including my Melitele, are merely a personification of this power invented for simpletons so they can understand it better, accept its existence. According to you, that power is blind. But for me, Geralt, faith allows you to expect what my goddess personifies from nature: order, law, goodness. And hope.’

‘I know.’

‘If you know that then why your reservations about the trance? What are you afraid of? That I’ll make you bow your head to a statue and sing canticles? Geralt, we’ll simply sit together for a while – you, me and Iola – and see if the girl’s talents will let her see into the vortex of power surrounding you. Maybe we’ll discover something worth knowing. And maybe we won’t discover anything. Maybe the power and fate surrounding you won’t choose to reveal themselves to us, will remain hidden and incomprehensible. I don’t know. But why shouldn’t we try?’

‘Because there’s no point. I’m not surrounded by any vortex or fate. And if I were, why the hell would I delve into it?’

‘Geralt, you’re sick.’

‘Injured, you mean.’

‘I know what I mean. There’s something not quite right with you. I can sense that. After all, I have known you ever since you were a youngster. When I met you, you came up to my waist. And now I feel that you’re spinning around in some damned whirlpool, tangled up in a slowly tightening noose. I want to know what’s happening. But I can’t do it myself, I have to count on Iola’s gifts.’

‘You want to delve too deeply. Why the metaphysics? I’ll confide in you, if you like. I’ll fill your evenings with tales of ever more astounding events from the past few years. Get a keg of beer so my throat doesn’t dry up and we can start today. But I fear I’ll bore you because you won’t find any nooses or vortexes there. Just a witcher’s ordinary tales.’

‘I’ll willingly listen to them. But a trance, I repeat, would do no harm.’

‘Don’t you think,’ he smiled, ‘that my lack of faith makes such a trance pointless?’

‘No, I don’t. And do you know why?’

‘No.’

Nenneke leant over and looked him in the eyes with a strange smile on her pale lips.

‘Because it would be the first proof I’ve ever heard of that a lack of faith has any kind of power at all.’

A GRAIN OF TRUTH

I

A number of black points moving against a bright sky streaked with mist drew the witcher's attention. Birds. They wheeled in slow, peaceful circles, then suddenly swooped and soared up again, flapping their wings.

The witcher observed the birds for a long time then – bearing in mind the shape of the land, density of the wood, depth and course of the ravine which he suspected lay in his path – calculated the distance to them, and how long he would take to cover it. Finally he threw aside his coat and tightened the belt across his chest by two holes. The pommel and hilt of the sword strapped across his back peeked over his shoulder.

'We'll go a little out of our way, Roach,' he said. 'We'll take a detour from the highway. I don't think the birds are circling there for nothing.'

The mare walked on, obedient to Geralt's voice.

'Maybe it's just a dead elk,' said Geralt. 'But maybe it's not. Who knows?'

There was a ravine, as he had suspected; the witcher scanned the crowns of the trees tightly filling the rift. But the sides of the gully were gentle, the riverbed dry and clear of blackthorns and rotting tree trunks. He crossed it easily. On the other side was a copse of birches, and behind it a large glade, heath and undergrowth, which threw tentacles of tangled branches and roots upwards.

The birds, scared away by the appearance of a rider, soared higher, croaking sharply in their hoarse voices.

Geralt saw the first corpse immediately – the white of the sheepskin jacket and matt-blue of the dress stood out clearly against a yellowing clump of sedge. He didn't see the second corpse but its location was betrayed by three wolves sitting calmly on their haunches watching the witcher. His mare snorted and the wolves, as if at a command, unhurriedly, trotted into the woods, every now and again turning their triangular heads to watch the newcomer. Geralt jumped off his horse.

The woman in the sheepskin and blue dress had no face or throat, and most of her left thigh had gone. The witcher, not leaning over, walked by her.

The man lay with his face to the ground. Geralt didn't turn the

body over, seeing that the wolves and birds hadn't been idle. And there was no need to examine the corpse in detail – the shoulders and back of the woollen doublet were covered with thick black rivulets of dried blood. It was clear the man had died from a blow to the neck, and the wolves had only found the body afterwards.

On a wide belt next to a short cutlass in a wooden sheath the man wore a leather purse. The witcher tore it off and, item by item, threw the contents on the grass: a tinder-box, a piece of chalk, sealing-wax, a handful of silver coins, a folding shaving-knife with a bone handle, a rabbit's ear, three keys and a talisman with a phallic symbol. Two letters, written on canvas, were damp with rain and dew, smudged beyond readability. The third, written on parchment, was also ruined by damp, but still legible. It was a credit note made out by the dwarves' bank in Murivel to a merchant called Rulle Asper, or Aspen. It wasn't for a large sum.

Bending over, Geralt lifted the man's right hand. As he had expected, the copper ring digging into the swollen, blue finger carried the sign of the armourers' guild: a stylised helmet with visor, two crossed swords and the rune 'A' engraved beneath them.

The witcher returned to the woman's corpse. As he was turning the body over something pricked him in the finger – a rose, pinned to the dress. The flower had withered but not lost its colour: the petals were dark blue, very dark blue. It was the first time Geralt had seen such a rose. He turned the body over completely, and winced.

On the woman's bare and bloody neck were clear bite marks. And not those of a wolf.

The witcher carefully backed away to his horse. Without taking his eyes from the forest edge, he climbed into the saddle. He circled the glade twice and, leaning over, looked around, examining the ground closely.

'So, Roach,' he said quietly, 'the case is reasonably clear. The armourer and the woman arrived on horseback from the direction of the forest. They were on their way home from Murivel, because nobody carries an uncashed credit note for long. Why they were going this way and not following the highway? I don't know. But they were crossing the heath, side by side. And then – again, I don't know why – they both dismounted, or fell from, their horses. The armourer died instantly. The woman ran, then fell and died, and whatever attacked her – which didn't leave any tracks – dragged her along the ground, with her throat in its teeth. The horses ran

off. This happened two or three days ago.'

The mare snorted restlessly, reacting to his tone of voice.

'The thing which killed them,' continued Geralt, watching the forest's edge, 'was neither a werewolf nor a leshy. Neither would have left so much for the scavengers. If there were swamps here I'd say it was a kikimora or a vypper . . . but there aren't any swamps here.'

Leaning over, the witcher pulled back the blanket which covered the horse's side and uncovered another sword strapped to the saddle-bag – one with a shining, ornate guard and black corrugated hilt.

'Well, Roach. We're taking a roundabout route; we'd better check why this armourer and woman were riding through the forest not along the highway. If we pass by ignoring such incidents we won't ever earn enough for your oats, will we?'

The mare obediently moved forward, across the heath, carefully sidestepping hollows.

'Although it's not a werewolf, we won't take any risks,' the witcher continued, taking a bunch of dried monkshead from a saddlebag and hanging it by the bit. The mare snorted. Geralt unlaced his tunic a little and pulled out a medallion engraved with a wolf with bared jaws. The medallion, hanging on a silver chain, bobbed up and down in rhythm to the horse's gait, sparkling in the sun's rays like mercury.

II

He noticed the red tiles of the tower's conical roof from the summit of a hill as he cut across a bend in the faint trail. The slope, covered with hazel, dry branches and a thick carpet of yellow leaves, wasn't safe to descend on horseback. The witcher retreated, carefully rode down the incline and returned to the main path. He rode slowly, stopped the horse every now and again and, hanging from the saddle, looked out for tracks.

The mare tossed her head, neighed wildly, stamped and danced on the path, kicking up a storm of dried leaves. Geralt, wrapping his left arm around the horse's neck, swept his right hand – the fingers arranged in the Sign of Axia – over the mount's head as he whispered an incantation.

'Is it as bad as all that?' he murmured, looking around and not withdrawing the Sign. 'Easy, Roach, easy.'

The charm worked quickly but the mare, prodded with his heel, moved forward reluctantly, losing the natural springy rhythm of her gait. The witcher jumped nimbly to the ground and went on by foot, leading her by the bridle. He saw a wall.

There was no gap between the wall and the forest, no distinct break. The young trees and juniper bushes twined their leaves with the ivy and wild vines clinging to the stonework. Geralt looked up. At that same moment, he felt a prickle along his neck, as if an invisible, soft creature had latched on to his neck, lifting the hairs there.

He was being watched.

He turned around smoothly. Roach snorted; the muscles in her neck twitched, moved under her skin.

A girl was standing on the slope of the hill he had just climbed down, one arm resting on the trunk of an alder tree. Her trailing white dress contrasted with the glossy blackness of her dishevelled hair, falling to her shoulders. She seemed to be smiling, but she was too far away to be sure.

'Greetings,' he said, raising his hand in a friendly gesture. He took a step towards the girl. She turned her head a little, following his movements. Her face was pale, her eyes black and enormous. The smile – if it had been a smile – vanished from her face as though wiped away with a cloth. Geralt took another step, the leaves rustled underfoot, and the girl ran down the slope like a deer,

flitting between the hazel bushes. She was no more than a white streak as she disappeared into the depths of the forest. The long dress didn't appear to restrict her ease of movement in the least.

Roach neighed anxiously, tossing her head. Geralt, still watching the forest, instinctively calmed her with the Sign again. Pulling the mare by the bridle he walked slowly along the wall, wading through burdock up to the waist.

He came to a sturdy gate, with iron fittings and rusty hinges, furnished with a great brass knocker. After a moment's hesitation Geralt reached out and touched the tarnished ring. He immediately jumped back as, at that moment, the gate opened, squeaking, clattering, and raking aside clumps of grass, stones and branches. There was no one behind it – the witcher could only see a deserted courtyard, neglected and overgrown with nettles. He entered, leading Roach. The mare, still stunned by the Sign, didn't resist, but she moved stiffly and hesitantly after him.

The courtyard was surrounded on three sides by a wall and the remains of some wooden scaffolding. On the fourth side stood the mansion, its façade mottled by a pox of chipped plaster, dirty damp patches, and festooned with ivy. The shutters, with their peeling paint, were closed, as was the door.

Geralt threw Roach's reins over the pillar by the gate and slowly made his way towards the mansion, following the gravel path past a small fountain full of leaves and rubbish. In the centre of the fountain, on a fanciful plinth, a white stone dolphin arched, turning its chipped tail upwards.

Next to the fountain in what, a very long time ago, used to be a flowerbed, grew a rosebush. Nothing but the colour of the flowers made this bush unique – but the flowers were exceptional: indigo, with a faint shade of purple on the tips of some of the petals. The witcher touched one, brought his face closer and inhaled. The flowers held the typical scent of roses, only a little more intense.

The door and all the shutters of the mansion flew open at the same instant with a bang. Geralt raised his head abruptly. Down the path, scrunching the gravel, a monster was rushing straight at him.

The witcher's right hand rose, as fast as lightning, above his right shoulder while his left jerked the belt across his chest making the sword hilt jump into his palm. The blade, leaping from the scabbard with a hiss, traced a short, luminous semi-circle and froze, the point aiming at the charging beast.

At the sight of the sword the monster stopped short, spraying gravel in all directions. The witcher didn't even flinch.

The creature was humanoid, and dressed in clothes which, though tattered, were of good quality and not lacking in stylish and useless ornamentation. His human form, however, reached no higher than the soiled collar of his tunic, for above it loomed a gigantic, hairy, bear-like head with enormous ears, a pair of wild eyes and terrifying jaws full of crooked fangs in which a red tongue flickered like flame.

'Flee, mortal man!' the monster roared, flapping his paws but not moving from the spot. 'I'll devour you! Tear you to pieces!' The witcher didn't move, didn't lower his sword. 'Are you deaf? Away with you!' The creature screamed, then made a sound somewhere between a pig's squeal and a stag's bellowing roar, making the shutters rattle and clatter and shaking rubble and plaster from the sills. Neither witcher nor monster moved.

'Clear off while you're still in one piece!' roared the creature, less sure of himself. 'Because if you don't, then—'

'Then what?' interrupted Geralt.

The monster suddenly gasped and tilted his monstrous head. 'Look at him, isn't he brave?' He spoke calmly, baring his fangs and glowering at Geralt with bloodshot eyes. 'Lower that iron, if you please. Perhaps you've not realised you're in my courtyard? Or maybe it's customary, wherever you come from, to threaten people with swords in their own courtyards?'

'It is customary,' Geralt agreed, 'when faced with people who greet their guests with a roar and the cry that they're going to tear you to pieces.'

'Pox on it!' The monster got himself worked up. 'And he'll insult me on top of it all, this straggler. A guest, is he? Pushes his way into the yard, ruins someone else's flowers, plays the lord and thinks that he'll be brought bread and salt. Bah!'

The creature spat, gasped and shut his jaws. The lower fangs protruded, making him look like a boar.

'So?' The witcher spoke after a moment, lowering his sword. 'Are we going to carry on standing like this?'

'And what do you suggest instead ? Lying down?' snorted the monster. 'Put that iron away, I said.'

The witcher nimbly slipped the weapon into its scabbard and,

without lowering his arm, stroked the hilt which rose above his shoulder.

‘I’d prefer you,’ he said, ‘not to make any sudden moves. This sword can always be drawn again, faster than you imagine.’

‘I noticed,’ rasped the monster. ‘If it wasn’t for that you’d have been out of this gate a long time ago, with my bootprint on your arse. What do you want here? How did you get here?’

‘I got lost,’ lied the witcher.

‘You got lost,’ repeated the monster, twisting his jaws in a menacing grin. ‘Well, unlose your way. Out of the gate, turn your left ear to the sun and keep walking and you’ll soon get back to the highway. Well? What are you waiting for?’

‘Is there any water?’ asked Geralt calmly. ‘The horse is thirsty. And so am I, if that doesn’t inconvenience you.’

The monster shifted from one foot to the other and scratched his ear. ‘Listen you,’ he said. ‘Are you really not frightened of me?’

‘Should I be?’

The monster looked around, cleared his throat and yanked up his baggy trousers.

‘Pox on it, what’s the harm of a guest in the house? It’s not every day I meet someone who doesn’t run away or faint at the sight of me. All right then. If you’re a weary but honest wanderer I invite you in. But if you’re a brigand or a thief, then I warn you: this house does what I tell it to. Within these walls I rule!’

He lifted his hairy paw. All the shutters clattered against the wall once more and deep in the dolphin’s stone gullet something rumbled.

‘I invite you in,’ he repeated.

Geralt didn’t move, scrutinising him.

‘Do you live alone?’

‘What’s that to do with you?’ said the monster angrily, opening his jaws, then croaked loudly, ‘Oh, I see. No doubt you’d like to know whether I’ve got forty servants all as beautiful as me. I don’t. Well, pox, are you going to make use of my generous invitation? If not, the gate’s over there.’

Geralt bowed stiffly. ‘I accept your invitation,’ he said formally. ‘I won’t slight the right of hospitality.’

‘My house is your house,’ the monster said in return, just as formally, although a little offhandedly. ‘This way please, dear guest. And leave the horse here, by the well.’

The interior was in need of extensive repair, although it was reasonably clean and tidy. The furniture had been made by skilled craftsmen, if a very long time ago. A pungent smell of dust hung in the dark rooms.

‘Light!’ growled the monster, and the torch in its iron bracket burst into flames and sooty smoke.

‘Not bad,’ remarked the witcher.

The monster cackled. ‘That’s it? I see you won’t be amazed by any old trick. I told you this house obeys my commands. This way, please. Careful, the stairs are steep. Light!’

On the stairs, the monster turned. ‘What’s that around your neck, dear guest?’

‘Have a look.’

The creature took the medallion in his paw, lifted it up to his eyes, tightening the chain around Geralt’s neck a little.

‘The animal has an unpleasant expression. What is it?’

‘My guild’s badge.’

‘Ah, you make muzzles, no doubt. This way, please. Light!’

The centre of the large room, completely devoid of windows, was taken up by a huge oak table, empty apart from an enormous brass candlestick, slowly turning green and covered with trickles of hardened wax. At the monster’s command the candles lit and flickered, brightening the interior a little.

One wall was hung with weapons, compositions of round shields, crossed partisans, javelins and guisarmes, heavy sabres and axes. Half of the adjacent wall was taken up by an enormous fireplace, above which hung rows of flaking and peeling portraits. The wall facing the entrance was filled with hunting trophies – elks and stag antlers whose branching racks threw long shadows across the grinning mounted heads of wild boar, bear and lynx, over the ruffled and frayed wings of eagles and hawks. The place of honour was filled by a rock dragon’s head, tainted brown, damaged and leaking stuffing. Geralt examined it more closely.

‘My grandpa killed it,’ said the monster, throwing a huge log into the depths of the fireplace. ‘It was probably the last one in the

vicinity when it got itself killed. Sit, my dear guest. You're hungry?'

'I won't deny it, dear host.'

The monster sat at the table, lowered his head, clasped his hairy paws over his stomach, muttered something while twiddling his enormous thumbs, then suddenly roared, thumping the table with his paw. Dishes and platters rattled like pewter and silver, chalices jingled like crystal. There was a smell of roast meat, garlic, marjoram and nutmeg. Geralt did not show any surprise.

'Yes.' The monster rubbed his hands. 'This is better than servants, isn't it? Help yourself, dear guest. Here is some fowl, here some boar ham, here terrine of . . . I don't know what. Something. Here we have some hazel grouse. Pox, no, it's partridge. I got the spells muddled up. Eat up, eat up. This is proper, real food, don't worry.'

'I'm not worried.' Geralt tore the fowl in two.

'I forgot,' snorted the monster, 'that you're not timid. What shall I call you?'

'Geralt. And your name, dear host?'

'Nivellen. But they call me Degen or Fanger around here. And they use me to frighten children.'

The monster poured the contents of an enormous chalice down his throat, after which he sank his fingers in the terrine, tearing half of it from the bowl in one go.

'Frighten children,' repeated Geralt with his mouth full. 'Without any reason, no doubt?'

'Of course not. Your health, Geralt!'

'And yours, Nivellen.'

'How's the wine? Have you noticed that it's made from grapes and not apples? But if you don't like it I'll conjure up a different one.'

'Thank you, it's not bad. Are your magical powers innate?'

'No. I've had them since growing this. This trap, that is. I don't know how it happened myself, but the house does whatever I wish. Nothing very big; I can conjure up food, drink, clothes, clean linen, hot water, soap. Any woman can do that, and without using magic at that. I can open and close windows and doors. I can light a fire. Nothing very remarkable.'

'It's something. And this . . . trap, as you call it, have you had it

long?'

'Twelve years.'

'How did it happen?'

'What's it got to do with you? Pour yourself some more wine.'

'With pleasure. It's got nothing to do with me. I'm just asking out of curiosity.'

'An acceptable reason,' the monster said, and laughed loudly. 'But I don't accept it. It's got nothing to do with you and that's that. But just to satisfy your curiosity a little I'll show you what I used to look like. Look at those portraits. The first from the chimney is my father. The second, pox only knows. And the third is me. Can you see it?'

Beneath the dust and spider-webs a nondescript man with a bloated, sad, spotty face and watery eyes looked down from the painting. Geralt, who was no stranger to the way portrait painters tended to flatter their clients, nodded.

'Can you see it?' repeated Nivellen, baring his fangs.

'I can.'

'Who are you?'

'I don't understand.'

'You don't understand?' The monster raised his head; his eyes shone like a cat's. 'My portrait is hung beyond the candlelight. I can see it, but I'm not human. At least, not at the moment. A human, looking at my portrait, would get up, go closer and, no doubt, have to take the candlestick with him. You didn't do that, so the conclusion is simple. But I'm asking you plainly: are you human?'

Geralt didn't lower his eyes. 'If that's the way you put it,' he answered after a moment's silence, 'then, not quite.'

'Ah. Surely it won't be tactless if I ask, in that case, what you are?'

'A witcher.'

'Ah,' Nivellen repeated after a moment. 'If I remember rightly, witchers earn their living in an interesting way – they kill monsters for money.'

'You remember correctly.'

Silence fell again. Candle flames pulsated, flicked upwards in thin wisps of fire, glimmering in the cut-crystal chalices. Cascades of

wax trickled down the candlestick.

Nivellen sat still, lightly twitching his enormous ears. ‘Let’s assume,’ he said finally, ‘that you draw your sword before I jump on you. Let’s assume you even manage to cut me down. With my weight, that won’t stop me; I’ll take you down through sheer momentum. And then it’s teeth that’ll decide. What do you think, witcher, which one of us has a better chance if it comes to biting each other’s throats?’

Geralt, steadying the carafe’s pewter stopper with his thumb, poured himself some wine, took a sip and leaned back into his chair. He was watching the monster with a smile. An exceptionally ugly one.

‘Yeeees,’ said Nivellen slowly, digging at the corner of his jaws with his claw. ‘One has to admit you can answer questions without using many words. It’ll be interesting to see how you manage the next one. Who paid you to deal with me?’

‘No one. I’m here by accident.’

‘You’re not lying, by any chance?’

‘I’m not in the habit of lying.’

‘And what are you in the habit of doing? I’ve heard about witchers – they abduct tiny children whom they feed with magic herbs. The ones who survive become witchers themselves, sorcerers with inhuman powers. They’re taught to kill, and all human feelings and reactions are trained out of them. They’re turned into monsters in order to kill other monsters. I’ve heard it said it’s high time someone started hunting witchers, as there are fewer and fewer monsters and more and more witchers. Do have some partridge before it’s completely cold.’

Nivellen took the partridge from the dish, put it between his jaws and crunched it like a piece of toast, bones cracking as they were crushed between his teeth.

‘Why don’t you say anything?’ he asked indistinctly, swallowing. ‘How much of the rumours about you witchers is true?’

‘Practically nothing.’

‘And what’s a lie?’

‘That there are fewer and fewer monsters.’

‘True. There’s a fair number of them.’ Nivellen bared his fangs. ‘One is sitting in front of you wondering if he did the right thing by

inviting you in. I didn't like your guild badge right from the start, dear guest.'

'You aren't a monster, Nivellen,' the witcher said dryly.

'Pox, that's something new. So what am I? Cranberry pudding? A flock of wild geese flying south on a sad November morning? No? Maybe I'm the virtue that a miller's buxom daughter lost in spring? Well, Geralt, tell me what I am. Can't you see I'm shaking with curiosity?'

'You're not a monster. Otherwise you wouldn't be able to touch this silver tray. And in no way could you hold my medallion.'

'Ha!' Nivellen roared so powerfully the candle flames fell horizontal for a moment. 'Today, very clearly, is a day for revealing great and terrible secrets! Now I'm going to be told that I grew these ears because I didn't like milky porridge as a child!'

'No, Nivellen,' said Geralt calmly. 'It happened because of a spell. I'm sure you know who cast that spell.'

'And what if I do?'

'In many cases a spell can be uncast.'

'You, as a witcher, can uncast spells in many cases?'

'I can. Do you want me to try?'

'No. I don't.' The monster opened his jaws and poked out his tongue, two span long, and very red. 'Surprised you, hasn't it?'

'That it has,' admitted Geralt.

The monster giggled and lounged in his armchair. 'I knew that would,' he said. 'Pour yourself some more, get comfortable and I'll tell you the whole story. Witcher or not, you've got an honest face and I feel like talking. Pour yourself more.'

'There's none left.'

'Pox on it!' The monster cleared his throat, then thumped the table with his paw again. A large earthenware demijohn in a wicker basket appeared next to the two empty carafes, from nowhere. Nivellen tore the sealing wax off with his teeth.

'As no doubt you've noticed,' he began, pouring the wine, 'this is quite a remote area. It's a long way to the nearest human settlement. It's because, you see, my father, and my grandfather too, in his time, didn't make themselves particularly loved by our neighbours or the merchants using the highway. If anyone went

astray here and my father spotted them from the tower, they lost – at best – their fortune. And a couple of the nearer settlements were burnt because Father decided the levies were being paid tardily. Not many people liked my father. Except for me, naturally. I cried awfully when what was left of my father after a blow from a two-handed sword was brought home on a cart one day. Grandpa didn't take part in robbery any more because, ever since he was hit on the head with a morningstar, he had a terrible stutter. He dribbled and rarely made it to the privy on time. As their heir, I had to lead the gang.

'I was young at the time,' Nivellen continued, 'a real milksop, so the lads in the crew wound me around their little fingers in a flash. I was as much in command of them as a fat piglet is of a pack of wolves. We soon began doing things which Father would never have allowed, had he been alive. I'll spare you the details and get straight to the point. One day we took ourselves as far as Gelibol, near Mirt, and robbed a temple. A young priestess was there too.'

'Which temple, Nivellen?'

'Pox only knows, but it must have been a bad one. There were skulls and bones on the altar, I remember, and a green fire was burning. It stank like nobody's business. But to the point. The lads overpowered the priestess and stripped her, then said I had to become a man. Well, I became a man, stupid little snot that I was, and while I was achieving manhood the priestess spat into my face and screamed something.'

'What?'

'That I was a monster in human skin, that I'd be a monster in a monster's skin, something about love, blood . . . I can't remember. She must have had the dagger, a little one, hidden in her hair. She killed herself and then—

'We fled from there, Geralt, I'm telling you – we nearly wore our horses out. It was a bad temple.'

'Go on.'

'Then it was as the priestess had said. A few days later, I woke up and as the servants saw me, they screamed and took to their heels. I went to the mirror . . . You see, Geralt, I panicked, had some sort of an attack, I remember it almost through a haze. To put it briefly, corpses fell. Several. I used whatever came to hand – and I'd suddenly become very strong. And the house helped as best it could: doors slammed, furniture flew in the air, fires broke out.

Whoever could get out ran away in a panic: my aunt and cousin, the lads from the crew. What am I saying? Even the dogs howled and cowered. My cat, Glutton, ran away. Even my aunt's parrot kicked the bucket out of fear. I was alone, roaring, howling, going mad, smashing whatever came to hand, mainly mirrors.'

Nivellen paused, sighed and sniffed.

'When the attack was over,' he resumed after a while, 'it was already too late. I was alone. I couldn't explain to anyone that only my appearance had changed, that although in this horrible shape I was just a stupid youngster, sobbing over the servants' bodies in an empty manor. I was afraid they'd come back and kill me before I could explain. But nobody returned.'

The monster grew silent for a moment and wiped his nose on his sleeve. 'I don't want to go back to those first months, Geralt. It still leaves me shaking when I recall them. I'll get to the point. For a long time, a very long time, I sat in the manor, quiet as a mouse, not stirring from the place. If anyone appeared, which rarely happened, I wouldn't go out. I'd tell the house to slam the shutters a couple of times, or I'd roar through the gargoyle, and that was usually enough for the would-be guest to leave in a hurry. So that's how it was, until one day I looked out of the window one pale dawn and – what did I see? Some trespasser stealing a rose from my aunt's bush. And it isn't just any old rosebush: these are blue roses from Nazair. It was Grandfather who brought the seedlings. I flew into a fury and jumped outside.

'The fat trespasser, when he got his voice back – he'd lost it when he saw me – squealed that he only wanted a few flowers for his daughter, that I should spare him, spare his life and his health. I was just ready to kick him out of the main gate when I remembered something. Stories Lenka, my nanny – the old bag – used to tell me. Pox on it, I thought, if pretty girls turn frogs into princes, or the other way round, then maybe . . . Maybe there's a grain of truth in these stories, a chance . . . I leapt four yards, roared so loud wild vine tumbled from the wall, and I yelled "Your daughter or your life!" Nothing better came to mind. The merchant, for he was a merchant, began to weep, then confessed that his daughter was only eight. Are you laughing?'

'No.'

'I didn't know whether to laugh or cry over my shitty fate. I felt sorry for the old trader. I couldn't watch him shake like that. I invited him inside, made him welcome and, when he was leaving I

poured gold and precious stones into his bag. There was still a fair fortune in the cellar from Father's day. I hadn't quite known what to do with it, so I could allow myself this gesture. The merchant beamed and thanked me so profusely that he slobbered all over himself. He must have boasted about his adventure somewhere because not two weeks had gone by when another merchant appeared. He had a pretty large bag ready with him. And a daughter. Also pretty large.'

Nivellen extended his legs under the table and stretched until the armchair creaked.

'I came to an understanding with the merchant in no time,' he continued. 'He'd leave her with me for a year. I had to help him load the sack onto his mule; he wouldn't have managed by himself.'

'And the girl?'

'She had fits at the sight of me for a while. She really thought I'd eat her. But after a month we were eating at the same table, chatting and going for long walks. She was kind, and remarkably smart, and I'd get tongue-tied when I talked to her. You see, Geralt, I was always shy with girls, always made a laughing stock of myself, even with wenches from the cowshed with dung up to their knees, girls the lads from the crew turned over this way and that at will. Even they made fun of me. To say nothing of having a maw like this. I couldn't even make myself say anything about why I had paid so dearly for a year of her life. The year dragged like the stench following marauding troops until, at last, the merchant arrived and took her away.

'I locked myself in the house, resigned, and didn't react for several months to any of the guests who turned up with daughters. But after a year spent with company, I realised how hard it was to live without anyone to talk to.' The monster made a noise which was supposed to be a sigh but came out more like a hiccough.

'The next one,' he said after a while, 'was called Fenne. She was small, bright and chirpy, a real goldcrest. She wasn't frightened of me at all. Once, on the anniversary of my first haircut, my coming of age, we'd both drunk too much mead and . . . ha, ha. Straight after, I jumped out of bed and ran to the mirror. I must admit I was disappointed, and despondent. The trap was the same as it ever was, if with a slightly more stupid expression. And they say the wisdom of ages is to be found in fairy tales. It's not worth a shit, wisdom like that, Geralt.

'Well, Fenne quickly tried to make me forget my worries. She was

a jolly girl, I tell you. Do you know what she thought up? We'd both frighten unwanted guests. Imagine: a guest like that enters the courtyard, looks around, and then, with a roar, I charge at him on all fours with Fenne, completely naked, sitting on my back and blowing my grandfather's hunting horn!'

Nivellen shook with laughter, the white of his fangs flashing. 'Fenne,' he continued, 'stayed with me for a year, then returned to her family with a huge dowry. She was preparing to marry a tavern owner, a widower.'

'Carry on, Nivellen. This is interesting.'

'You think so?' said the monster, scratching himself between the ears with a rasping sound. 'All right. The next one, Primula, was the daughter of an impoverished knight. The knight, when he got here, had a skinny horse, a rusty cuirass and incredible debts. He was as hideous as cow dung, I tell you, Geralt, and spread a similar smell. Primula, I'd wager my right hand, was conceived while he was at war, as she was quite pretty. I didn't frighten her either, which isn't surprising, really, as compared to her parent I might have appeared quite comely. She had, as it turned out, quite a temperament and I, having gained some self-confidence, seized the moment by the horns. After two weeks Primula and I already had a very close relationship. She liked to pull me by the ears and shout "Bite me to death, you animal!" and "Tear me apart, you beast!" and other equally idiotic things. I ran to the mirror in the breaks, but just imagine, Geralt, I looked at myself with growing anxiety. Less and less did I long to return to my former shape. You see, Geralt, I used to be a weakling and now I'd become a strapping fellow. I'd keep getting ill, I'd cough, my nose would run, but now I don't catch anything. And my teeth? You wouldn't believe how rotten my teeth had been! And now? I can bite through the leg of a chair. Do you want me to bite a chair leg?'

'No, I don't.'

'Maybe that's good.' The monster opened his mouth wide. 'My showing-off used to amuse the girls and there aren't many whole chairs left in the house.' Nivellen yawned, his enormous tongue rolling up into a tube.

'This talking has made me tired, Geralt. Briefly: there were two after Primula, Ilka and Venimira. Everything happened in the same way, to the point of boredom. First, a mixture of fear and reserve, then a thread of sympathy re-enforced by small but precious gifts, then "Bite me, eat me up", Daddy's return, a tender farewell and an

increasingly discernible depletion of the treasury. I decided to take longer breaks to be alone. Of course, I'd long ago stopped believing that a virgin's kiss would transform the way I looked. And I'd come to terms with it. And, what's more, I'd come to the conclusion that things were fine as they were and that there wasn't any need for changes.'

'Really? No changes, Nivellen?'

'It's true. I have a horse's health, which came with the way I look, for one. Secondly, my being different works on girls like an aphrodisiac. Don't laugh! I'm certain that as a human I'd have to give a mighty good chase to get at a girl like, for example, Venimira, who was an extremely beautiful maid. I don't suppose she'd have glanced twice at the fellow in the portrait. And thirdly: safety. Father had enemies, and a couple of them had survived. People whom the crew, under my pitiful leadership, had sent to their graves, had relatives. There's gold in the cellar. If it wasn't for the fear inspired by me, somebody would come and get it, if only peasants with pitchforks.'

'You seem quite sure,' Geralt remarked, playing with an empty chalice, 'that you haven't offended anyone in your present shape. No father, no daughter. No relative or daughter's betrothed—'

'Leave off, Geralt.' Nivellen was indignant. 'What are you talking about? The fathers couldn't contain themselves for joy. I told you, I was incredibly generous. And the daughters? You didn't see them when they got here in their dresses of sackcloth, their little hands raw from washing, their shoulders stooped from carrying buckets. Even after two weeks with me Primula still had marks on her back and thighs from the strap her knightly father had beaten her with. They walked around like princesses here, carried nothing but a fan and didn't even know where the kitchen was. I dressed them up and covered them with trinkets. At the click of a finger, I'd conjure up hot water in the tin bath Father had plundered for my mother at Assengard. Can you imagine? A tin bath! There's hardly a regent, what am I saying, hardly a lord who's got a tin bath at home. This was a house from a fairy tale for them, Geralt. And as far as bed is concerned, well . . . Pox on it, virtue is rarer today than a rock dragon. I didn't force any of them, Geralt.'

'But you suspected someone had paid me to kill you. Who would have?'

'A scoundrel who wanted the contents of my cellar but didn't have any more daughters,' Nivellen said emphatically. 'Human

greed knows no limits.'

'And nobody else?'

'And nobody else.'

They both remained silent, gazing at the nervous flicker of the candle flames.

'Nivellen,' said the witcher suddenly, 'are you alone now?'

'Witcher,' answered the monster after a moment's hesitation, 'I think that, in principle, I ought to insult you, take you by the neck and throw you down the stairs. Do you know why? Because you treat me like a dimwit. I noticed how you've been cocking your ears and glancing at the door. You know perfectly well that I don't live alone. Am I right?'

'You are. I'm sorry.'

'Pox on your apologies. Have you seen her?'

'Yes. In the forest, by the gate. Is she why merchants and daughters have been leaving here empty-handed for some time?'

'So you know about that too? Yes, she's the reason.'

'Do you mind if I ask whether—'

'Yes, I do mind.'

Silence again.

'Oh well, it's up to you,' the witcher finally said, getting up. 'Thanks for your hospitality, dear host. Time I was on my way.'

'Quite right.' Nivellen also got up. 'For certain reasons I can't offer you a room in the manor for the night, and I don't encourage you to spend the night in these woods. Ever since the area's been deserted it's been bad at night here. You ought to get back to the highway before dusk.'

'I'll bear that in mind, Nivellen. Are you sure you don't need my help?'

The monster looked at him askance. 'You think you *could* help me? You'd be able to lift this from me?'

'I wasn't only thinking about that sort of help.'

'You didn't answer my question. Although . . . you probably did. You wouldn't be able to.'

Geralt looked him straight in the eyes. 'You had some bad luck,' he said. 'Of all the temples in Gelibol and the Nimnar Valley, you

picked the Church of Coram Agh Tera, the Lionheaded Spider. In order to lift the curse thrown by the priestess of Coram Agh Tera, you need knowledge and powers which I don't possess.'

'And who does?'

'So you are interested after all? You said things were fine as they are.'

'As they are, yes. But not as they might be. I'm afraid that—'

'What are you afraid of?'

The monster stopped at the door to the room and turned. 'I've had enough of your questions, witcher, which you keep asking instead of answering mine. Obviously, you've got to be asked in the right way. Listen. For some time now I've had hideous dreams. Maybe the word "monstrous" would be more accurate. Am I right to be afraid? Briefly, please.'

'Have you ever had muddy feet after waking from such a dream? Conifer needles in your sheets?'

'No.'

'And have—'

'No. Briefly, please.'

'You're rightly afraid.'

'Can anything be done about it? Briefly, please.'

'No.'

'Finally. Let's go, I'll see you out.'

In the courtyard, as Geralt was adjusting the saddle-bags, Nivellen stroked the mare's nostrils and patted her neck. Roach, pleased with the caress, lowered her head.

'Animals like me,' boasted the monster. 'And I like them, too. My cat, Glutton, ran away at the beginning but she came back later. For a long time, she was the only living creature who kept me company in my misfortune. Vereena, too—' He broke off with a grimace.

Geralt smiled. 'Does she like cats too?'

'Birds.' Nivellen bared his teeth. 'I gave myself away, pox on it. But what's the harm. She isn't another merchant's daughter, Geralt, or another attempt to find a grain of truth in old folk tales. It's serious. We love each other. If you laugh, I'll sock you one.'

Geralt didn't laugh. 'You know your Vereena,' he said, 'is

probably a rusalka?'

'I suspected as much. Slim. Dark. She rarely speaks, and in a language I don't know. She doesn't eat human food. She disappears into the forest for days on end, then comes back. Is that typical?'

'More or less.' The witcher tightened Roach's girth-strap. 'No doubt you think she wouldn't return if you were to become human?'

'I'm sure of it. You know how frightened rusalkas are of people. Hardly anybody's seen a rusalka from up close. But Vereena and I . . . Pox on it! Take care, Geralt.'

'Take care, Nivellen.' The witcher prodded the mare in the side with his heel and made towards the gate. The monster shuffled along at his side.

'Geralt?'

'Yes.'

'I'm not as stupid as you think. You came here following the tracks of one of the merchants who'd been here lately. Has something happened to one of them?'

'Yes.'

'The last was here three days ago. With his daughter, not one of the prettiest, by the way. I commanded the house to close all its doors and shutters and give no sign of life. They wandered around the courtyard and left. The girl picked a rose from my aunt's rosebush and pinned it to her dress. Look for them somewhere else. But be careful, this is a horrible area. I told you that the forest isn't the safest of places at night. Ugly things are heard and seen.'

'Thanks, Nivellen. I'll remember about you. Who knows, maybe I'll find someone who—'

'Maybe yes. And maybe no. It's my problem, Geralt, my life and my punishment. I've learnt to put up with it. I've got used to it. If it gets worse, I'll get used to that too. And if it gets far worse don't look for anybody. Come here yourself and put an end to it. As a witcher. Take care, Geralt.'

Nivellen turned and marched briskly towards the manor. He didn't look round again.

III

The area was deserted, wild and ominously inhospitable. Geralt didn't return to the highway before dusk; he didn't want to take a roundabout route so he took a short-cut through the forest. He spent the night on the bare summit of a high hill, his sword on his knees, beside a tiny campfire into which, every now and then, he threw wisps of monkshood. In the middle of the night he noticed the glow of a fire far away in the valley; he heard mad howling and singing and a sound which could only have been the screaming of a tortured woman. When dawn had barely broken he made his way there to find nothing but a trampled glade and charred bones in still-warm ashes. Something sitting in the crown of an enormous oak shrieked and hissed. It could have been a harpy, or an ordinary wildcat. The witcher didn't stop to check.

IV

About midday, while Roach was drinking at a spring, the mare neighed piercingly and backed away, baring her yellow teeth and chewing her bit. Geralt calmed her with the Sign. Then he noticed a regular ring formed by the caps of reddish mushrooms peering from the moss.

‘You’re becoming a real hysteric, Roach,’ he said. ‘This is just an ordinary devil’s ring. What’s the fuss?’

The mare snorted, turning her head towards him. The witcher rubbed his forehead, frowned and grew thoughtful. Then he leapt into the saddle, turned the horse around and started back, following his own tracks.

‘Animals like me,’ he muttered. ‘Sorry, Roach. It turns out you’ve got more brains than me!’

V

The mare flattened her ears against her skull and snorted, throwing up earth with her hooves; she didn't want to go. Geralt didn't calm her with the Sign; he jumped from the saddle and threw the reins over the horse's head. He no longer had his old sword in its lizard-skin sheath on his back; its place was filled with a shining, beautiful weapon with a cruciform and slender, well-weighted hilt, ending in a spherical pommel made of white metal.

This time the gate didn't open for him. It was already open, just as he had left it.

He heard singing. He didn't understand the words; he couldn't even identify the language. He didn't need to – the witcher felt and understood the very nature, the essence, of this quiet, piercing song which flowed through the veins in a wave of nauseous, overpowering menace.

The singing broke off abruptly, and then he saw her.

She was clinging to the back of the dolphin in the dried-up fountain, embracing the moss-overgrown stone with her tiny hands, so pale they seemed transparent. Beneath her storm of tangled black hair shone huge, wide-open eyes the colour of anthracite.

Geralt slowly drew closer, his step soft and springy, tracing a semi-circle from the wall and blue rosebush. The creature glued to the dolphin's back followed him with her eyes, turning her petite face with an expression of longing, and full of charm. He could still hear her song, even though her thin, pale lips were held tight and not the slightest sound emerged from them.

The witcher halted at a distance of ten paces. His sword, slowly drawn from its black enamelled sheath, glistened and glowed above his head.

'It's silver,' he said. 'This blade is silver.'

The pale little face did not flinch, the anthracite eyes did not change expression.

'You're so like a rusalka,' the witcher continued calmly, 'that you could deceive anyone. All the more as you're a rare bird, black-haired one. But horses are never mistaken. They recognise creatures like you instinctively and perfectly. What are you? I think you're a moola, or an alpor. An ordinary vampire couldn't come out in the sun.'

The corners of the pale lips quivered and turned up a little.

‘Nivellen attracted you with that shape of his, didn’t he? You evoked his dreams. I can guess what sort of dreams they were, and I pity him.’

The creature didn’t move.

‘You like birds,’ continued the witcher. ‘But that doesn’t stop you biting the necks of people of both sexes, does it? You and Nivellen, indeed ! A beautiful couple you’d make, a monster and a vampire, rulers of a forest castle. You’d dominate the whole area in a flash. You, eternally thirsty for blood, and he, your guardian, a murderer at your service, a blind tool. But first he had to become a true monster, not a human being in a monster’s mask.’

The huge black eyes narrowed.

‘Where is he, black-haired one? You were singing, so you’ve drunk some blood. You’ve taken the ultimate measure, which means you haven’t managed to enslave his mind. Am I right?’

The black-tressed head nodded slightly, almost imperceptibly, and the corners of the mouth turned up even more. The tiny little face took on an eerie expression.

‘No doubt you consider yourself the lady of this manor now?’

A nod, this time clearer.

‘Are you a moola?’

A slow shake of the head. The hiss which reverberated through his bones could only have come from the pale, ghastly, smiling lips, although the witcher didn’t see them move.

‘Alpor ?’

Denial.

The witcher backed away and clasped the hilt of his sword tighter. ‘That means you’re—’

The corners of the lips started to turn up higher and higher, the lips flew open . . .

‘A bruxa!’ the witcher shouted, throwing himself towards the fountain.

From behind the pale lips glistened white, spiky fangs. The vampire jumped up, arched her back like a leopard and screamed.

The wave of sound hit the witcher like a battering ram, depriving him of breath, crushing his ribs, piercing his ears and brain with

thorns of pain. Flying backwards he just managed to cross his wrists in the Sign of Heliotrop. The spell cushioned some of his impact with the wall but even so the world grew dark and the remainder of his breath burst from his lungs in a groan.

On the dolphin's back, in the stone circle of the dried-up fountain where a dainty girl in a white dress had sat just a moment ago, an enormous black bat flattened its glossy body, opening its long, narrow jaws wide, revealing rows of needle-like white teeth. The membranous wings spread and flapped silently, and the creature charged at the witcher like an arrow fired from a crossbow.

Geralt, with the metallic taste of blood in his mouth, shouted a spell and threw his hand, fingers spread in the Sign of Quen, out in front of him. The bat, hissing, turned abruptly, then chuckled and veered up into the air before diving down vertically, straight at the nape of the witcher's neck. Geralt jumped aside, slashed, and missed. The bat, smoothly, gracefully drew in a wing, circled around him and attacked anew, opening its eyeless, toothed snout wide. Geralt waited, sword held with both hands, always pointed in the creature's direction. At the last moment, he jumped – not to the side but forward, dealing a swinging cut which made the air howl.

He missed. It was so unexpected that he lost his rhythm and dodged a fraction of a second too late. He felt the beast's talons tear his cheek, and a damp velvety wing slapped against his neck. He curled up on the spot, transferred the weight of his body to his right leg and slashed backwards sharply, missing the amazingly agile creature again.

The bat beat its wings, soared up and glided towards the fountain. As the crooked claws scraped against the stone casing the monstrous, slobbering snout was already blurring, morphing, disappearing, although the pale little lips which were taking its place couldn't quite hide the murderous fangs.

The bruxa howled piercingly, modulating her voice into a macabre tune, glared at the witcher with eyes full of hatred, and screamed again.

The soundwave was so powerful it broke through the Sign. Black and red circles spun in Geralt's eyes; his temples and the crown of his head throbbed. Through the pain drilling in his ears, he began to hear voices wailing and moaning, the sound of flute and oboe, the rustle of a gale. The skin on his face grew numb and cold. He fell to one knee and shook his head.

The black bat floated towards him silently, opening its toothy

jaws. Geralt, still stunned by the scream, reacted instinctively. He jumped up and, in a flash, matching the tempo of his movements to the speed of the monster's flight, took three steps forward, dodged, turned a semi-circle and then, quick as a thought, delivered a two-handed blow. The blade met with no resistance . . . almost no resistance. He heard a scream, but this time it was a scream of pain, caused by the touch of silver.

The wailing bruxa was morphing on the dolphin's back. On her white dress, slightly above her left breast, a red stain was visible beneath a slash no longer than a little finger. The witcher ground his teeth – the cut, which should have sundered the beast in two, had been nothing but a scratch.

'Shout, vampire,' he growled, wiping the blood from his cheek. 'Scream your guts out. Lose your strength. And then I'll slash your pretty little head off!'

You. You will be the first to grow weak, Sorcerer. I will kill you.

The bruxa's lips didn't move, but the witcher heard the words clearly; they resounded in his mind, echoing and reverberating as if underwater.

'We shall see,' he muttered through his teeth as he walked, bent over, in the direction of the fountain.

I will kill you. I'll kill you. I'll kill you.

'We shall see.'

'Vereena!' Nivellen, his head hanging low and both hands clinging to the doorframe, stumbled from the mansion. He staggered towards the fountain, waving his paws unsteadily. Blood stained the cuff of his tunic.

'Vereena!' he roared again.

The bruxa jerked her head in his direction. Geralt, raising his sword to strike, jumped towards her, but the vampire's reaction was much faster. A sharp scream and another soundwave knocked the witcher from his feet. He tumbled onto his back and scraped against the gravel of the path. The bruxa arched and tensed to jump, her fangs flashing like daggers. Nivellen, spreading his paws like a bear, tried to grab her but she screamed straight into his face, throwing him back against the wooden scaffolding under the wall, which broke with a sharp crash and buried him beneath a stack of timber.

Geralt was already on his feet, running, tracing a semi-circle around the courtyard, trying to draw the bruxa's attention away

from Nivellen. The vampire, fluttering her white dress, scurried straight at him, light as a butterfly, barely touching the ground. She was no longer screaming, no longer trying to morph. The witcher knew she was tired, and that she was still lethal. Behind Geralt's back, Nivellen was clattering under the scaffolding, roaring.

Geralt leapt to the left, executing a short moulinet with his sword to confuse the bruxa gliding towards him – white and black, wind-blown, terrible. He'd underestimated her. She screamed. He didn't make the Sign in time, flew backwards until he thumped against the wall. The pain in his spine shot all the way to the tips of his fingers, paralysed his shoulders, cut him down at the legs. He fell to his knees. The bruxa, wailing melodiously, jumped towards him.

'Vereena!' roared Nivellen.

She turned – and Nivellen forced the sharp broken end of a three-metre-long pole between her breasts. She didn't shout. She only sighed.

The witcher shook, hearing this sigh.

They stood there: Nivellen, on wide-spread legs, was wielding the pole in both hands, one end firmly secured under his arm.

The bruxa, like a white butterfly on a pin, hung on the other end of the stake clutching it with both hands. The vampire exhaled excruciatingly and suddenly pressed herself hard against the stake.

Geralt watched a red stain bloom on her back, on the white dress through which the broken tip emerged in a geyser of blood: hideous, almost obscene. Nivellen screamed, took one step back, then another, retreating from her, but he didn't let go of the pole and dragged the bruxa behind him. One more step and he leaned back against the mansion. The end of the pole scraped against the wall.

Slowly, as if a caress, the bruxa moved her tiny hands along the stake, stretched her arms out to their full length, grasped the pole hard and pulled on it again. Over a metre of bloodied wood already protruded from her back. Her eyes were wide open, her head flung back. Her sighs became more frequent and rhythmic, turning into a ruckling wheeze.

Geralt stood but, fascinated by the scene, still couldn't make himself act. He heard words resounding dully within his skull, as if echoing around a cold, damp dungeon.

Mine. Or nobody's. I love you. Love you.

Another terrible, vibrating sigh, choking in blood. The bruxa moved further along the pole and stretched out her arms. Nivellen roared desperately and, without letting go of the stake, tried to push the vampire as far from himself as possible – but in vain. She pulled herself closer and grabbed him by the head. He wailed horrifically and tossed his hairy head. The bruxa moved along the pole again and tilted her head towards Nivellen's throat. The fangs flashed a blinding white.

Geralt jumped. Every move he made, every step, was part of his nature: hard-learnt, automatic and lethally sure. Three quick steps, and the third, like a hundred such steps before, finished on the left leg with a strong, firm stamp. A twist of his torso and a sharp, forceful cut. He saw her eyes. Nothing could change now. He heard the voice. Nothing. He yelled, to drown the word which she was repeating. Nothing could change. He cut.

He struck decisively, like hundreds of times before, with the centre of the blade, and immediately, following the rhythm of the movement, took a fourth step and half a turn. The blade, freed by the half-turn, floated after him, shining, drawing a fan of red droplets in its wake. The streaming raven-black hair floated in the air, *floated, floated, floated . . .*

The head fell onto the gravel.

There are fewer and fewer monsters?

And I? What am I?

Who's shouting? The birds?

The woman in a sheepskin jacket and blue dress?

The roses from Nazair?

How quiet!

How empty. What emptiness.

Within me.

Nivellen, curled up in a bundle, sheltering his head in his arms and shaking with twitches and shivers, was lying in the nettles by the manor wall.

'Get up,' said the witcher.

The young, handsome, well-built man with a pale complexion lying by the wall raised his head and looked around. His eyes were vague. He rubbed them with his knuckles. He looked at his hands, felt his face. He moaned quietly and, putting his finger in his

mouth, ran it along his gums for a long time. He grasped his face again and moaned as he touched the four bloody, swollen streaks on his cheek. He burst out sobbing, then laughed.

'Geralt! How come? How did this—Geralt!'

'Get up, Nivellen. Get up and come along. I've got some medicine in my saddle-bags. We both need it.'

'I've no longer got . . . I haven't, have I? Geralt? Why?'

The witcher helped him get up, trying not to look at the tiny hands – so pale as to be transparent – clenched around the pole stuck between the small breasts which were now plastered with a wet red fabric.

Nivellen moaned again. 'Vereena—'

'Don't look. Let's go.'

They crossed the courtyard, holding each other up, and passed the blue rosebush.

Nivellen kept touching his face with his free hand. 'Incredible, Geralt. After so many years? How's it possible?'

'There's a grain of truth in every fairy tale,' said the witcher quietly. 'Love and blood. They both possess a mighty power. Wizards and learned men have been racking their brains over this for years, but they haven't arrived at anything except that—'

'That what, Geralt?'

'It has to be true love.'

THE VOICE OF REASON 3

‘I’m Falwick, Count of Moën. And this knight is Tailles, from Dorndal.’

Geralt bowed cursorily, looking at the knights. Both wore armour and crimson cloaks with the emblem of the White Rose on their left shoulder. He was somewhat surprised as, so far as he knew, there was no Commandery of that Order in the neighbourhood.

Nenneke, to all appearances smiling light-heartedly and at ease, noticed his surprise.

‘These nobly born gentlemen,’ she said casually, settling herself more comfortably in her throne-like armchair, ‘are in the service of Duke Hereward, who governs these lands most mercifully.’

‘Prince.’ Tailles, the younger of the knights, corrected her emphatically, fixing his hostile pale blue eyes on the priestess. ‘Prince Hereward.’

‘Let’s not waste time with details and titles.’ Nenneke smiled mockingly. ‘In my day, only those with royal blood were addressed as princes, but now, it seems, titles don’t mean so much. Let’s get back to our introductions, and why the Knights of the White Rose are visiting my humble temple. You know, Geralt, that the Chapter is requesting investitures for the Order from Hereward, which is why so many Knights of the Rose have entered his service. And a number of locals, like Tailles here, have taken vows and assumed the red cloak which becomes him so well.’

‘My honour.’ The witcher bowed once more, just as cursorily as before.

‘I doubt it,’ the priestess remarked coldly. ‘They haven’t come here to honour you. Quite the opposite. They’ve arrived demanding that you leave as soon as possible. In short, they’re here to chase you out. You consider that an honour? I don’t. I consider it an insult.’

‘The noble knights have troubled themselves for no reason,’ shrugged Geralt. ‘I don’t intend to settle here. I’m leaving of my own accord without any additional incentives, and soon at that.’

‘Immediately,’ growled Tailles. ‘With not a moment’s delay. The prince orders—’

‘In this temple, I give the orders,’ interrupted Nenneke in a cold, authoritative voice. ‘I usually try to ensure my orders don’t conflict too much with Hereward’s politics, as far as those politics are logical and understandable. In this case they are irrational, so I won’t treat them any more seriously than they deserve. Geralt, witcher of Rivia, is my guest. His stay is a pleasure to me. So he will stay in my temple for as long as he wishes.’

‘You have the audacity to contradict the prince, woman?’ Tailles shouted, then threw his cloak back over his shoulder to reveal his grooved, brass-edged breast-plate in all its splendour. ‘You dare to question our ruler’s authority?’

‘Quiet,’ Nenneke snapped and narrowed her eyes. ‘Lower your voice. Have a care who you speak to like that.’

‘I know who I’m talking to!’ The knight advanced a step. Falwick, the older knight, grabbed him firmly by the elbow and squeezed until the armour-plated gauntlet grated. Tailles yanked furiously. ‘And my words express the prince’s will, the lord of this estate! We have got soldiers in the yard, woman—’

Nenneke reached into the purse at her belt and took out a small porcelain jar. ‘I really don’t know,’ she said calmly, ‘what will happen if I smash this container at your feet, Tailles. Maybe your lungs will burst. Maybe you’ll grow fur. Or maybe both, who knows? Only merciful Melitele.’

‘Don’t dare threaten me with your spells, priestess! Our soldiers —’

‘If any one of your soldiers touches one of Melitele’s priestesses, they will hang, before dusk, from the acacias along the road to town. And they know that very well. As do you, Tailles, so stop acting like a fool. I delivered you, you shitty brat, and I pity your mother, but don’t tempt fate. And don’t force me to teach you manners!’

‘All right, all right,’ the witcher butted in, growing bored. ‘It looks as though I’m becoming the cause of a serious conflict and I don’t see why I should. Sir Falwick, you look more level-headed than your companion who, I see, is beside himself with youthful enthusiasm. Listen, Falwick, I assure you that I will leave in a few days. I also assure you that I have no intention to work here, to undertake any commissions or orders. I’m not here as a witcher, but on personal business.’

Count Falwick met his eyes and Geralt realised his mistake. There

was pure, unwavering hatred in the White Rose knight's eyes. The witcher was sure that it was not Duke Hereward who was chasing him out, but Falwick and his like.

The knight turned to Nenneke, bowed with respect and began to speak. He spoke calmly and politely. He spoke logically. But Geralt knew Falwick was lying through his teeth.

'Venerable Nenneke, I ask your forgiveness, but Prince Hereward will not tolerate the presence of this witcher on his lands. It is of no importance if he is hunting monsters or claims to be here on personal business – the prince knows that witchers do not undertake personal business. But they do attract trouble like a magnet filings. The wizards are rebelling and writing petitions, the druids are threatening—'

'I don't see why Geralt should bear the consequences of the unruliness of local wizards and druids,' interrupted the priestess. 'Since when has Hereward been interested in either's opinion?'

'Enough of this discussion.' Falwick stiffened. 'Have I not made myself sufficiently clear, venerable Nenneke? I will make it so clear as can't be clearer: neither the prince nor the Chapter of the Order will tolerate the presence of this witcher, Geralt, the Butcher of Blaviken, in Ellander for one more day.'

'This isn't Ellander!' The priestess sprang from her chair. 'This is the temple of Melitele! And I, Nenneke, the high priestess of Melitele, will not tolerate your presence on temple grounds a minute longer, sirs!'

'Sir Falwick,' the witcher said quietly, 'listen to the voice of reason. I don't want any trouble, nor do I believe that you particularly care for it. I'll leave this neighbourhood within three days. No, Nenneke, don't say anything, please. It's time for me to be on my way. Three days. I don't ask for more.'

'And you're right not to ask.' The priestess spoke before Falwick could react. 'Did you hear, boys? The witcher will remain here for three days because that's his fancy. And I, priestess of Great Melitele, will for those three days be his host, for that is my fancy. Tell that to Hereward. No, not Hereward. Tell that to his wife, the noble Ermellia, adding that if she wants to continue receiving an uninterrupted supply of aphrodisiacs from my pharmacy, she'd better calm her duke down. Let her curb his humours and whims, which look ever more like symptoms of idiocy.'

'Enough!' Tailles shouted so shrilly his voice broke into a falsetto.

‘I don’t intend to stand by and listen as some charlatan insults my lord and his wife! I will not let such an insult pass unnoticed! It is the Order of the White Rose which will rule here, now; it’s the end of your nests of darkness and superstitions. And I, a Knight of the White Rose—’

‘Shut up, you brat,’ interrupted Geralt, smiling nastily. ‘Halt your uncontrolled little tongue. You speak to a lady who deserves respect, especially from a Knight of the White Rose. Admittedly, to become one it’s enough, lately, to pay a thousand Novigrad crowns into the Chapter’s treasury, so the Order’s full of sons of money-lenders and tailors – but surely some manners have survived? But maybe I’m mistaken?’

Tailles grew pale and reached to his side.

‘Sir Falwick,’ said Geralt, not ceasing to smile. ‘If he draws his sword, I’ll take it from him and beat the snotty-nosed little brat’s arse with the flat of his blade. And then I’ll batter the door down with him.’

Tailles, his hands shaking, pulled an iron gauntlet from his belt and, with a crash, threw it to the ground at the witcher’s feet.

‘I’ll wash away the insult to the Order with your blood, mutant!’ he yelled. ‘On beaten ground! Go into the yard!’

‘You’ve dropped something, son,’ Nenneke said calmly. ‘So pick it up, we don’t leave rubbish here. This is a temple. Falwick, take that fool from here or this will end in grief. You know what you’re to tell Hereward. And I’ll write a personal letter to him; you don’t look like trustworthy messengers to me. Get out of here. You can find your way out, I hope?’

Falwick, restraining the enraged Tailles with an iron grip, bowed, his armour clattering. Then he looked the witcher in the eyes. The witcher didn’t smile. Falwick threw his crimson cloak over his shoulders.

‘This wasn’t our last visit, venerable Nenneke,’ he said. ‘We’ll be back.’

‘That’s just what I’m afraid of,’ replied the priestess coldly. ‘The displeasure’s mine.’

THE LESSER EVIL

I

As usual, cats and children noticed him first. A striped tomcat sleeping on a sun-warmed stack of wood, shuddered, raised his round head, pulled back his ears, hissed and bolted off into the nettles. Three-year-old Dragomir, fisherman Trigla's son, who was sitting on the hut's threshold doing his best to make dirtier an already dirty shirt, started to scream as he fixed his tearful eyes on the passing rider.

The witcher rode slowly, without trying to overtake the hay-cart obstructing the road. A laden donkey trotted behind him, stretching its neck, and constantly pulling the cord tied to the witcher's pommel tight. In addition to the usual bags the longeared animal was lugging a large shape, wrapped in a saddle-cloth, on its back. The grey-white flanks of the ass were covered with black streaks of dried blood.

The cart finally turned down a side-street leading to a granary and harbour from which a sea-breeze blew, carrying the stink of tar and ox's urine. Geralt picked up his pace. He didn't react to the muffled cry of the woman selling vegetables who was staring at the bony, taloned paw sticking out beneath the horse-blanket, bobbing up and down in time with the donkey's trot. He didn't look round at the crowd gathering behind him and rippling with excitement.

There were, as usual, many carts in front of the alderman's house. Geralt jumped from the saddle, adjusted the sword on his back and threw the reins over the wooden barrier. The crowd following him formed a semi-circle around the donkey.

Even outside, the alderman's shouts were audible.

'It's forbidden, I tell you! Forbidden, goddammit! Can't you understand what I say, you scoundrel?'

Geralt entered. In front of the alderman, small, podgy and red with rage, stood a villager holding a struggling goose by the neck.

'What—By all the gods! Is that you, Geralt? Do my eyes deceive me?' And turning to the peasant again: 'Take it away, you boor! Are you deaf?'

'They said,' mumbled the villager, squinting at the goose, 'that a wee something must be given to his lordship, otherways—'

'Who said?' yelled the alderman. 'Who? That I supposedly take bribes? I won't allow it, I say! Away with you! Greetings, Geralt.'

‘Greetings, Caldemeyn.’

The alderman squeezed the witcher’s hand, slapped him on the shoulder. ‘You haven’t been here for a good two years, Geralt. Eh? You can never stay in one place for long, can you? Where are you coming from? Ah, dog’s arse, what’s the difference where? Hey, somebody bring us some beer! Sit down, Geralt, sit down. It’s mayhem here because we’ve the market tomorrow. How are things with you, tell me!’

‘Later. Come outside first.’

The crowd outside had grown two-fold but the empty space around the donkey hadn’t grown any smaller. Geralt threw the horse-blanket aside. The crowd gasped and pulled back. Caldemeyn’s mouth fell open.

‘By all the gods, Geralt! What is it?’

‘A kikimora. Is there any reward for it?’

Caldemeyn shifted from foot to foot, looking at the spidery shape with its dry black skin, that glassy eye with its vertical pupil, the needle-like fangs in the bloody jaws.

‘Where—From where—?’

‘On the dyke, not some four miles from town. On the swamps. Caldemeyn, people must have disappeared there. Children.’

‘Well, yes, true enough. But nobody—Who could have guessed—Hey, folks, go home, get back to work! This isn’t a show! Cover it up, Geralt. Flies are gathering.’

Back inside the alderman grabbed a large jug of beer without a word and drank it to the last drop in one draught. He sighed deeply and sniffed.

‘There’s no reward,’ he said gloomily. ‘No one suspected that there was something like that lurking in the salt marshes. It’s true that several people have disappeared in those parts, but . . . Hardly anyone loitered on that dyke. And why were you there? Why weren’t you taking the main road?’

‘It’s hard for me to make a living on main roads,Caldemeyn.’

‘I forgot.’ The alderman suppressed a belch, puffing out his cheeks. ‘And this used to be such a peaceful neighbourhood. Even imps only rarely pissed in the women’s milk. And here, right next to us, some sort of felispectre. It’s only fitting that I thank you. Because as for paying you, I can’t. I haven’t the funds.’

‘That’s a shame. I could do with a small sum to get through the winter.’ The witcher took a sip from his jug, wiped away the froth. ‘I’m making my way to Yspaden, but I don’t know if I’ll get there before the snows block the way. I might get stuck in one of the little towns on the Lutonski road.’

‘Do you plan to stay long in Blaviken?’

‘No. I’ve no time to waste. Winter’s coming.’

‘Where are you going to stay? With me perhaps? There’s an empty room in the attic. Why get fleeced by the innkeepers, those thieves. We’ll have a chat and you can tell me what’s happening in the big, wide world.’

‘Willingly. But what will Libushe have to say about it? It was quite obvious last time that she’s not very keen on me.’

‘Women don’t have a say in my house. But, just between us, don’t do what you did during supper last time in front of her again.’

‘You mean when I threw my fork at that rat?’

‘No. I mean when you hit it, even in the dark.’

‘I thought it would be amusing.’

‘It was. But don’t do it in front of Libushe. And listen, this . . . what’s it called . . . Kiki—’

‘Kikimora.’

‘Do you need it for anything?’

‘What would I want it for? You can have them throw it in the cesspool if there’s no reward for it.’

‘That’s not a bad idea. Hey, Karelka, Borg, Carrypebble! Any of you there?’

A town guard entered with a halberd on his shoulder, the blade catching the doorframe with a crash.

‘Carrypebble,’ said Caldemeyn. ‘Get somebody to help you and take the donkey with that muck wrapped up in the horse-blanket, lead it past the pigsties and chuck the kikimora in the cesspool. Understood ?’

‘At your command. But . . . Alderman, sir—’

‘What?’

‘Maybe before we drown that hideous thing—’

‘Well ?’

‘We could show it to Master Irion. It might be useful to him.’

Caldemeyn slapped his forehead with his open palm.

‘You’re not stupid, Carrypebble. Listen, Geralt, maybe our local wizard will spare you something for that carcass. The fishermen bring him the oddest of fish – octopedes, clabaters or herrongs – many have made some money on them. Come on, let’s go to the tower.’

‘You’ve got yourselves a wizard ? Is he here for good or only passing?’

‘For good. Master Irion. He’s been living in Blaviken for a year. A powerful magus, Geralt, you’ll see that from his very appearance.’

‘I doubt whether a powerful magus will pay for a kikimora,’ Geralt grimaced. ‘As far as I know it’s not needed for any elixirs. Your Irion will only insult me, no doubt. We witchers and wizards don’t love each other.’

‘I’ve never heard of Master Irion insulting anyone. I can’t swear that he’ll pay you but there’s no harm in trying. There might be more kikimoras like that on the marshes and what then? Let the wizard look at the monster and cast some sort of spell on the marshlands or something, just in case.’

The witcher thought for a moment.

‘Very well, Caldemeyn. What the heck, we’ll risk a meeting with Master Irion. Shall we go?’

‘We’re off. Carrypebble, chase the kids away and bring the floppyears. Where’s my hat?’

II

The tower, built from smoothly hewn blocks of granite and crowned by tooth-like battlements, was impressive, dominating the broken tiles of homesteads and dipping-roofed thatched cottages.

‘He’s renovated it, I see,’ remarked Geralt. ‘With spells, or did he have you working at it?’

‘Spells, chiefly.’

‘What’s he like, this Irion?’

‘Decent. He helps people. But he’s a recluse, doesn’t say much. He rarely leaves the tower.’

On the door, which was adorned with a rosace inlaid with pale wood, hung a huge knocker in the shape of a flat bulging-eyed fish-head holding a brass ring in its toothed jaws. Caldemeyn, obviously well-versed with the workings of its mechanics, approached, cleared his throat and recited:

‘Alderman Caldemeyn greets you with a case for Master Irion. With him greets you, Witcher Geralt, with respect to the same case.’

For a long moment nothing happened, then finally the fish-head moved its toothed mandibles and belched a cloud of steam.

‘Master Irion is not receiving. Leave, my good people.’

Caldemeyn waddled on the spot and looked at Geralt. The witcher shrugged. Carrypebble picked his nose with serious concentration.

‘Master Irion is not receiving,’ the knocker repeated metallically. ‘Go, my good—’

‘I’m not a good person,’ Geralt broke in loudly. ‘I’m a witcher. That thing on the donkey is a kikimora, and I killed it not far from town. It is the duty of every resident wizard to look after the safety of the neighbourhood. Master Irion does not have to honour me with conversation, does not have to receive me, if that is his will. But let him examine the kikimora and draw his own conclusions. Carrypebble, unstrap the kikimora and throw it down by the door.’

‘Geralt,’ the alderman said quietly. ‘You’re going to leave but I’m going to have to—’

‘Let’s go, Caldemeyn. Carrypebble, take that finger out of your nose and do as I said.’

‘One moment,’ the knocker said in an entirely different tone. ‘Geralt, is that really you?’

The witcher swore quietly.

‘I’m losing patience. Yes, it’s really me. So what?’

‘Come up to the door,’ said the knocker, puffing out a small cloud of steam. ‘Alone. I’ll let you in.’

‘What about the kikimora?’

‘To hell with it. I want to talk to you, Geralt. Just you. Forgive me, Alderman.’

‘What’s it to me, Master Irion?’ Caldemeyn waved the matter aside. ‘Take care, Geralt. We’ll see each other later. Carrypebble! Into the cesspool with the monster!’

‘As you command.’

The witcher approached the inlaid door, which opened a little bit – just enough for him to squeeze through – and then slammed shut, leaving him in complete darkness.

‘Hey!’ he shouted, not hiding his anger.

‘Just a moment,’ answered a strangely familiar voice.

The feeling was so unexpected that the witcher staggered and stretched out his hand, looking for support. He didn’t find any.

The orchard was blossoming with white and pink, and smelled of rain. The sky was split by the many-coloured arc of a rainbow, which bound the crowns of the trees to the distant, blue chain of mountains. The house nestled in the orchard, tiny and modest, was drowning in hollyhocks. Geralt looked down and discovered that he was up to his knees in thyme.

‘Well, come on, Geralt,’ said the voice. ‘I’m in front of the house.’

He entered the orchard, walking through the trees. He noticed a movement to his left and looked round. A fair-haired girl, entirely naked, was walking along a row of shrubs carrying a basket full of apples. The witcher solemnly promised himself that nothing would surprise him anymore.

‘At last. Greetings, witcher.’

‘Stregobor!’ Geralt was surprised.

During his life, the witcher had met thieves who looked like town councillors, councillors who looked like beggars, harlots who looked like princesses, princesses who looked like calving cows and

kings who looked like thieves. But Stregobor always looked as, according to every rule and notion, a wizard should look. He was tall, thin and stooping, with enormous bushy grey eyebrows and a long, crooked nose. To top it off, he wore a black, trailing robe with improbably wide sleeves, and wielded a long staff capped with a crystal knob. None of the wizards Geralt knew looked like Stregobor. Most surprising of all was that Stregobor was, indeed, a wizard.

They sat in wicker chairs at a white marble-topped table on a porch surrounded by hollyhocks. The naked blonde with the apple basket approached, smiled, turned and, swaying her hips, returned to the orchard.

'Is that an illusion, too?' asked Geralt, watching the sway.

'It is. Like everything here. But it is, my friend, a first-class illusion. The flowers smell, you can eat the apples, the bee can sting you, and she,' the wizard indicated the blonde, 'you can—'

'Maybe later.'

'Quite right. What are you doing here, Geralt? Are you still toiling away, killing the last representatives of dying species for money? How much did you get for the kikimora? Nothing, I guess, or you wouldn't have come here. And to think that there are people who don't believe in destiny. Unless you knew about me. Did you?'

'No, I didn't. It's the last place I could have expected you. If my memory serves me correctly you used to live in a similar tower in Kovir.'

'A great deal has changed since then.'

'Such as your name. Apparently, you're Master Irion now.'

'That's the name of the man who created this tower. He died about two hundred years ago, and I thought it right to honour him in some way since I occupied his abode. I'm living here. Most of the inhabitants live off the sea and, as you know, my speciality, apart from illusions, is weather. Sometimes I'll calm a storm, sometimes conjure one up, sometimes drive schools of whiting and cod closer to the shores with the westerly wind. I can survive. That is,' he added, miserably, 'I could.'

'How come "I could"? Why the change of name?'

'Destiny has many faces. Mine is beautiful on the outside and hideous on the inside. She has stretched her bloody talons towards me—'

‘You’ve not changed a bit, Stregobor.’ Geralt grimaced. ‘You’re talking nonsense while making wise and meaningful faces. Can’t you speak normally?’

‘I can,’ sighed the wizard. ‘I can if that makes you happy. I made it all the way here, hiding and running from a monstrous being that wants to murder me. My escape proved in vain – it found me. In all probability, it’s going to try to kill me tomorrow, or at the latest, the day after.’

‘Aha,’ said the witcher, dispassionately. ‘Now I understand.’

‘My facing death doesn’t impress you much, does it?’

‘Stregobor,’ said Geralt, ‘that’s the way of the world. One sees all sorts of things when one travels. Two peasants kill each other over a field which, the following day, will be trampled flat by two counts and their retinues trying to kill each other off. Men hang from trees at the roadside, brigands slash merchants’ throats. At every step in town you trip over corpses in the gutters. In palaces they stab each other with daggers, and somebody falls under the table at a banquet every minute, blue from poisoning. I’m used to it. So why should a death threat impress me, and one directed at you at that?’

‘One directed at me at that,’ Stregobor repeated with a sneer. ‘And I considered you a friend. Counted on your help.’

‘Our last meeting,’ said Geralt, ‘was in the court of King Idi of Kovir. I’d come to be paid for killing the amphisboena which had been terrorising the neighbourhood. You and your compatriot Zavist vied with each other to call me a charlatan, a thoughtless murdering machine and a scavenger. Consequently not only didn’t Idi pay me a penny, he gave me twelve hours to leave Kovir and, since his hourglass was broken, I barely made it. And now you say you’re counting on my help. You say a monster’s after you. What are you afraid of, Stregobor? If it catches up with you, tell it you like monsters, that you protect them and make sure no witcher scavenger ever troubles their peace. Indeed, if the monster disembowels and devours you, it’ll prove terribly ungrateful.’

The wizard turned his head away silently. Geralt laughed. ‘Don’t get all puffed up like a frog, magician. Tell me what’s threatening you. We’ll see what can be done.’

‘Have you heard of the Curse of the Black Sun?’

‘But of course. Except that it was called the Mania of Mad Eltibald after the wizard who started the lark and caused dozens of girls from good, even noble, families to be murdered or imprisoned

in towers. They were supposed to have been possessed by demons, cursed, contaminated by the Black Sun, because that's what, in your pompous jargon, you called the most ordinary eclipse in the world.'

'Eltibald wasn't mad at all. He deciphered the writing on Dauk menhirs, on tombstones in the Wozgor necropolises, and examined the legends and traditions of weretots. All of them spoke of the eclipse in no uncertain terms. The Black Sun was to announce the imminent return of Lilit, still honoured in the East under the name of Niya, and the extermination of the human race. Lilit's path was to be prepared by "sixty women wearing gold crowns, who would fill the river valleys with blood".'

'Nonsense,' said the witcher. 'And what's more, it doesn't rhyme. All decent predictions rhyme. Everyone knows what Eltibald and the Council of Wizards had in mind at the time. You took advantage of a madman's ravings to strengthen your own authority. To break up alliances, ruin marriage allegiances, stir up dynasties. In a word: to tangle the strings of crowned puppets even more. And here you are lecturing me about predictions, which any old storyteller at the marketplace would be ashamed of.'

'You can have your reservations about Eltibald's theories, about how the predictions were interpreted. But you can't challenge the fact that there have been horrendous mutations among girls born just after the eclipse.'

'And why not? I've heard quite the opposite.'

'I was present when they did an autopsy on one of them,' said the wizard. 'Geralt, what we found inside the skull and marrow could not be described. Some sort of red sponge. The internal organs were all mixed up, some were missing completely. Everything was covered in moving cilia, bluish-pink shreds. The heart was six-chambered, with two chambers practically atrophied. What do you say to that?'

'I've seen people with eagles' talons instead of hands, people with a wolf's fangs. People with additional joints, additional organs and additional senses. All of which were the effects of your messing about with magic.'

'You've seen all sorts of mutations, you say.' The magician raised his head. 'And how many of them have you slaughtered for money, in keeping with your witcher's calling? Well? Because one can have a wolf's fangs and go no further than baring them at the trollops in taverns, or one can have a wolf's nature, too, and attack children. And that's just how it was with the girls who were born after the

eclipse. Their outright insane tendency to cruelty, aggression, sudden bursts of anger and an unbridled temperament, were noted.'

'You can say that about any woman,' sneered Geralt. 'What are you drivelling on about? You're asking me how many mutants I've killed. Why aren't you interested in how many I've extricated from spells, freed from curses? I, a witcher despised by you. And what have you done, you mighty magicians?'

'A higher magic was used. Ours and that of the priests, in various temples. All attempts ended in the girls' deaths.'

'That speaks badly of you, not the girls. And so we've now got the first corpses. I take it the only autopsies were done on them?'

'No. Don't look at me like that, you know very well that there were more corpses, too. It was initially decided to eliminate all of them. We got rid of a few . . . autopsies were done on all of them. One of them was even vivisectioned.'

'And you sons-of-bitches have the nerve to criticise witchers? Oh, Stregobor, the day will come when people will learn, and get the better of you.'

'I don't think a day like that will come soon,' said the wizard caustically. 'Don't forget that we were acting in the people's defence. The mutant girls would have drowned entire countries in blood.'

'So say you magicians, turning your noses up, so high and mighty with your auras of infallibility. While we're on the subject, surely you're not going to tell me that in your hunt for these so-called mutants you haven't once made a mistake?'

'All right,' said Stregobor after a long silence. 'I'll be honest, although for my own sake I shouldn't. We did make a mistake – more than one. Picking them out was extremely difficult. And that's why we stopped . . . getting rid of them, and started isolating them instead.'

'Your famous towers,' snorted the witcher.

'Our towers. But that was another mistake. We underestimated them. Many escaped. Then some mad fashion to free imprisoned beauties took hold of princes, especially the younger ones, who didn't have much to do and still less to lose. Most of them, fortunately, twisted their necks—'

'As far as I know, those imprisoned in the towers died quickly. It's been said you must have helped them somewhat.'

‘That’s a lie. But it is true that they quickly fell into apathy, refused to eat . . . What is interesting is that shortly before they died they showed signs of the gift of clairvoyance. Further proof of mutation.’

‘Your proofs are becoming ever less convincing. Do you have any more?’

‘I do. Silvena, the lady of Narok, whom we never managed to get close to because she gained power so quickly. Terrible things are happening in Narok now. Fialka, Evermir’s daughter, escaped her tower using a home-made rope and is now terrorising North Velhad. Bernika of Talgar was freed by an idiot prince. Now he’s sitting in a dungeon, blinded, and the most common feature of the Talgar landscape is a set of gallows. There are other examples, too.’

‘Of course there are,’ said the witcher. ‘In Yamurlak, for instance, old man Abrad reigns. He’s got scrofula, not a single tooth in his head, was probably born some hundred years before this eclipse, and can’t fall asleep unless someone’s being tortured to death in his presence. He’s wiped out all his relatives and emptied half of the country in crazy – how did you put it? – attacks of anger. There are also traces of a rampant temperament. Apparently he was nicknamed Abrad Jack-up-the-Skirt in his youth. Oh, Stregobor, it would be great if the cruelty of rulers could be explained away by mutations or curses.’

‘Listen, Geralt—’

‘No. You won’t win me over with your reasons nor convince me that Eltibad wasn’t a murdering madman, so let’s get back to the monster threatening you. You’d better understand that, after the introduction you’ve given me, I don’t like the story. But I’ll hear you out.’

‘Without interrupting with spiteful comments?’

‘That I can’t promise.’

‘Oh well,’ Stregobor slipped his hands into the sleeves of his robe, ‘then it’ll only take longer. Well, the story begins in Creyden, a small principality in the north. The wife of Fredefalk, the Prince of Creyden, was Aridea, a wise, educated woman. She had many exceptional adepts of the magical arts in her family and – through inheritance, no doubt – she came into possession of a rare and powerful artefact. One of Nehalenia’s Mirrors. They’re chiefly used by prophets and oracles because they predict the future accurately, albeit intricately. Aridea quite often turned to the Mirror—’

‘With the usual question, I take it,’ interrupted Geralt. ‘“Who is the fairest of them all?” I know; all Nehalenia’s Mirrors are either polite or broken.’

‘You’re wrong. Aridea was more interested in her country’s fate. And the Mirror answered her questions by predicting a horrible death for her and for a great number of others by the hand, or fault, of Fredefalk’s daughter from his first marriage. Aridea ensured this news reached the Council, and the Council sent me to Creyden. I don’t have to add that Fredefalk’s first-born daughter was born shortly after the eclipse. I was quite discreet for a little while. She managed to torture a canary and two puppies during that time, and also gouged out a servant’s eye with the handle of a comb. I carried out a few tests using curses, and most of them confirmed that the little one was a mutant. I went to Aridea with the news because Fredefalk’s daughter meant the world to him. Aridea, as I said, wasn’t stupid—’

‘Of course,’ Geralt interrupted again, ‘and no doubt she wasn’t head-over-heels in love with her stepdaughter. She preferred her own children to inherit the throne. I can guess what followed. How come nobody throttled her? And you, too, while they were at it.’

Stregobor sighed, raised his eyes to heaven, where the rainbow was still shimmering colourfully and picturesquely.

‘I wanted to isolate her, but Aridea decided otherwise. She sent the little one out into the forest with a hired thug, a trapper. We found him later in the undergrowth . . . without any trousers, so it wasn’t hard to recreate the turn of events. She had dug a brooch-pin into his brain, through his ear, no doubt while his attention was on entirely different matters.’

‘If you think I feel sorry for him,’ muttered Geralt, ‘then you’re wrong.’

‘We organised a manhunt,’ continued Stregobor, ‘but all traces of the little one had disappeared. I had to leave Creyden in a hurry because Fredefalk was beginning to suspect something. Then, four years later I received news from Aridea. She’d tracked down the little one, who was living in Mahakam with seven gnomes whom she’d managed to convince it was more profitable to rob merchants on the roads than to pollute their lungs with dust from the mines. She was known as Shrike because she liked to impale the people she caught on a sharp pole while they were still alive. Several times Aridea hired assassins, but none of them returned. Well, then it became hard to find anyone to try – Shrike had already become

quite famous. She'd learnt to use a sword so well there was hardly a man who could defy her. I was summoned, and arrived in Creyden secretly, only to learn that someone had poisoned Aridea. It was generally believed that it was the work of Fredefalk, who had found himself a younger, more robust mistress – but I think it was Renfri.'

'Renfri ?'

'That's what she was called. I said she'd poisoned Aridea. Shortly afterwards Prince Fredefalk died in a strange hunting accident, and Aridea's eldest son disappeared without a word. That must have been the little one's doing, too. I say "little" but she was seventeen by then. And she was pretty well-developed.

'Meanwhile,' the wizard picked up after a moment's break, 'she and her gnomes had become the terror of the whole of Mahakam. Until, one day, they argued about something, I don't know what – sharing out the loot, or whose turn it was to spend the night with her – anyway, they slaughtered each other with knives. Only Shrike survived. Only her. And I was in the neighbourhood at the time. We met face to face: she recognised me in a flash and knew the part I'd played in Creyden. I tell you, Geralt, I had barely managed to utter a curse – and my hands were shaking like anything – when that wildcat flew at me with a sword. I turned her into a neat slab of mountain crystal, six ells by nine. When she fell into a lethargy I threw the slab into the gnomes' mine and brought the tunnels down on it.'

'Shabby work,' commented Geralt. 'That spell could have been reversed. Couldn't you have burnt her to cinders? You know so many nice spells, after all.'

'No. It's not my speciality. But you're right, I did make a hash of it. Some idiot prince found her, spent a fortune on a counter-curse, reversed the spell and triumphantly took her home to some out-of-the-way kingdom in the east. His father, an old brigand, proved to have more sense. He gave his son a hiding, and questioned Shrike about the treasures which she and the gnomes had seized and which she'd hidden. His mistake was to allow his elder son to assist him when he had her stretched out, naked, on the executioner's bench. Somehow, the following day, that same eldest son – now an orphan bereft of siblings – was ruling the kingdom, and Shrike had taken over the office of first favourite.'

'Meaning she can't be ugly.'

'That's a matter of taste. She wasn't a favourite for long. Up until the first coup d'état at the palace, to give it a grand name – it was

more like a barn. It soon became clear that she hadn't forgotten about me. She tried to assassinate me three times in Kovir. I decided not to risk a fourth attempt and to wait her out in Pontar. Again, she found me. This time I escaped to Angren, but she found me there too. I don't know how she does it, I cover my traces well. It must be a feature of her mutation.'

'What stopped you from casting another spell to turn her into crystal? Scruples?'

'No. I don't have any of those. She had become resistant to magic.'

'That's impossible.'

'It's not. It's enough to have the right artefact or aura. Or this could also be associated with her mutation, which is progressing. I escaped from Angren and hid here, in Arcsea, in Blaviken. I've lived in peace for a year, but she's tracked me down again.'

'How do you know? Is she already in town?'

'Yes. I saw her in the crystal ball.' The wizard raised his wand. 'She's not alone. She's leading a gang, which shows that she's brewing something serious. Geralt, I don't have anywhere else to run. I don't know where I could hide. The fact that you've arrived here exactly at this time can't be a coincidence. It's fate.'

The witcher raised his eyebrows. 'What's on your mind?'

'Surely it's obvious. You're going to kill her.'

'I'm not a hired thug, Stregobor.'

'You're not a thug, agreed.'

'I kill monsters for money. Beasts which endanger people. Horrors conjured up by spells and sorceries cast by the likes of you. Not people.'

'She's not human. She's exactly a monster: a mutant, a cursed mutant. You brought a kikimora here. Shrike's worse than a kikimora. A kikimora kills because it's hungry, but Shrike does it for pleasure. Kill her and I'll pay you whatever sum you ask. Within reason, of course.'

'I've already told you. I consider the story about mutations and Lilit's curse to be nonsense. The girl has her reasons for settling her account with you, and I'm not going to get mixed up in it. Turn to the alderman, to the town guards. You're the town wizard, you're protected by municipal law.'

‘I spit on the law, the alderman and his help!’ exploded Stregobor. ‘I don’t need defence, I need you to kill her! Nobody’s going to get into this tower – I’m completely safe here. But what’s that to me? I don’t intend to spend the rest of my days here, and Shrike’s not going to give up while I’m alive. Am I to sit here, in this tower, and wait for death?’

‘They did. Do you know what, magician? You should have left that hunt for the girls to other, more powerful, wizards. You should have foreseen the consequences.’

‘Please, Geralt.’

‘No, Stregobor.’

The sorcerer was silent. The unreal sun in its unreal sky hadn’t moved towards the zenith but the witcher knew it was already dusk in Blaviken. He felt hungry.

‘Geralt,’ said Stregobor, ‘when we were listening to Eltibald, many of us had doubts. But we decided to accept the lesser evil. Now I ask you to make a similar choice.’

‘Evil is evil, Stregobor,’ said the witcher seriously as he got up. ‘Lesser, greater, middling, it’s all the same. Proportions are negotiated, boundaries blurred. I’m not a pious hermit, I haven’t done only good in my life. But if I’m to choose between one evil and another, then I prefer not to choose at all. Time for me to go. We’ll see each other tomorrow.’

‘Maybe,’ said the wizard. ‘If you get here in time.’

III

The Golden Court, the country town's elegant inn, was crowded and noisy. The guests, locals and visitors, were mostly engaged in activities typical for their nation or profession. Serious merchants argued with dwarves over the price of goods and credit interest. Less serious merchants pinched the backsides of the girls carrying beer, cabbage and beans. Local nitwits pretended to be well-informed. Harlots were trying to please those who had money while discouraging those who had none. Carters and fishermen drank as if there were no tomorrow. Some seamen were singing a song which celebrated the ocean waves, the courage of captains and the graces of mermaids, the latter graphically and in considerable detail.

'Exert your memory, friend,' Caldemeyn said to the innkeeper, leaning across the counter in order to be heard over the din. 'Six men and a wench, all dressed in black leather studded with silver in the Novigradian style. I saw them at the turnpike. Are they staying here or at The Tuna Fish?'

The innkeeper wrinkled his bulging forehead and wiped a tankard on his striped apron.

'Here, Alderman,' he finally said. 'They say they've come for the market but they all carry swords, even the woman. Dressed, as you said, in black.'

'Well,' the alderman nodded. 'Where are they now? I don't see them here.'

'In the lesser alcove. They paid in gold.'

'I'll go in alone,' said Geralt. 'There's no point in making this an official affair in front of them all, at least for the time being. I'll bring her here.'

'Maybe that's best. But be careful, I don't want any trouble.'

'I'll be careful.'

The seamen's song, judging by the growing intensity of obscene words, was reaching its grand finale. Geralt drew aside the curtain – stiff and sticky with dirt – which hid the entrance to the alcove.

Six men were seated at the table. Shrike wasn't with them.

'What d'you want?' yelled the man who noticed him first. He was balding and his face was disfigured by a scar which ran across his left eyebrow, the bridge of his nose and his right cheek.

‘I want to see Shrike.’

Two identical figures stood up – identical motionless faces and fair, dishevelled, shoulder-length hair, identical tight-fitting black outfits glistening with silver ornaments. And with identical movements the twins took identical swords from the bench.

‘Keep calm, Vyr. Sit down, Nimir,’ said the man with the scar, leaning his elbows on the table. ‘Who d’you say you want to see, brother? Who’s Shrike?’

‘You know very well who I mean.’

‘Who’s this then?’ asked a half-naked athlete, sweaty, girded crosswise with belts, and wearing spiked pads on his forearms. ‘D’you know him, Nohorn?’

‘No,’ said the man with the scar.

‘It’s some albino,’ giggled a slim, dark-haired man sitting next to Nohorn. Delicate features, enormous black eyes and pointed ears betrayed him to be a half-blood elf. ‘Albino, mutant, freak of nature. And this sort of thing is allowed to enter pubs among decent people.’

‘I’ve seen him somewhere before,’ said a stocky, weatherbeaten man with a plait, measuring Geralt with an evil look in his narrowed eyes.

‘Doesn’t matter where you’ve seen him, Tavik,’ said Nohorn. ‘Listen here. Civril insulted you terribly a moment ago. Aren’t you going to challenge him? It’s such a boring evening.’

‘No,’ said the witcher calmly.

‘And me, if I pour this fish soup over your head, are you going to challenge me?’ cackled the man sitting naked to the waist.

‘Keep calm, Fifteen,’ said Nohorn. ‘He said no, that means no. For the time being. Well, brother, say what you have to say and clear out. You’ve got one chance to clear out on your own. You don’t take it, the attendants will carry you out.’

‘I don’t have anything to say to you. I want to see Shrike. Renfri.’

‘Do you hear that, boys?’ Nohorn looked around at his companions. ‘He wants to see Renfri. And may I know why?’

‘No.’

Nohorn raised his head and looked at the twins as they took a step forward, the silver clasps on their high boots jangling.

‘I know,’ the man with the plait said suddenly. ‘I know where I’ve seen him now!’

‘What’s that you’re mumbling, Tavik?’

‘In front of the alderman’s house. He brought some sort of dragon in to trade, a cross between a spider and a crocodile. People were saying he’s a witcher.’

‘And what’s a witcher?’ Fifteen asked. ‘Eh? Civril?’

‘A hired magician,’ said the half-elf. ‘A conjurer for a fistful of silver. I told you, a freak of nature. An insult to human and divine laws. They ought to be burned, the likes of him.’

‘We don’t like magicians,’ screeched Tavik, not taking his narrowed eyes off Geralt. ‘It seems to me, Civril, that we’re going to have more work in this hole than we thought. There’s more than one of them here and everyone knows they stick together.’

‘Birds of a feather.’ The half-breed smiled maliciously. ‘To think the likes of you walk the earth. Who spawns you freaks?’

‘A bit more tolerance, if you please,’ said Geralt, calmly, ‘as I see your mother must have wandered off through the forest alone often enough to give you good reason to wonder where you come from yourself.’

‘Possibly,’ answered the half-elf, the smile not leaving his face. ‘But at least I knew my mother. You witchers can’t say that much about yourselves.’

Geralt grew a little pale and tightened his lips. Nohorn, noticing it, laughed out loud.

‘Well, brother, you can’t let an insult like that go by. That thing that you have on your back looks like a sword. So? Are you going outside with Civril? The evening’s so boring.’

The witcher didn’t react.

‘Shitty coward,’ snorted Tavik.

‘What did he say about Civril’s mother?’ Nohorn continued monotonously, resting his chin on his clasped hands. ‘Something extremely nasty, as I understood it. That she was an easy lay, or something. Hey, Fifteen, is it right to listen to some straggler insulting a companion’s mother? A mother, you son-of-a-bitch, is sacred!’

Fifteen got up willingly, undid his sword and threw it on the table. He stuck his chest out, adjusted the pads spiked with silver

studs on his shoulders, spat and took a step forward.

'If you've got any doubts,' said Nohorn, 'then Fifteen is challenging you to a fist fight. I told you they'd carry you out of here. Make room.'

Fifteen moved closer and raised his fists. Geralt put his hand on the hilt of his sword.

'Careful,' he said. 'One more step and you'll be looking for your hand on the floor.'

Nohorn and Tavik leapt up, grabbing their swords. The silent twins drew theirs with identical movements. Fifteen stepped back. Only Civril didn't move.

'What's going on here, dammit? Can't I leave you alone for a minute?'

Geralt turned round very slowly and looked into eyes the colour of the sea.

She was almost as tall as him. She wore her straw-coloured hair unevenly cut, just below the ears. She stood with one hand on the door, wearing a tight, velvet jacket clasped with a decorated belt. Her skirt was uneven, asymmetrical – reaching down to her calf on the left side and, on the right, revealing a strong thigh above a boot made of elk's leather. On her left side, she carried a sword; on her right, a dagger with a huge ruby set in its pommel.

'Lost your voices?'

'He's a witcher,' mumbled Nohorn.

'So what?'

'He wanted to talk to you.'

'So what?'

'He's a sorcerer!' Fifteen roared.

'We don't like sorcerers,' snarled Tavik.

'Take it easy, boys,' said the girl. 'He wants to talk to me; that's no crime. You carry on having a good time. And no trouble. Tomorrow's market day. Surely you don't want your pranks to disrupt the market, such an important event in the life of this pleasant town?'

A quiet, nasty giggle reverberated in the silence which fell. Civril, still sprawled out carelessly on the bench, was laughing.

'Come on, Renfri,' chuckled the half-blood. 'Important . . . event!'

‘Shut up, Civril. Immediately.’

Civril stopped laughing. Immediately. Geralt wasn’t surprised. There was something very strange in Renfri’s voice – something associated with the red reflection of fire on blades, the wailing of people being murdered, the whinnying of horses and the smell of blood. Others must also have had similar associations – even Tavik’s weather-beaten face grew pale.

‘Well, white-hair,’ Renfri broke the silence. ‘Let’s go into the larger room. Let’s join the alderman you came with. He wants to talk to me too, no doubt.’

At the sight of them, Caldemeyn, who was waiting at the counter, broke off his quiet conversation with the innkeeper, straightened himself and folded his arms across his chest.

‘Listen, young lady,’ he said severely, not wasting time with banal niceties, ‘I know from this witcher of Rivia here what brings you to Blaviken. Apparently you bear a grudge against our wizard.’

‘Maybe. What of it?’ asked Renfri quietly, in an equally brusque tone.

‘Only that there are tribunals to deal with grudges like that. He who wants to revenge a grudge using steel – here in Arcsea – is considered a common bandit. And also, that either you get out of Blaviken early in the morning with your black companions, or I throw you into prison, pre – How do you say it, Geralt?’

‘Preventively.’

‘Exactly. Understood, young lady?’

Renfri reached into the purse on her belt and pulled out a parchment which had been folded several times.

‘Read this, Alderman. If you’re literate. And don’t call me “young lady”.’

Caldemeyn took the parchment, spent a long time reading it, then, without a word, gave it to Geralt.

‘“To my regents, vassals and freemen subjects,”’ the witcher read out loud. ‘ “To all and sundry. I proclaim that Renfri, the Princess of Creyden, remains in our service and is well seen by us; whosoever dares maltreet her will incur our wrath. Audoen, King—” ’ Maltreat is not spelt like that. But the seal appears authentic.’

‘Because it is authentic,’ said Renfri, snatching the parchment from him. ‘It was affixed by Audoen, your merciful lord. That’s why

I don't advise you to maltreat me. Irrespective of how you spell it, the consequences for you would be lamentable. You are not, honourable Alderman, going to put me in prison. Or call me "young lady". I haven't infringed any law. For the time being.'

'If you infringe by even an inch,' Caldemeyn looked as if he wanted to spit, 'I'll throw you in the dungeon together with this piece of paper. I swear on all the gods, young lady. Come on, Geralt.'

'With you, witcher,' Renfri touched Geralt's shoulder, 'I'd still like a word.'

'Don't be late for supper,' the alderman threw over his shoulder, 'or Libushe will be furious.'

'I won't.'

Geralt leant against the counter. Fiddling with the wolf's head medallion hanging around his neck, he looked into the girl's blue-green eyes.

'I've heard about you,' she said. 'You're Geralt, the white-haired witcher from Rivia. Is Stregobor your friend?'

'No.'

'That makes things easier.'

'Not much. Don't expect me to look on peacefully.'

Renfri's eyes narrowed.

'Stregobor dies tomorrow,' she said quietly, brushing the unevenly cut hair off her forehead. 'It would be the lesser evil if he died alone.'

'If he did, yes. But in fact, before Stregobor dies several other people will die too. I don't see any other possibility.'

'Several, witcher, is putting it mildly.'

'You need more than words to frighten me, Shrike.'

'Don't call me Shrike. I don't like it. The point is, I see other possibilities. It would be worth talking it over . . . but Libushe is waiting. Is she pretty, this Libushe?'

'Is that all you had to say to me?'

'No. But you should go. Libushe's waiting.'

IV

There was someone in his little attic room. Geralt knew it before he even reached the door, sensing it through the barely perceptible vibration of his medallion. He blew out the oil lamp which had lit his path up the stairs, pulled the dagger from his boot, slipped it into the back of his belt and pressed the door handle. The room was dark. But not for a witcher.

He was deliberately slow in crossing the threshold; he closed the door behind him carefully. The next second he dived at the person sitting on his bed, crushed them into the linen, forced his forearm under their chin and reached for his dagger. He didn't pull it out. Something wasn't right.

'Not a bad start,' she said in a muffled voice, lying motionless beneath him. 'I expected something like this, but I didn't think we'd both be in bed so quickly. Take your hand from my throat please.'

'It's you.'

'It's me. Now there are two possibilities. The first: you get off me and we talk. The second: we stay in this position, in which case I'd like to take my boots off at least.'

The witcher released the girl, who sighed, sat up and adjusted her hair and skirt.

'Light the candle,' she said. 'I can't see in the dark, unlike you, and I like to see who I'm talking to.'

She approached the table – tall, slim, agile – and sat down, stretching out her long legs in their high boots. She wasn't carrying any visible weapons.

'Have you got anything to drink here?'

'No.'

'Then it's a good thing I brought something,' she laughed, placing a travelling wine-skin and two leather tumblers on the table.

'It's nearly midnight,' said Geralt, coldly. 'Shall we come to the point?'

'In a minute. Here, have a drink. Here's to you, Geralt.'

'Likewise, Shrike.'

'My name's Renfri, dammit.' She raised her head. 'I will permit you to omit my royal title, but stop calling me Shrike!'

‘Be quiet or you’ll wake the whole house. Am I finally going to learn why you crept in here through the window?’

‘You’re slow-witted, witcher. I want to save Blaviken from slaughter. I crawled over the rooftops like a she-cat in March in order to talk to you about it. Appreciate it.’

‘I do,’ said Geralt. ‘Except that I don’t know what talk can achieve. The situation’s clear. Stregobor is in his tower, and you’d have to lay siege to it in order to get to him. If you do that, your letter of safe-conduct won’t help you. Audoen won’t defend you if you openly break the law. The alderman, guards, the whole of Blaviken will stand against you.’

‘The whole of Blaviken would regret standing up to me.’ Renfri smiled, revealing a predator’s white teeth. ‘Did you take a look at my boys? They know their trade, I assure you. Can you imagine what would happen in a fight between them and those dimwit guards who keep tripping over their own halberds?’

‘Do you imagine I would stand by and watch a fight like that? I’m staying at the alderman’s, as you can see. If the need arises, I should stand at his side.’

‘I have no doubt,’ Renfri grew serious, ‘that you will. But you’ll probably be alone as the rest will cower in the cellars. No warrior in the world could match seven swordsmen. So, white-hair, let’s stop threatening each other. As I said: slaughter and bloodshed can be avoided. There are two people who can prevent it.’

‘I’m all ears.’

‘One,’ said Renfri, ‘is Stregobor himself. He leaves his tower voluntarily, I take him to a deserted spot, and Blaviken sinks back into blissful apathy and forgets the whole affair.’

‘Stregobor may seem crazy, but he’s not *that* crazy.’

‘Who knows, witcher, who knows. Some arguments can’t be denied, like the Tridam ultimatum. I plan to present it to the sorcerer.’

‘What is it, this ultimatum?’

‘That’s my sweet secret.’

‘As you wish. But I doubt it’ll be effective. Stregobor’s teeth chatter when he speaks of you. An ultimatum which would persuade him to voluntarily surrender himself into your beautiful hands would have to be pretty good. So who’s the other person? Let me guess.’

‘I wonder how sharp you are, white-hair.’

‘It’s you, Renfri. You’ll reveal a truly princely—what am I saying, *royal* magnanimity and renounce your revenge. Have I guessed ?’

Renfri threw back her head and laughed, covering her mouth with her hand. Then she grew silent and fixed her shining eyes on the witcher.

‘Geralt,’ she said, ‘I used to be a princess. I had everything I could dream of. Servants at my beck and call, dresses, shoes. Cambric knickers. Jewels and trinkets, ponies, goldfish in a pond. Dolls, and a doll’s house bigger than this room. That was my life until Stregobor and that whore Aridea ordered a huntsman to butcher me in the forest and bring back my heart and liver. Lovely, don’t you think?’

‘No. I’m pleased you evaded the huntsman, Renfri.’

‘Like shit I did. He took pity on me and let me go. After the son-of-a-bitch raped me and robbed me.’

Geralt, fiddling with his medallion, looked her straight in the eyes. She didn’t lower hers.

‘That was the end of the princess,’ she continued. ‘The dress grew torn, the cambric grew grubby. And then there was dirt, hunger, stench, stink and abuse. Selling myself to any old bum for a bowl of soup or a roof over my head. Do you know what my hair was like? Silk. And it reached a good foot below my hips. I had it cut right to the scalp with sheep-shears when I caught lice. It’s never grown back properly.’

She was silent for a moment, idly brushing the uneven strands of hair from her forehead.

‘I stole rather than starve to death. I killed to avoid being killed myself. I was locked in prisons which stank of urine, never knowing if they would hang me in the morning, or just flog me and release me. And through it all my stepmother and your sorcerer were hard on my heels, with their poisons and assassins and spells. And you want me to reveal my magnanimity? To forgive him royally? I’ll tear his head off, royally, first.’

‘Aridea and Stregobor tried to poison you?’

‘With an apple seasoned with nightshade. I was saved by a gnome, and an emetic I thought would turn my insides out. But I survived.’

‘Was that one of the seven gnomes?’ Renfri, pouring wine, froze

holding the wine-skin over the tumbler.

‘Ah,’ she said. ‘You do know a lot about me. Yes? Do you have something against gnomes? Or humanoids? They were better to me than most people, not that it’s your business.

‘Stregobor and Aridea hunted me like a wild animal as long as they could. Until I became the hunter. Aridea died in her own bed. She was lucky I didn’t get to her earlier – I had a special plan for her, and now I’ve got one for the sorcerer. Do you think he deserves to die?’

‘I’m no judge. I’m a witcher.’

‘You are. I said that there were two people who could prevent bloodshed in Blaviken. The second is you. The sorcerer will let you into the tower. You could kill him.’

‘Renfri,’ said Geralt calmly, ‘did you fall from the roof onto your head on the way to my room?’

‘Are you a witcher or aren’t you, dammit? They say you killed a kikimora and brought it here on a donkey to get a price for it. Stregobor is worse than the kikimora. It’s just a mindless beast which kills because that’s how the gods made it. Stregobor is a brute, a true monster. Bring him to me on a donkey and I won’t begrudge you any sum you care to mention.’

‘I’m not a hired thug, Shrike.’

‘You’re not,’ she agreed with a smile. She leant back on the stool and crossed her legs on the table without the slightest effort to cover her thighs with her skirt. ‘You’re a witcher, a defender of people from evil. And evil is the steel and fire which will cause devastation here if we fight each other. Don’t you think I’m proposing a lesser evil, a better solution? Even for that son-of-a-bitch Stregobor. You can kill him mercifully, with one thrust. He’ll die without knowing it. And I guarantee him quite the reverse.’

Geralt remained silent.

Renfri stretched, raising her arms.

‘I understand your hesitation,’ she said. ‘But I need an answer now.’

‘Do you know why Stregobor and the king’s wife wanted to kill you?’

Renfri straightened abruptly and took her legs off the table.

‘It’s obvious,’ she snarled. ‘I am heir to the throne. Aridea’s

children were born out of wedlock and don't have any right to—'

'No.'

Renfri lowered her head, but only for a moment. Her eyes flashed. 'Fine. I'm supposed to be cursed. Contaminated in my mother's womb. I'm supposed to be . . .'

'Yes?'

'A monster.'

'And are you?'

For a fleeting moment she looked helpless, shattered. And very sad.

'I don't know, Geralt,' she whispered, and then her features hardened again. 'Because how am I to know, dammit? When I cut my finger, I bleed. I bleed every month, too. I get belly-ache when I overeat, and a hangover when I get drunk. When I'm happy I sing and I swear when I'm sad. When I hate someone I kill them and when—But enough of this! Your answer, witcher.'

'My answer is no.'

'You remember what I said?' she asked after a moment's silence. 'There are offers you can't refuse, the consequences are so terrible, and this is one of them. Think it over.'

'I have thought carefully. And my suggestion was as serious.'

Renfri was silent for some time, fiddling with a string of pearls wound three times around her shapely neck before falling teasingly between her breasts, their curves just visible through the slit of her jacket.

'Geralt,' she said, 'did Stregobor ask you to kill me?'

'Yes. He believed it was the lesser evil.'

'Can I believe you refused him, as you have me?'

'You can.'

'Why?'

'Because I don't believe in a lesser evil.'

Renfri smiled faintly, an ugly grimace in the yellow candlelight.

'You don't believe in it, you say. Well you're right, in a way. Only Evil and Greater Evil exist and beyond them, in the shadows, lurks True Evil. True Evil, Geralt, is something you can barely imagine, even if you believe nothing can still surprise you. And sometimes

True Evil seizes you by the throat and demands that you choose between it and another, slightly lesser, Evil.'

'What's your goal here, Renfri?

'Nothing. I've had a bit to drink and I'm philosophising, I'm looking for general truths. And I've found one: lesser evils exist, but we can't choose them. Only True Evil can force us to such a choice. Whether we like it or not.'

'Maybe I've not had enough to drink.' The witcher smiled sourly. 'And in the meantime midnight's passed, the way it does. Let's speak plainly. You're not going to kill Stregobor in Blaviken because I'm not going to let you. I'm not going to let it come to a slaughter here. So, for the second time, renounce your revenge. Prove to him, to everyone, that you're not an inhuman and bloodthirsty monster. Prove he has done you great harm through his mistake.'

For a moment Renfri watched the witcher's medallion spinning as he twisted the chain.

'And if I tell you, witcher, that I can neither forgive Stregobor nor renounce my revenge then I admit that he is right, is that it? I'd be proving that I am a monster cursed by the gods? You know, when I was still new to this life a freeman took me in. He took a fancy to me, even though I found him repellent. So every time he wanted to fuck me he had to beat me so hard I could barely move, even the following day. One morning I rose while it was still dark and slashed his throat with a scythe. I wasn't yet as skilled as I am now, and a knife seemed too small. And as I listened to him gurgle and choke, watched him kicking and flailing, I felt the marks left by his feet and fists fade, and I felt, oh, so great, so great that . . . I left him, whistling, sprightly, feeling so joyful, so happy. And it's the same each time. If it wasn't, who'd waste time on revenge?'

'Renfri,' said Geralt. 'Whatever your motives, you're not going to leave here joyful and happy. But you'll leave here alive, early tomorrow morning, as the alderman ordered. You're not going to kill Stregobor in Blaviken.'

Renfri's eyes glistened in the candlelight, reflecting the flame, the pearls glowed in the slit of her jacket, the wolf medallion spinning round on its chain sparkled.

'I pity you,' she said slowly, gazing at the medallion. 'You claim a lesser evil doesn't exist. You're standing on a flagstone running with blood, alone and so very lonely because you can't choose, but you had to. And you'll never know, you'll never be sure, if you were

right . . . And your reward will be a stoning, and a bad word. I pity you . . .'

'And you?' asked the witcher quietly, almost in a whisper.

'I can't choose, either.'

'What are you?'

'I am what I am.'

'Where are you?'

'I'm . . . cold . . .'

'Renfri!' Geralt squeezed the medallion tightly in his hand.

She tossed her head as if waking up, and blinked several times, surprised. For a very brief moment she looked frightened.

'You've won,' she said sharply. 'You win, witcher. Tomorrow morning I'll leave Blaviken and never return to this rotten town. Never. Now pass me the wine-skin.'

Her usual derisive smile returned as she put her empty tumbler back on the table. 'Geralt?'

'I'm here.'

'That bloody roof is steep. I'd prefer to leave at dawn than fall and hurt myself in the dark. I'm a princess and my body's delicate. I can feel a pea under a mattress – as long as it's not well-stuffed with straw, obviously. How about it?'

'Renfri,' Geralt smiled despite himself, 'is that really befitting of a princess?'

'What do you know about princesses, dammit? I've lived as one and the joy of it is being able to do what you like. Do I have to tell you straight out what I want?'

Geralt, still smiling, didn't reply.

'I can't believe you don't find me attractive.' Renfri grimaced. 'Are you afraid you'll meet the freeman's sticky fate? Eh, white-hair, I haven't got anything sharp on me. Have a look for yourself.'

She put her legs on his knees. 'Pull my boots off. A high boot is the best place to hide a knife.'

Barefoot, she got up, tore at the buckle of her belt. 'I'm not hiding anything here, either. Or here, as you can see. Put that bloody candle out.'

Outside, in the darkness, a cat yawled.

‘Renfri ?’

‘What?’

‘Is this cambric?’

‘Of course it is, dammit. Am I a princess or not?’

V

‘Daddy,’ Marilka nagged monotonously, ‘when are we going to the market? To the market, Daddy!’

‘Quiet, Marilka,’ grunted Caldemeyn, wiping his plate with his bread. ‘So what were you saying, Geralt? They’re leaving?’

‘Yes.’

‘I never thought it would end so peacefully. They had me by the throat with that letter from Audoen. I put on a brave face but, to tell you the truth, I couldn’t do a thing to them.’

‘Even if they openly broke the law? Started a fight?’

‘Even if they did. Audoen’s a very touchy king. He sends people to the scaffold on a whim. I’ve got a wife, a daughter, and I’m happy with my office. I don’t have to worry where the bacon will come from tomorrow. It’s good news that they’re leaving. But how, and why, did it happen?’

‘Daddy, I want to go to the market!’

‘Libushe! Take Marilka away! Geralt, I asked Centurion, the Golden Court’s innkeeper, about that Novigradian company. They’re quite a gang. Some of them were recognised.’

‘Yes?’

‘The one with the gash across his face is Nohorn, Abergard’s old adjutant from the so-called Free Angren Company – you’ll have heard of them. That hulk they call Fifteen was one of theirs too and I don’t think his nickname comes from fifteen good deeds. The half-elf is Civril, a brigand and professional murderer. Apparently, he had something to do with the massacre at Tridam.’

‘Where?’

‘Tridam. Didn’t you hear of it? Everyone was talking about it three . . . Yes, three years ago. The Baron of Tridam was holding some brigands in the dungeons. Their comrades – one of whom was that half-blood Civril – seized a river ferry full of pilgrims during the Feast of Nis. They demanded the baron set those others free. The baron refused, so they began murdering pilgrims, one after another. By the time the baron released his prisoners they’d thrown a dozen pilgrims overboard to drift with the current – and following the deaths the baron was in danger of exile, or even of execution. Some blamed him for waiting so long to give in, and others claimed

he'd committed a great evil in releasing the men, in setting a pre—precedent or something. The gang should have been shot from the banks, together with the hostages, or attacked on the boats; he shouldn't have given an inch. At the tribunal the baron argued he'd had no choice, he'd chosen the lesser evil to save more than twenty-five people – women and children – on the ferry.'

'The Tridam ultimatum,' whispered the witcher. 'Renfri—'

'What?'

'Caldemeyn, the marketplace.'

'What?'

'She's deceived us. They're not leaving. They'll force Stregobor out of his tower as they forced the Baron of Tridam's hand. Or they'll force me to . . . They're going to start murdering people at the market, it's a real trap!'

'By all the gods—Where are you going? Sit down!'

Marilka, terrified by the shouting, huddled, keening, in the corner of the kitchen.

'I told you!' Libushe shouted, pointing to the witcher. 'I said he only brings trouble!'

'Silence, woman! Geralt? Sit down!'

'We have to stop them. Right now, before people go to the market. And call the guards. As the gang leaves the inn seize them and hold them.'

'Be reasonable. We can't. We can't touch a hair of their heads if they've done nothing wrong. They'll defend themselves and there'll be bloodshed. They're professionals, they'll slaughter my people, and it'll be my head for it if word gets to Audoen. I'll gather the guards, go to the market and keep an eye on them there—'

'That won't achieve anything, Caldemeyn. If the crowd's already in the square you can't prevent panic and slaughter. Renfri has to be stopped right now, while the marketplace is empty.'

'It's illegal. I can't permit it. It's only a rumour the half-elf was at Tridam. You could be wrong, and Audoen would flay me alive.'

'We have to take the lesser evil!'

'Geralt, I forbid it! As Alderman, I forbid it! Leave your sword! Stop!'

Marilka was screaming, her hands pressed over her mouth.

VI

Shading his eyes with his hand, Civril watched the sun emerge from behind the trees. The marketplace was coming to life. Waggons and carts rumbled past and the first vendors were already filling their stalls. A hammer was banging, a cock crowing and seagulls screeched loudly overhead.

‘Looks like a lovely day,’ Fifteen said pensively.

Civril looked at him askance but didn’t say anything.

‘The horses all right, Tavik?’ asked Nohorn, pulling on his gloves.

‘Saddled and ready. But, there’s still not many of them in the marketplace.’

‘There’ll be more.’

‘We should eat.’

‘Later.’

‘Dead right. You’ll have time later. And an appetite.’

‘Look,’ said Fifteen suddenly.

The witcher was approaching from the main street, walking between stalls, coming straight towards them.

‘Renfri was right,’ Civril said. ‘Give me the crossbow, Nohorn.’ He hunched over and, holding the strap down with his foot, pulled the string back. He placed the bolt carefully in the groove as the witcher continued to approach. Civril raised the crossbow.

‘Not one step closer, witcher!’

Geralt stopped about forty paces from the group.

‘Where’s Renfri?’

The half-blood’s pretty face contorted. ‘At the tower. She’s making the sorcerer an offer he can’t refuse. But she knew you would come. She left a message for you.’

‘Speak.’

‘ “I am what I am. Choose. Either me, or a lesser.” You’re supposed to know what it means.’

The witcher nodded, raised his hand above his right shoulder, and drew his sword. The blade traced a glistening arc above his head. Walking slowly, he made his way towards the group.

Civril laughed nastily, ominously.

‘Renfri said this would happen, witcher, and left us something special to give you. Right between the eyes.’

The witcher kept walking, and the half-elf raised the crossbow to his cheek. It grew very quiet.

The bowstring hummed, the witcher’s sword flashed and the bolt flew upwards with a metallic whine, spinning in the air until it clattered against the roof and rumbled into the gutter.

‘He deflected it . . .’ groaned Fifteen. ‘Deflected it in flight—’

‘As one,’ ordered Civril. Blades hissed as they were drawn from sheathes, the group pressed shoulder to shoulder, bristling with blades.

The witcher came on faster; his fluid walk became a run – not straight at the group quivering with swords, but circling it in a tightening spiral.

As Geralt circled the group Tavik’s nerve failed. He rushed the witcher, the twins following him.

‘Don’t disperse!’ Civril roared, shaking his head and losing sight of the witcher. He swore and jumped aside, seeing the group fall apart, scattering around the market stalls.

Tavik went first. He was chasing the witcher when he saw Geralt running in the opposite direction, towards him. He skidded, trying to stop, but the witcher shot past before he could raise his sword. Tavik felt a hard blow just above his hip, fell to his knees and, when he saw his hip, started screaming.

The twins simultaneously attacked the black, blurred shape rushing towards them, mistimed their attack and collided with each other as Geralt slashed Vyr across the chest and Nimir in the temple, leaving one twin to stagger, head down, into a vegetable stall, and the other to spin in place and fall limply into the gutter.

The marketplace boiled with vendors running away, stalls clattering to the ground and screams rising in the dusty air. Tavik tried to stumble to his trembling legs and fell painfully to the ground.

‘From the left, Fifteen!’ Nohorn roared, running in a semi-circle to approach the witcher from behind.

Fifteen spun. But not quickly enough. He bore a thrust through the stomach, prepared to strike and was struck again in the neck,

just below his ear. He took four unsteady steps and collapsed into a fish cart, which rolled away beneath him. Sliding over the slippery cargo Fifteen fell onto the flagstones, silver with scales.

Civril and Nohorn struck simultaneously from both sides, the elf with a high sweeping cut, Nohorn from a kneeling position, low and flat. The witcher caught both, two metallic clangs merging into one. Civril leapt aside and tripped, catching himself against a stall as Nohorn warded off a blow so powerful it threw him backwards to his knees. Leaping up he parried too slowly, taking a gash in the face parallel to his old scar.

Civril bounced off the stall, jumping over Nohorn as he fell, missed the witcher and jumped away. The thrust was so sharp, so precise, he didn't feel it; his legs only gave way when he tried to attack again. The sword fell from his hand, the tendons severed above the elbow. Civril fell to his knees and shook his head, trying and failing to rise. His head dropped, and among the shattered stalls and market wares, the scattered fish and cabbages, his body stilled in the centre of a growing red puddle.

Renfri entered the marketplace.

She approached slowly with a soft, feline step, avoiding the carts and stalls. The crowd in the streets and by the houses, which had been humming like a hornet's nest, grew silent. Geralt stood motionless, his sword in his lowered hand. Renfri came to within ten paces and stopped, close enough to see that, under her jacket, she wore a short coat of chain-mail, barely covering her hips.

'You've made your choice,' she said slowly. 'Are you sure it's the right one?'

'This won't be another Tridam,' Geralt said with an effort.

'It wouldn't have been. Stregobor laughed in my face. He said I could butcher Blaviken and the neighbouring villages and he wouldn't leave his tower. And he won't let anyone in, not even you. Why are you looking at me like that? Yes, I deceived you. I'll deceive anyone if I have to, why should you be special?'

'Get out of here, Renfri.'

She laughed. 'No, Geralt.' She drew her sword, quickly and nimbly.

'Renfri.'

'No. You made a choice. Now it's my turn.' With one sharp move, she tore the skirt from her hips and spun it in the air, wrapping the

material around her forearm. Geralt retreated and raised his hand, arranging his fingers in the Sign.

Renfri laughed hoarsely. ‘It doesn’t affect me. Only the sword will.’

‘Renfri,’ he repeated. ‘Go. If we cross blades, I—I won’t be able—’

‘I know,’ she said. ‘But I, I can’t do anything else. I just can’t. We are what we are, you and I.’

She moved towards him with a light, swaying step, her sword glinting in her right hand, her skirt dragging along the ground from her left.

She leapt, the skirt fluttered in the air and, veiled in its tracks, the sword flashed in a short, sparing cut. Geralt jumped away; the cloth didn’t even brush him, and Renfri’s blade slid over his diagonal parry. He attacked instinctively, spinning their blades, trying to knock her weapon aside. It was a mistake. She deflected his blade and slashed, aiming for his face. He barely parried and pirouetted away, dodging her dancing blade and jumping aside again. She fell on him, threw the skirt into his eyes and slashed flatly from short range, spinning. Spinning with her he avoided the blow. She knew the trick and turned with him, their bodies so close he could feel the touch of her breath as she ran the edge across his chest. He felt a twinge of pain, ignored it. He turned again, in the opposite direction, deflected the blade flying towards his temple, made a swift feint and attacked. Renfri sprang away as if to strike from above as Geralt lunged and swiftly slashed her exposed thigh and groin from below with the very tip of his sword.

She didn’t cry out. Falling to her side she dropped her sword and clutched her thigh. Blood poured through her fingers in a bright stream over her decorated belt, elk-leather boots, and onto the dirty flagstones. The clamour of the swaying crowd, crammed in the streets, grew as they saw blood.

Geralt put up his sword.

‘Don’t go . . .’ she moaned, curling up in a ball.

He didn’t reply.

‘I’m . . . cold . . .’

He said nothing. Renfri moaned again, curling up tighter as her blood flowed into the cracks between the stones.

‘Geralt . . . Hold me . . .’

The witcher remained silent.

She turned her head, resting her cheek on the flagstones and was still. A fine dagger, hidden beneath her body until now, slipped from her numb fingers.

After a long moment the witcher raised his head, hearing Stregobor's staff tapping against the flagstones. The wizard was approaching quickly, avoiding the corpses.

'What slaughter,' he panted. 'I saw it, Geralt, I saw it all in my crystal ball . . .'

He came closer, bent over. In his trailing black robe, supported by his staff, he looked old.

'It's incredible.' He shook his head. 'Shrike's dead.'

Geralt didn't reply.

'Well, Geralt.' The wizard straightened himself. 'Fetch a cart and we'll take her to the tower for an autopsy.'

He looked at the witcher and, not getting any answer, leant over the body.

Someone the witcher didn't know found the hilt of his sword and drew it. 'Touch a single hair of her head,' said the person the witcher didn't know, 'touch her head and yours will go flying to the flagstones.'

'Have you gone mad? You're wounded, in shock! An autopsy's the only way we can confirm—'

'Don't touch her!'

Stregobor, seeing the raised blade, jumped aside and waved his staff. 'All right!' he shouted. 'As you wish! But you'll never know! You'll never be sure! Never, do you hear, witcher?'

'Be gone.'

'As you wish.' The wizard turned away, his staff hitting the flagstones. 'I'm returning to Kovir. I'm not staying in this hole another day. Come with me rather than rot here. These people don't know anything, they've only seen you killing. And you kill nastily, Geralt. Well, are you coming?'

Geralt didn't reply; he wasn't looking at him. He put his sword away. Stregobor shrugged and walked away, his staff tapping rhythmically against the ground.

A stone came flying from the crowd and clattered against the

flagstones. A second followed, whizzing past just above Geralt's shoulder. The witcher, holding himself straight, raised both hands and made a swift gesture with them. The crowd heaved; the stones came flying more thickly but the Sign, protecting him behind an invisible oval shield, pushed them aside.

'Enough!' yelled Caldemeyn. 'Bloody hell, enough of that!'

The crowd roared like a surge of breakers but the stones stopped flying. The witcher stood, motionless.

The alderman approached him.

'Is this,' he said, with a broad gesture indicating the motionless bodies strewn across the square, 'how your lesser evil looks? Is this what you believed necessary?'

'Yes,' replied Geralt slowly, with an effort.

'Is your wound serious?'

'No.'

'In that case, get out of here.'

'Yes,' said the witcher. He stood a moment longer, avoiding the alderman's eyes. Then he turned away slowly, very slowly.

'Geralt.'

The witcher looked round.

'Don't come back,' said Caldemeyn. 'Never come back.'

THE VOICE OF REASON 4

‘Let’s talk, Iola.

‘I need this conversation. They say silence is golden. Maybe it is, although I’m not sure it’s worth that much. It has its price certainly; you have to pay for it.

‘It’s easier for you. Yes it is, don’t deny it. You’re silent through choice; you’ve made it a sacrifice to your goddess. I don’t believe in Melitele, don’t believe in the existence of other gods either, but I respect your choice, your sacrifice. Your belief. Because your faith and sacrifice, the price you’re paying for your silence, will make you a better, a greater being. Or, at least, it could. But my faithlessness can do nothing. It’s powerless.

‘You ask what I believe in, in that case.

‘I believe in the sword.

‘As you can see, I carry two. Every witcher does. It’s said, spitefully, the silver one is for monsters and the iron for humans. But that’s wrong. As there are monsters which can be struck down only with a silver blade, so there are those for whom iron is lethal. And Iola, not just any iron, it must come from a meteorite. What is a meteorite, you ask? It’s a falling star. You must have seen them – short, luminous streaks in the night. You’ve probably made a wish on one. Perhaps it was one more reason for you to believe in the gods. For me, a meteorite is nothing more than a bit of metal, primed by the sun and its fall, metal to make swords.

‘Yes, of course you can take my sword. Feel how light it—No! Don’t touch the edge, you’ll cut yourself. It’s sharper than a razor. It has to be.

‘I train in every spare moment. I don’t dare lose my skill. I’ve come here – this furthest corner of the temple garden – to limber up, to rid my muscles of that hideous, loathsome numbness which has come over me, this coldness flowing through me. And you found me here. Funny, for a few days I was trying to find you. I wanted—

‘I need to talk, Iola. Let’s sit down for a moment.

‘You don’t know me at all, do you?

‘I’m called Geralt. Geralt of—No. Only Geralt. Geralt of nowhere.

I'm a witcher.

'My home is Kaer Morhen, Witcher's Settlement. It's . . . It was a fortress. Not much remains of it.

'Kaer Morhen . . . That's where the likes of me were produced. It's not done anymore, no one lives in Kaer Morhen now. No one but Vesemir. Who's Vesemir? My father. Why are you so surprised ? What's so strange about it? Everyone's got a father, and mine is Vesemir. And so what if he's not my real father? I didn't know him, or my mother. I don't even know if they're still alive, and I don't much care.

Yes, Kaer Morhen. I underwent the usual mutation there, through the Trial of Grasses, and then hormones, herbs, viral infections. And then through them all again. And again, to the bitter end. Apparently, I took the changes unusually well; I was only ill briefly. I was considered to be an exceptionally resilient brat . . . and was chosen for more complicated experiments as a result. They were worse. Much worse. But, as you see, I survived. The only one to live out of all those chosen for further trials. My hair's been white ever since. Total loss of pigmentation. A side-effect, as they say. A trifle.

'Then they taught me various things until the day when I left Kaer Morhen and took to the road. I'd earned my medallion, the Sign of the Wolf's School. I had two swords: silver and iron, and my conviction, enthusiasm, incentive and . . . faith. Faith that I was needed in a world full of monsters and beasts, to protect the innocent. As I left Kaer Morhen I dreamed of meeting my first monster. I couldn't wait to stand eye to eye with him. And the moment arrived.

'My first monster, Iola, was bald and had exceptionally rotten teeth. I came across him on the highway where, with some fellow monsters, deserters, he'd stopped a peasant's cart and pulled out a little girl, maybe thirteen years old. His companions held her father while the bald man tore off her dress, yelling it was time for her to meet a real man. I rode up and said the time had come for him, too – I thought I was very witty. The bald monster released the girl and threw himself at me with an axe. He was slow but tough. I hit him twice – not clean cuts, but spectacular, and only then did he fall. His gang ran away when they saw what a witcher's sword could do to a man . . .

'Am I boring you, Iola?

'I need this. I really do need it.

‘Where was I? My first noble deed. You see, they’d told me again and again in Kaer Morhen not to get involved in such incidents, not to play at being knight errant or uphold the law. Not to show off, but to work for money. And I joined this fight like an idiot, not fifty miles from the mountains. And do you know why? I wanted the girl, sobbing with gratitude, to kiss her saviour on the hands, and her father to thank me on his knees. In reality her father fled with his attackers, and the girl, drenched in the bald man’s blood, threw up, became hysterical and fainted in fear when I approached her. Since then, I’ve only very rarely interfered in such matters.

‘I did my job. I quickly learnt how. I’d ride up to village enclosures or town pickets and wait. If they spat, cursed and threw stones I rode away. If someone came out to give me a commission, I’d carry it out.

‘I visited towns and fortresses. I looked for proclamations nailed to posts at the crossroads. I looked for the words “Witcher urgently needed”. And then there’d be a sacred site, a dungeon, necropolis or ruins, forest ravine or grotto hidden in the mountains, full of bones and stinking carcasses. Some creature which lived to kill, out of hunger, for pleasure, or invoked by some sick will. A manticore, wyvern, fogler, aeschna, ilyocoris, chimera, leshy, vampire, ghoul, graveir, were-wolf, giant scorpion, striga, black annis, kikimora, vypper . . . so many I’ve killed. There’d be a dance in the dark and a slash of the sword, and fear and distaste in the eyes of my employer afterwards.

‘Mistakes? Of course I’ve made them. But I keep to my principles. No, not the code. Although I have at times hidden behind a code. People like that. Those who follow a code are often respected and held in high esteem. But no one’s ever compiled a witcher’s code. I invented mine. Just like that. And keep to it. Always—

‘Not always.

‘There have been situations where it seemed there wasn’t any room for doubt. When I should say to myself “What do I care? It’s nothing to do with me, I’m a witcher”. When I should listen to the voice of reason. To listen to my instinct, even if it’s fear, if not to what my experience dictates.

‘I should have listened to the voice of reason that time . . .

‘I didn’t.

‘I thought I was choosing the lesser evil. I chose the lesser evil. Lesser evil! I’m Geralt! Witcher . . . I’m the Butcher of Blaviken—

‘Don’t touch me! It might . . . You might see . . . and I don’t want you to. I don’t want to know. I know my fate whirls about me like water in a weir. It’s hard on my heels, following my tracks, but I never look back.

‘A loop? Yes, that’s what Nenneke sensed. What tempted me, I wonder, in Cintra? How could I have taken such a risk so foolishly —?

‘No, no, no. I never look back. I’ll never return to Cintra. I’ll avoid it like the plague. I’ll *never* go back there.

‘Heh, if my calculations are correct, that child would have been born in May, sometime around the feast of Belleteyn. If that’s true it’s an interesting coincidence. Because Yennefer was also born on Belleteyn’s . . .

‘Enough of this, we should go. It’s already dusk.

‘Thank you for talking to me. Thank you, Iola.

‘No, nothing’s wrong. I’m fine.

‘Quite fine.’

A QUESTION OF PRICE

I

The witcher had a knife at his throat.

He was wallowing in a wooden tub, brimful of soapsuds, his head thrown back against its slippery rim. The bitter taste of soap lingered in his mouth as the knife, blunt as a doorknob, scraped his Adam's apple painfully and moved towards his chin with a grating sound.

The barber, with the expression of an artist who is conscious that he is creating a masterpiece, scraped once more for form's sake, then wiped the witcher's face with a piece of linen soaked in tincture of angelica.

Geralt stood up, allowed a servant to pour a bucket of water over him, shook himself and climbed from the tub, leaving wet footmarks on the brick floor.

'Your towel, sir.' The servant glanced curiously at his medallion.

'Thanks.'

'Clothes,' said Haxo. 'Shirt, underpants, trousers and tunic. And boots.'

'You've thought of everything. But can't I go in my own shoes?'

'No. Beer?'

'With pleasure.'

He dressed slowly. The touch of someone else's coarse, unpleasant clothes against his swollen skin spoilt his relaxed mood.

'Castellan?'

'Yes, Geralt?'

'You don't know what this is all about, do you? Why they need me here?'

'It's not my business,' said Haxo, squinting at the servants. 'My job is to get you dressed—'

'Dressed up, you mean.'

'—get you dressed and take you to the banquet, to the queen. Put the tunic on, sir. And hide the medallion beneath it.'

'My dagger was here.'

'It isn't anymore. It's in a safe place, like your swords and your

possessions. Nobody carries arms where you're going.'

The witcher shrugged, pulling on the tight purple tunic.

'And what's this?' he asked indicating the embroidery on the front of his outfit.

'Oh yes,' said Haxo. 'I almost forgot. During the banquet you will be the Honourable Ravix of Fourhorn. As guest of honour you will sit at the queen's right hand, such is her wish, and that, on the tunic, is your coat of arms. A bear passant sable, damsel vested azure riding him, her hair loose and arms raised. You should remember it – one of the guests might have a thing about heraldry. It often happens.'

'Of course I'll remember it,' said Geralt seriously. 'And Fourhorn, where's that?'

'Far enough. Ready? Can we go?'

'We can. Just tell me, Haxo, what's this banquet in aid of?'

'Princess Pavetta is turning fifteen and, as is the custom, contenders for her hand have turned up in their dozens. Queen Calanthe wants her to marry someone from Skellige; an alliance with the islanders would mean a lot to us.'

'Why them?'

'Those they're allied with aren't attacked as often as others.'

'A good reason.'

'And not the sole one. In Cintra women can't rule. King Roegner died some time ago and the queen doesn't want another husband: our Lady Calanthe is wise and just, but a king is a king. Whoever marries the princess will sit on the throne, and we want a tough, decent fellow. They have to be found on the islands. They're a hard nation. Let's go.'

Geralt stopped halfway down the gallery surrounding the small inner courtyard and looked around.

'Castellan,' he said under his breath, 'we're alone. Quickly, tell me why the queen needs a witcher. You of all people must know something.'

'For the same reasons as everyone else,' Haxo grunted. 'Cintra is just like any other country. We've got werewolves and basilisks and a manticore could be found, too, if you looked hard enough. So a witcher might also come in useful.'

‘Don’t twist my words, Castellan. I’m asking why the queen needs a witcher in disguise as a bear passont, with hair loose at that, at the banquet.’

Haxo also looked around, and even leant over the gallery balustrade.

‘Something bad’s happening, Geralt,’ he muttered. ‘In the castle. Something’s frightening people.’

‘What?’

‘What usually frightens people? A monster. They say it’s small, hunchbacked, bristling like a Urcheon. It creeps around the castle at night, rattles chains. Moans and groans in the chambers.’

‘Have you seen it?’

‘No,’ Haxo spat, ‘and I don’t want to.’

‘You’re talking nonsense, Castellan,’ grimaced the witcher. ‘It doesn’t make sense. We’re going to an engagement feast. What am I supposed to do there? Wait for a hunchback to jump out and groan? Without a weapon? Dressed up like a jester? Haxo?’

‘Think what you like,’ grumbled the castellan. ‘They told me not to tell you anything, but you asked. So I told you. And you tell me I’m talking nonsense. How charming.’

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you, Castellan. I was simply surprised . . .’

‘Stop being surprised.’ Haxo turned away, still sulking. ‘Your job isn’t to be surprised. And I strongly advise you, witcher, that if the queen orders you to strip naked, paint your arse blue and hang yourself upside down in the entrance hall like a chandelier, you do it without surprise or hesitation. Otherwise you might meet with a fair amount of unpleasantness. Have you got that?’

‘I’ve got it. Let’s go, Haxo. Whatever happens, that bath’s given me an appetite.’

II

Apart from the curt, ceremonious greetings with which she welcomed him as ‘Lord of Fourhorn’, Queen Calanthe didn’t exchange a single word with the witcher. The banquet was about to begin and the guests, loudly announced by the herald, were gathering.

The table was huge, rectangular, and could seat more than forty men. Calanthe sat at the head of the table on a throne with a high backrest. Geralt sat on her right and, on her left, a grey-haired bard called Drogodar, with a lute. Two more chairs at the head of the table, on the queen’s left, remained empty.

To Geralt’s right, along the table, sat Haxo and a voivode whose name he’d forgotten. Beyond them were guests from the Duchy of Attre – the sullen and silent knight Rainfarn and his charge, the chubby twelve-year-old Prince Windhalm, one of the pretenders to the princess’s hand. Further down were the colourful and motley knights from Cintra, and local vassals.

‘Baron Eylembert of Tigg!’ announced the herald.

‘Coodcoodak!’ murmured Calanthe, nudging Drogodar. ‘This will be fun.’

A thin and whiskered, richly attired knight bowed low, but his lively, happy eyes and cheerful smirk belied his subservience.

‘Greetings, Coodcoodak,’ said the queen ceremoniously. Obviously the baron was better known by his nickname than by his family name. ‘We are happy to see you.’

‘And I am happy to be invited,’ declared Coodcoodak, and sighed. ‘Oh well, I’ll cast an eye on the princess, if you permit, my queen. It’s hard to live alone, ma’am.’

‘Aye, Coodcoodak,’ Calanthe smiled faintly, wrapping a lock of hair around her finger. ‘But you’re already married, as we well know.’

‘Aaahh.’ The baron was miffed. ‘You know yourself, ma’am, how weak and delicate my wife is, and smallpox is rife in the neighbourhood. I bet my belt and sword against a pair of old slippers that in a year I’ll already be out of mourning.’

‘Poor man, Coodcoodak. But lucky, too,’ Calanthe’s smile grew wider. ‘Lucky your wife isn’t stronger. I hear that last harvest, when she caught you in the haystack with a strumpet, she chased you for

almost a mile with a pitchfork but couldn't catch you. You have to feed her better, cuddle her more and take care that her back doesn't get cold during the night. Then, in a year, you'll see how much better she is.'

Coodcoodak pretended to grow doleful. 'I take your point. But can I stay for the feast?'

'We'd be delighted, Baron.'

'The legation from Skellige!' shouted the herald, becoming increasingly hoarse.

The islanders – four of them, in shiny leather doublets trimmed with seal fur and belted with chequered woollen sashes – strode in with a sprightly, hollow step. They were led by a sinewy warrior with a dark face and aquiline nose and, at his side, a broad-shouldered youth with a mop of red hair. They all bowed before the queen.

'It is a great honour,' said Calanthe, a little flushed, 'to welcome such an excellent knight as Eist Tuirseach of Skellige to my castle again. If it weren't for your well-known disdain for marriage, I'd be delighted to think you're here to court my Pavetta. Has loneliness got the better of you after all, sir?'

'Often enough, beautiful Calanthe,' replied the dark-faced islander, raising his glistening eyes to the queen. 'But my life is too dangerous for me to contemplate a lasting union. If it weren't for that . . . Pavetta is still a young girl, an unopened bud, but I can see . . .'

'See what?'

'The apple does not fall far from the tree,' smiled Eist Tuirseach, flashing his white teeth. 'Suffice it to look at you, my queen, to know how beautiful the princess will be when she reaches the age at which a woman can please a warrior. In the meantime, it is young men who ought to court her. Such as our King Bran's nephew here, Crach an Craite, who travelled here for exactly that purpose.'

Crach, bowing his red head, knelt on one knee before the queen.

'Who else have you brought, Eist?'

A thickset, robust man with a bushy beard, and a strapping fellow with bagpipes on his back, knelt by Crach an Craite.

'This is the gallant druid Mousesack, who, like me, is a good friend and advisor to King Bran. And this is Draig Bon-Dhu, our famous skald. And thirty seamen from Skellige are waiting in the

courtyard, burning with hope to catch a glimpse of the beautiful Calanthe of Cintra.'

'Sit down, noble guests. Tuirseach, sir, sit here.'

Eist took the vacant seat at the narrower end of the table, only separated from the queen by Drogodar and an empty chair. The remaining islanders sat together on the left, between Marshal Vissegerd and the three sons of Lord Strept, Tinglant, Fodcat and Wieldhill.

'That's more or less everyone.' The queen leant over to the marshal. 'Let's begin, Vissegerd.'

The marshal clapped his hands. The servants, carrying platters and jugs, moved towards the table in a long line, greeted by a joyful murmur from the guests.

Calanthe barely ate, reluctantly picking at the morsels served her with a silver fork. Drogodar, having bolted his food, kept strumming his lute. The rest of the guests, on the other hand, laid waste to the roast piglets, birds, fish and molluscs on offer – with the red-haired Crach an Craite in the lead. Rainfarn of Attre reprimanded the young Prince Windhalm severely, even slapping his hand when he reached for a jug of cider. Coodcoodak stopped picking bones for a moment and entertained his neighbours by imitating the whistle of a mud turtle. The atmosphere grew merrier by the minute. The first toasts were being raised, and already becoming less and less coherent.

Calanthe adjusted the narrow golden circlet on her curled ash-grey hair and turned to Geralt, who was busy cracking open a huge red lobster.

'It's loud enough that we can exchange a few words discreetly. Let us start with courtesies: I'm pleased to meet you.'

'The pleasure's mutual, your Majesty.'

'After the courtesies come hard facts. I've got a job for you.'

'So I gathered. I'm rarely invited to feasts for the pleasure of my company.'

'You're probably not very interesting company, then. What else have you gathered?'

'I'll tell you when you've outlined my task, your Majesty.'

'Geralt,' said Calanthe, her fingers tapping an emerald necklace, the smallest stone of which was the size of a bumble-bee, 'what sort

of task do you expect, as a witcher? What? Digging a well? Repairing a hole in the roof? Weaving a tapestry of all the positions King Vridank and the beautiful Cerro tried on their wedding night? Surely you know what your profession's about?'

'Yes, I do. I'll tell you what I've gathered, your Majesty.'

'I'm curious.'

'I gathered that. And that, like many others, you've mistaken my trade for an altogether different profession.'

'Oh?' Calanthe, casually leaning towards the lute-strumming Drogodar, gave the impression of being pensive and absent. 'Who, Geralt, makes up this ignorant horde with whom you equate me? And for what profession do those fools mistake your trade?'

'Your Majesty,' said Geralt calmly, 'while I was riding to Cintra, I met villagers, merchants, peddlers, dwarves, tinkers and woodcutters. They told me about a black annis who has its hide-out somewhere in these woods, a little house on a chicken-claw tripod. They mentioned a chimera nestling in the mountains. Aeschnes and centipedeanomorphs. Apparently a manticore could also be found if you look hard enough. So many tasks a witcher could perform without having to dress up in someone else's feathers and coat of arms.'

'You didn't answer my question.'

'Your Majesty, I don't doubt that a marriage alliance with Skellige is necessary for Cintra. It's possible, too, that the schemers who want to prevent it deserve a lesson – using means which don't involve you. It's convenient if this lesson were to be given by an unknown lord from Fourhorn, who would then disappear from the scene. And now I'll answer your question. You mistake my trade for that of a hired killer. Those others, of whom there are so many, are rulers. It's not the first time I've been called to a court where the problems demand the quick solutions of a sword. But I've never killed people for money, regardless of whether it's for a good or bad cause. And I never will.'

The atmosphere at the table was growing more and more lively as the beer diminished. The red-haired Crach an Craite found appreciative listeners to his tale of the battle at Thwyth. Having sketched a map on the table with the help of meat bones dipped in sauce, he marked out the strategic plan, shouting loudly. Coodcoodak, proving how apt his nickname was, suddenly cackled like a very real sitting hen, creating general mirth among the

guests, and consternation among the servants who were convinced that a bird, mocking their vigilance, had somehow managed to make its way from the courtyard into the hall.

'Thus fate has punished me with too shrewd a witcher,' Calanthe smiled, but her eyes were narrowed and angry. 'A witcher who, without a shadow of respect or, at the very least, of common courtesy, exposes my intrigues and infamous plans. But hasn't fascination with my beauty and charming personality clouded your judgement? Don't ever do that again, Geralt. Don't speak to those in power like that. Few of them would forget your words, and you know kings – they have all sorts of things at their disposal: daggers, poisons, dungeons, red-hot pokers. There are hundreds, thousands, of ways kings can avenge their wounded pride. And you wouldn't believe how easy it is, Geralt, to wound some rulers' pride. Rarely will any of them take words such as "No", "I won't", and "Never" calmly. But that's nothing. Interrupt one of them or make inappropriate comments, and you'll condemn yourself to the wheel.'

The queen clasped her narrow white hands together and lightly rested her chin on them. Geralt didn't interrupt, nor did he comment.

'Kings,' continued Calanthe, 'divide people into two categories – those they order around, and those they buy – because they adhere to the old and banal truth that everyone can be bought. Everyone. It's only a question of price. Don't you agree? Ah, I don't need to ask. You're a witcher, after all, you do your job and take the money. As far as you're concerned the idea of being bought has lost its scornful undertone. The question of your price, too, is clear, related as it is to the difficulty of the task and how well you execute it. And your fame, Geralt. Old men at fairs and markets sing of the exploits of the white-haired witcher from Rivia. If even half of it is true then I wager your services are not cheap. So it would be a waste of money to engage you in such simple, trite matters as palace intrigue or murder. Those can be dealt with by other, cheaper hands.'

'BRAAAK! Ghaaa-braaak!' roared Coodcoodak suddenly, to loud applause. Geralt didn't know which animal he was imitating, but he didn't want to meet anything like it. He turned his head and caught the queen's venomously green glance. Drogodar, his lowered head and face concealed by his curtain of grey hair, quietly strummed his lute.

'Ah, Geralt,' said Calanthe, with a gesture forbidding a servant from refilling her goblet. 'I speak and you remain silent. We're at a feast. We all want to enjoy ourselves. Amuse me. I'm starting to

miss your pertinent remarks and perceptive comments. I'd also be pleased to hear a compliment or two, homage or assurance of your obedience. In whichever order you choose.'

'Oh well, your Majesty,' said the witcher, 'I'm not a very interesting dinner companion. I'm amazed to be singled out for the honour of occupying this place. Indeed, someone far more appropriate should have been seated here. Anyone you wished. It would have sufficed for you to give them the order, or to buy them. It's only a question of price.'

'Go on, go on,' Calanthe tilted her head back and closed her eyes, the semblance of a pleasant smile on her lips.

'So I'm honoured and proud to be sitting by Queen Calanthe of Cintra, whose beauty is surpassed only by her wisdom. I also regard it as a great honour that the queen has heard of me and that, on the basis of what she has heard, does not wish to use me for trivial matters. Last winter Prince Hrobarik, not being so gracious, tried to hire me to find a beauty who, sick of his vulgar advances, had fled the ball, losing a slipper. It was difficult to convince him that he needed a huntsman, and not a witcher.'

The queen was listening with an enigmatic smile.

'Other rulers, too, unequal to you in wisdom, didn't refrain from proposing trivial tasks. It was usually a question of the murder of a stepson, stepfather, stepmother, uncle, aunt – it's hard to mention them all. They were all of the opinion that it was simply a question of price.'

The queen's smile could have meant anything.

'And so I repeat,' Geralt bowed his head a little, 'that I can't contain my pride to be sitting next to you, ma'am. And pride means a very great deal to us witchers. You wouldn't believe how much. A lord once offended a witcher's pride by proposing a job that wasn't in keeping with either honour or the witcher's code. What's more, he didn't accept a polite refusal and wished to prevent the witcher from leaving his castle. Afterwards everyone agreed this wasn't one of his best ideas.'

'Geralt,' said Calanthe, after a moment's silence, 'you were wrong. You're a very interesting dinner companion.'

Coodcoodak, shaking beer froth from his whiskers and the front of his jacket, craned his neck and gave the penetrating howl of a she-wolf in heat. The dogs in the courtyard, and the entire neighbourhood, echoed the howl.

One of the brothers from Strept dipped his finger in his beer and touched up the thick line around the formation drawn by Crach an Craite.

'Error and incompetence!' he shouted. 'They shouldn't have done that! Here, towards the wing, that's where they should have directed the cavalry, struck the flanks!'

'Ha!' roared Crach an Craite, whacking the table with a bone and splattering his neighbours' faces and tunics with sauce. 'And so weaken the centre? A key position? Ludicrous!'

'Only someone who's blind or sick in the head would miss the opportunity to manoeuvre in a situation like that!'

'That's it! Quite right!' shouted Windhalm of Attre.

'Who's asking you, you little snot?'

'Snot yourself!'

'Shut your gob or I'll wallop you—'

'Sit on your arse and keep quiet, Crach,' called Eist Tuirseach, interrupting his conversation with Vissegerd. 'Enough of these arguments. Drogodar, sir ! Don't waste your talent! Indeed, your beautiful though quiet tunes should be listened to with greater concentration and gravity. Draig Bon-Dhu, stop scoffing and guzzling! You're not going to impress anyone here like that. Pump up your bagpipes and delight our ears with decent martial music. With your permission, noble Calanthe!'

'Oh mother of mine,' whispered the queen to Geralt, raising her eyes to the vault for a moment in silent resignation. But she nodded her permission, smiling openly and kindly.

'Draig Bon-Dhu,' said Eist, 'play us the song of the battle of Hochebuz. It won't leave us in any doubt as to the tactical manoeuvres of commanders – or as to who acquired immortal fame there! To the health of the heroic Calanthe of Cintra!'

'The health! And glory!' The guests roared, emptying their goblets and clay cups.

Draig Bon-Dhu's bagpipes gave out an ominous drone and burst into a terrible, drawn-out, modulated wail. The guests took up the song, beating out a rhythm on the table with whatever came to hand. Coodcoodak was staring avidly at the goat-leather sack, captivated by the idea of adopting its dreadful tones in his own repertoire.

‘Hochebuz,’ said Calanthe, looking at Geralt, ‘my first battle. Although I fear rousing the indignation and contempt of such a proud witcher, I confess that we were fighting for money. Our enemy was burning villages which paid us levies and we, greedy for our tributes, challenged them on the field. A trivial reason, a trivial battle, a trivial three thousand corpses pecked to pieces by the crows. And look – instead of being ashamed I’m proud as a peacock that songs are sung about me. Even when sung to such awful music.’

Again she summoned her parody of a smile full of happiness and kindness, and answered the toast raised to her by lifting her own, empty, goblet. Geralt remained silent.

‘Let’s go on.’ Calanthe accepted a pheasant leg offered to her by Drogodar and picked at it gracefully. ‘As I said, you’ve aroused my interest. I’ve been told that witchers are an interesting caste, but I didn’t really believe it. Now I do. When hit you give a note which shows you’re fashioned of pure steel, unlike these men moulded from bird shit. Which doesn’t, in any way, change the fact that you’re here to execute a task. And you’ll do it without being so clever.’

Geralt didn’t smile disrespectfully or nastily, although he very much wanted to. He held his silence.

‘I thought,’ murmured the queen, appearing to give her full attention to the pheasant’s thigh, ‘that you’d say something. Or smile. No? All the better. Can I consider our negotiations concluded?’

‘Unclear tasks,’ said the witcher dryly, ‘can’t be clearly executed.’

‘What’s unclear? You did, after all, guess correctly. I have plans regarding a marriage alliance with Skellige. These plans are threatened, and I need you to eliminate the threat. But here your shrewdness ends. The supposition that I mistake your trade for that of a hired thug has piqued me greatly. Accept, Geralt, that I belong to that select group of rulers who know exactly what witchers do, and how they ought to be employed. On the other hand, if someone kills as efficiently as you do, even though not for money, he shouldn’t be surprised if people credit him with being a professional in that field. Your fame runs ahead of you, Geralt, it’s louder than Draig Bon-Dhu’s accursed bagpipes, and there are equally few pleasant notes in it.’

The bagpipe player, although he couldn’t hear the queen’s words, finished his concert. The guests rewarded him with an uproarious

ovation and dedicated themselves with renewed zeal to the remains of the banquet, recalling battles and making rude jokes about womenfolk. Coodcoodak was making a series of loud noises, but there was no way to tell if these were yet another animal imitation, or an attempt to relieve his overloaded stomach.

Eist Tuirseach leant far across the table. ‘Your Majesty,’ he said, ‘there are good reasons, I am sure, for your dedication to the lord from Fourhorn, but it’s high time we saw Princess Pavetta. What are we waiting for? Surely not for Crach an Craite to get drunk? And even that moment is almost here.’

‘You’re right as usual, Eist,’ Calanthe smiled warmly. Geralt was amazed by her arsenal of smiles. ‘Indeed, I do have important matters to discuss with the Honourable Ravix. I’ll dedicate some time to you too, but you know my principle: duty then pleasure. Haxo!’

She raised her hand and beckoned the castellan. Haxo rose without a word, bowed, and quickly ran upstairs, disappearing into the dark gallery. The queen turned to the witcher.

‘You heard? We’ve been debating for too long. If Pavetta has stopped preening in front of the looking-glass she’ll be here presently. So prick up your ears because I won’t repeat this. I want to achieve the ends which, to a certain degree, you have guessed. There can be no other solution. As for you, you have a choice. You can be forced to act by my command – I don’t wish to dwell on the consequences of disobedience, although obedience will be generously rewarded – or you can render me a paid service. Note that I didn’t say “I can buy you”, because I’ve decided not to offend your witcher’s pride. There’s a huge difference, isn’t there?’

‘The magnitude of this difference has somehow escaped my notice.’

‘Then pay greater attention. The difference, my dear witcher, is that one who is bought is paid according to the buyer’s whim, whereas one who renders a service sets his own price. Is that clear ?’

‘To a certain extent. Let’s say, then, that I choose to serve. Surely I should know what that entails?’

‘No. Only a command has to be specific and explicit. A paid service is different. I’m interested in the results, nothing more. How you achieve it is your business.’

Geralt, raising his head, met Mousesack’s penetrating black gaze.

The druid of Skellige, without taking his eyes from the witcher, was crumbling bread in his hands and dropping it as if lost in thought. Geralt looked down. There on the oak table, crumbs, grains of buckwheat and fragments of lobster shell were moving like ants. They were forming runes which joined up – for a moment – into a word. A question.

Mousesack waited without taking his eyes off him. Geralt, almost imperceptibly, nodded. The druid lowered his eyelids and, with a stony face, swiped the crumbs off the table.

'Honourable gentlemen!' called the herald. 'Pavetta of Cintra!'

The guests grew silent, turning to the stairs.

Preceded by the castellan and a fair-haired page in a scarlet doublet, the princess descended slowly, her head lowered. The colour of her hair was identical to her mother's – ash-grey – but she wore it braided into two thick plaits which reached below her waist. Pavetta was adorned only with a tiara ornamented with a delicately worked jewel and a belt of tiny golden links which girded her long silvery-blue dress at the hips.

Escorted by the page, herald, castellan and Vissegerd, the princess occupied the empty chair between Drogodar and Eist Tuirseach. The knightly islander immediately filled her goblet and entertained her with conversation. Geralt didn't notice her answer with more than a word. Her eyes were permanently lowered, hidden behind her long lashes even during the noisy toasts raised to her around the table. There was no doubt her beauty had impressed the guests – Crach an Craite stopped shouting and stared at Pavetta in silence, even forgetting his tankard of beer. Windhalm of Attre was also devouring the princess with his eyes, flushing shades of red as though only a few grains in the hourglass separated them from their wedding night. Coodcoodak and the brothers from Strept were studying the girl's petite face, too, with suspicious concentration.

'Aha,' said Calanthe quietly, clearly pleased. 'And what do you say, Geralt? The girl has taken after her mother. It's even a shame to waste her on that red-haired lout, Crach. The only hope is that the pup might grow into someone with Eist Tuirseach's class. It's the same blood, after all. Are you listening, Geralt? Cintra has to form an alliance with Skellige because the interest of the state demands it. My daughter has to marry the right person. Those are the results you must ensure me.'

'I have to ensure that? Isn't your will alone sufficient for it to happen?'

‘Events might take such a turn that it won’t be sufficient.’

‘What can be stronger than your will?’

‘Destiny.’

‘Aha. So I, a poor witcher, am to face down a destiny which is stronger than the royal will. A witcher fighting destiny! What irony!’

‘Yes, Geralt? What irony?’

‘Never mind. Your Majesty, it seems the service you demand borders on the impossible.’

‘If it bordered on the possible,’ Calanthe drawled, ‘I would manage it myself. I wouldn’t need the famous Geralt of Rivia. Stop being so clever. Everything can be dealt with – it’s only a question of price. Bloody hell, there must be a figure on your witchers’ pricelist for work that borders on the impossible. I can guess one, and it isn’t low. You ensure me my outcome and I will give you what you ask.’

‘What did you say?’

‘I’ll give you whatever you ask for. And I don’t like being told to repeat myself. I wonder, witcher, do you always try to dissuade your employers as strongly as you are me? Time is slipping away. Answer, yes or no?’

‘Yes.’

‘That’s better. That’s better, Geralt. Your answers are much closer to the ideal. They’re becoming more like those I expect when I ask a question. So. Discreetly stretch your left hand out and feel behind my throne.’

Geralt slipped his hand under the yellow-blue drapery. Almost immediately he felt a sword secured to the leather-upholstered backrest. A sword well-known to him.

‘Your Majesty,’ he said quietly, ‘not to repeat what I said earlier about killing people, you do realise that a sword alone will not defeat destiny?’

‘I do,’ Calanthe turned her head away. ‘A witcher is also necessary. As you see, I took care of that.’

‘Your Maje—’

‘Not another word, Geralt. We’ve been conspiring for too long. They’re looking at us, and Eist is getting angry. Talk to the

castellan. Have something to eat. Drink, but not too much. I want you to have a steady hand.'

He obeyed. The queen joined a conversation between Eist, Vissegerd and Mousesack, with Pavetta's silent and dreamy participation. Drogodar had put away his lute and was making up for his lost eating time. Haxo wasn't talkative. The voivode with the hard-to-remember name, who must have heard something about the affairs and problems of Fourhorn, politely asked whether the mares were foaling well. Geralt answered yes, much better than the stallions. He wasn't sure if the joke had been well taken, but the voivode didn't ask any more questions.

Mousesack's eyes constantly sought the witcher's, but the crumbs on the table didn't move again.

Crach an Craite was becoming more and more friendly with the two brothers from Strept. The third, the youngest brother, was paralytic, having tried to match the drinking speed imposed by Draig Bon-Dhu. The skald had emerged from it unscathed.

The younger and less important lords gathered at the end of the table, tipsy, started singing a well-known song – out of tune – about a little goat with horns and a vengeful old woman with no sense of humour.

A curly-haired servant and a captain of the guards wearing the gold and blue of Cintra ran up to Vissegerd. The marshal, frowning, listened to their report, rose, and leaned down from behind the throne to murmur something to the queen. Calanthe glanced at Geralt and answered with a single word. Vissegerd leant over even further and whispered something more; the queen looked at him sharply and, without a word, slapped her armrest with an open palm. The marshal bowed and passed the command to the captain of the guards. Geralt didn't hear it but he did notice that Mousesack wriggled uneasily and glanced at Pavetta – the princess was sitting motionless, her head lowered.

Heavy footsteps, each accompanied by the clang of metal striking the floor, could be heard over the hum at the table. Everyone raised their heads and turned.

The approaching figure was clad in armour of iron sheets and leather treated with wax. His convex, angular, black and blue breast-plate overlapped a segmented apron and short thigh pads. The armour-plated brassards bristled with sharp, steel spikes and the visor, with its densely grated screen extending out in the shape of a dog's muzzle, was covered with spikes like a conker casing.

Clattering and grinding, the strange guest approached the table and stood motionless in front of the throne.

‘Noble queen, honourable gentlemen,’ said the newcomer, bowing stiffly. ‘Please forgive me for disrupting your ceremonious feast. I am Urcheon of Erlenwald.’

‘Greetings, Urcheon of Erlenwald,’ said Calanthe slowly. ‘Please take your place at the table. In Cintra we welcome every guest.’

‘Thank you, your Majesty,’ Urcheon of Erlenwald bowed once again and touched his chest with a fist clad in an iron gauntlet. ‘But I haven’t come to Cintra as a guest but on a matter of great importance and urgency. If your Majesty permits I will present my case immediately, without wasting your time.’

‘Urcheon of Erlenwald,’ said the queen sharply, ‘a praiseworthy concern about our time does not justify lack of respect. And such is your speaking to us from behind an iron trellis. Remove your helmet, and we’ll endure the time wasted while you do.’

‘My face, your Majesty, must remain hidden for the time being. With your permission.’

An angry ripple, punctuated here and there with the odd curse, ran through the gathered crowd. Mousesack, lowering his head, moved his lips silently. The witcher felt the spell electrify the air for a second, felt it stir his medallion. Calanthe was looking at Urcheon, narrowing her eyes and drumming her fingers on her armrest.

‘Granted,’ she said finally. ‘I choose to believe your motive is sufficiently important. So – what brings you here, Urcheon-without-a-face? ’

‘Thank you,’ said the newcomer. ‘But I’m unable to suffer the accusation of lacking respect, so I explain that it is a matter of a knight’s vows. I am not allowed to reveal my face before midnight strikes.’

Calanthe, raising her hand perfunctorily, accepted his explanation. Urcheon advanced, his spiked armour clanging.

‘Fifteen years ago,’ he announced loudly, ‘your husband King Roegner lost his way while hunting in Erlenwald. Wandering around the pathless tracts, he fell from his horse into a ravine and sprained his leg. He lay at the bottom of the gully and called for help but the only answer he got was the hiss of vipers and the howling of approaching werewolves. He would have died without the help he received.’

‘I know what happened,’ the queen affirmed. ‘If you know it, too, then I guess you are the one who helped him.’

‘Yes. It is only because of me he returned to you in one piece, and well.’

‘I am grateful to you then, Urcheon of Erlenwald. That gratitude is none the lesser for the fact that Roegner, gentleman of my heart and bed, has left this world. Tell me, if the implication that your aid was not disinterested does not offend another of your knightly vows, how I can express my gratitude.’

‘You well know my aid was not disinterested. You know, too, that I have come to collect the promised reward for saving the king’s life.’

‘Oh yes?’ Calanthe smiled but green sparks lit up her eyes. ‘So you found a man at the bottom of a ravine, defenceless, wounded, at the mercy of vipers and monsters. And only when he promised you a reward did you help? And if he didn’t want to or couldn’t promise you something, you’d have left him there, and, to this day, I wouldn’t know where his bones lay? How noble. No doubt your actions were guided by a particularly chivalrous vow at the time.’

The murmur around the hall grew louder.

‘And today you come for your reward, Urcheon?’ continued the queen, smiling even more ominously. ‘After fifteen years? No doubt you are counting the interest accrued over this period? This isn’t the dwarves’ bank, Urcheon. You say Roegner promised you a reward ? Ah, well, it will be difficult to get him to pay you. It would be simpler to send you to him, into the other world, to reach an agreement over who owes what. I loved my husband too dearly, Urcheon, to forget that I could have lost him then, fifteen years ago, if he hadn’t chosen to bargain with you. The thought of it arouses rather-ill feeling towards you. Masked newcomer, do you know that here in Cintra, in my castle and in my power, you are just as helpless and close to death as Roegner was then, at the bottom of the ravine? What will you propose, what price, what reward will you offer, if I promise you will leave here alive?’

The medallion on Geralt’s neck twitched. The witcher caught Mousesack’s clearly uneasy gaze. He shook his head a little and raised his eyebrows questioningly. The druid also shook his head and, with a barely perceptible move of his curly beard, indicated Urcheon. Geralt wasn’t sure.

‘Your words, your Majesty,’ called Urcheon, ‘are calculated to

frighten me, to kindle the anger of the honourable gentlemen gathered here, and the contempt of your pretty daughter, Pavetta. But above all, your words are untrue. And you know it!'

'You accuse me of lying like a dog.' An ugly grimace crept across Calanthe's lips.

'You know very well, your Majesty,' the newcomer continued adamantly, 'what happened then in Erlenwald. You know Roegner, once saved, vowed of his own will to give me whatever I asked for. I call upon every one to witness my words! When the king, rescued from his misadventure, reached his retinue, he asked me what I demanded and I answered. I asked him to promise me whatever he had left at home without knowing or expecting it. The king swore it would be so, and on his return to the castle he found you, Calanthe, in labour. Yes, your Majesty, I waited for fifteen years and the interest on my reward has grown. Today I look at the beautiful Pavetta and see that the wait has been worth it! Gentlemen and knights! Some of you have come to Cintra to ask for the princess's hand. You have come in vain. From the day of her birth, by the power of the royal oath, the beautiful Pavetta has belonged to me!'

An uproar burst forth among the guests. Some shouted, someone swore, someone else thumped his fist on the table and knocked the dishes over. Wieldhill of Strept pulled a knife out of the roast lamb and waved it about. Crach an Craite, bent over, was clearly trying to break a plank from the table trestle.

'That's unheard of!' yelled Vissegerd. 'What proof do you have? Proof ?'

'The queen's face,' exclaimed Urcheon, extending his hand, 'is the best proof!'

Pavetta sat motionless, not raising her head. The air was growing thick with something very strange. The witcher's medallion was tearing at its chain under the tunic. He saw the queen summon a page and whisper a short command. Geralt couldn't hear it, but he was puzzled by the surprise on the boy's face and the fact that the command had to be repeated. The page ran towards the exit.

The uproar at the table continued as Eist Tuirseach turned to the queen.

'Calanthe,' he said calmly, 'is what he says true?'

'And if it is,' the queen muttered through her teeth, biting her lips and picking at the green sash on her shoulder, 'so what?'

‘If what he says is true,’ Eist frowned, ‘then the promise will have to be kept.’

‘Is that so?’

‘Or am I to understand,’ the islander asked grimly, ‘that you treat all promises this lightly, including those which have etched themselves so deeply in my memory?’

Geralt, who had never expected to see Calanthe blush deeply, with tears in her eyes and trembling lips, was surprised.

‘Eist,’ whispered the queen, ‘this is different—’

‘Is it, really?’

‘Oh, you son-of-a-bitch!’ Crach an Craite yelled unexpectedly, jumping up. ‘The last fool who said I’d acted in vain was pinched apart by crabs at the bottom of Allenker bay! I didn’t sail here from Skellig to return empty-handed! A suitor has turned up, some son of a trollop! Someone bring me a sword and give that idiot some iron! We’ll soon see who—’

‘Maybe you could just shut up, Crach?’ Eist snapped scathingly, resting both fists on the table. ‘Draig Bon-Dhu! I render you responsible for his future behaviour!’

‘And are you going to silence me, too, Tuirseach?’ shouted Rainfarn of Attre, standing up. ‘Who is going to stop me from washing the insult thrown at my prince away with blood? And his son, Windhalm, the only man worthy of Pavetta’s hand and bed! Bring the swords! I’ll show that Urcheon, or whatever he’s called, how we of Attre take revenge for such abuse! I wonder whether anybody or anything can hold me back?’

‘Yes. Regard for good manners,’ said Eist Tuirseach calmly. ‘It is not proper to start a fight here or challenge anyone without permission from the lady of the house. What is this? Is the throne room of Cintra an inn where you can punch each other’s heads and stab each other with knives as the fancy takes you?’

Everybody started to shout again, to curse and swear and wave their arms about. But the uproar suddenly stopped, as if cut by a knife, at the short, furious roar of an enraged bison.

‘Yes,’ said Coodcoodak, clearing his throat and rising from his chair. ‘Eist has it wrong. This doesn’t even look like an inn anymore. It’s more like a zoo, so a bison should be at home here. Honourable Calanthe, allow me to offer my opinion.’

‘A great many people, I see,’ said Calanthe in a drawling voice,

‘have an opinion on this problem and are offering it even without my permission. Strange that you aren’t interested in mine? And in my opinion, this bloody castle will sooner collapse on my head than I give my Pavetta to this crank. I haven’t the least intention—’

‘Roegner’s oath – ’ Urcheon began, but the queen silenced him, banging her golden goblet on the table.

‘Roegner’s oath means about as much to me as last year’s snows! And as for you, Urcheon, I haven’t decided whether to allow Crach or Rainfarn to meet you outside, or to simply hang you. You’re greatly influencing my decision with your interruption!’

Geralt, still disturbed by the way his medallion was quivering, looked around the hall. Suddenly he saw Pavetta’s eyes, emerald green like her mother’s. The princess was no longer hiding them beneath her long lashes – she swept them from Mousesack to the witcher, ignoring the others. Mousesack, bent over, was wriggling and muttering something.

Coodcoodak, still standing, cleared his throat meaningfully.

‘Speak,’ the queen nodded. ‘But be brief.’

‘As you command, your Majesty. Noble Calanthe and you, knights! Indeed, Urcheon of Erlenwald made a strange request of King Roegner, a strange reward to demand when the king offered him his wish. But let us not pretend we’ve never heard of such requests, of the Law of Surprise, as old as humanity itself. Of the price a man who saves another can demand, of the granting of a seemingly impossible wish. “You will give me the first thing that comes to greet you.” It might be a dog, you’ll say, a halberdier at the gate, even a mother-in-law impatient to holler at her son-in-law when he returns home. Or: “You’ll give me what you find at home yet don’t expect.” After a long journey, honourable gentlemen, and an unexpected return, this could be a lover in the wife’s bed. But sometimes it’s a child. A child marked out by destiny.’

‘Briefly, Coodcoodak,’ Calanthe frowned.

‘As you command. Sirs! Have you not heard of children marked out by destiny? Was not the legendary hero, Zatret Voruta, given to the dwarves as a child because he was the first person his father met on his return? And Mad Deï, who demanded a traveller give him what he left at home without knowing it? That surprise was the famous Supree, who later liberated Mad Deï from the curse which weighed him down. Remember Zivelena, who became the Queen of Metinna with the help of the gnome Rumplestelt, and in return

promised him her first-born? Zivelena didn't keep her promise when Rumplestelt came for his reward and, by using spells, she forced him to run away. Not long after that, both she and the child died of the plague. You do not dice with Destiny with impunity!'

'Don't threaten me, Coodcoodak,' Calanthe grimaced. 'Midnight is close, the time for ghosts. Can you remember any more legends from your undoubtedly difficult childhood? If not, then sit down.'

'I ask your Grace,' the baron turned up his long whiskers, 'to allow me to remain standing. I'd like to remind everybody of another legend. It's an old, forgotten legend – we've all probably heard it in our difficult childhoods. In this legend, the kings kept their promises. And we, poor vassals, are only bound to kings by the royal word: treaties, alliances, our privileges and fiefs all rely on it. And now? Are we to doubt all this? Doubt the inviolability of the king's word? Wait until it is worth as much as yesteryear's snow? If this is how things are to be then a difficult old age awaits us after our difficult childhoods!'

'Whose side are you on, Coodcoodak?' hollered Rainfarn of Attre.

'Silence! Let him speak!'

'This cackler, full of hot air, insults her Majesty!'

'The Baron of Tigg is right!'

'Silence,' Calanthe said suddenly, getting up. 'Let him finish.'

'I thank you graciously,' bowed Coodcoodak. 'But I have just finished.'

Silence fell, strange after the commotion his words had caused. Calanthe was still standing. Geralt didn't think anyone else had noticed her hand shake as she wiped her brow.

'My lords,' she said finally, 'you deserve an explanation. Yes, this . . . Urcheon . . . speaks the truth. Roegner did swear to give him that which he did not expect. It looks as if our lamented king was an oaf as far as a woman's affairs are concerned, and couldn't be trusted to count to nine. He confessed the truth on his death-bed, because he knew what I'd do to him if he'd admitted it earlier. He knew what a mother, whose child is disposed of so recklessly, is capable of.'

The knights and magnates remained silent. Urcheon stood motionless, like a spiked, iron statue.

'And Coodcoodak,' continued Calanthe, 'well, Coodcoodak has reminded me that I am not a mother but a queen. Very well then.

As queen, I shall convene a council tomorrow. Cintra is not a tyranny. The council will decide whether a dead king's oath is to decide the fate of the successor to the throne. It will decide whether Pavetta and the throne of Cintra are to be given to a stranger, or to act according to the kingdom's interest.' Calanthe was silent for a moment, looking askance at Geralt. 'And as for the noble knights who have come to Cintra in the hope of the princess's hand . . . It only remains for me to express my deep regret at the cruel disrespect and dishonour they have experienced here, at the ridicule poured on them. I am not to blame.'

Amidst the hum of voices which rumbled through the guests, the witcher managed to pick out Eist Tuirseach's whisper.

'On all the gods of the sea,' sighed the islander. 'This isn't befitting. This is open incitement to bloodshed. Calanthe, you're simply setting them against each other—'

'Be quiet, Eist,' hissed the queen furiously, 'because I'll get angry.'

Mousesack's black eyes flashed as – with a glance – the druid indicated Rainfarn of Attre who, with a gloomy, grimacing face, was preparing to stand. Geralt reacted immediately, standing up first and banging the chair noisily.

'Maybe it will prove unnecessary to convene the council,' he said in ringing tones.

Everyone grew silent, watching him with astonishment. Geralt felt Pavetta's emerald eyes on him, he felt Urcheon's gaze fall on him from behind the lattice of his black visor, and he felt the Force surging like a flood-wave and solidifying in the air. He saw how, under the influence of this Force, the smoke from the torches and oil lamps was taking on fantastic forms. He knew that Mousesack saw it too. He also knew that nobody else saw it.

'I said,' he repeated calmly, 'that convening the council may not prove necessary. You understand what I have in mind, Urcheon of Erlenwald?'

The spiked knight took two grating steps forward.

'I do,' he said, his words hollow beneath his helmet. 'It would take a fool not to understand. I heard what the merciful and noble lady Calanthe said a moment ago. She has found an excellent way of getting rid of me. I accept your challenge, knight unknown to me!'

'I don't recall challenging you,' said Geralt. 'I don't intend to duel

you, Urcheon of Erlenwald.'

'Geralt!' called Calanthe, twisting her lips and forgetting to call the witcher Ravix, 'don't overdo it! Don't put my patience to the test!'

'Or mine,' added Rainfarn ominously. Crach an Craite growled, and Eist Tuirseach meaningfully showed him a clenched fist. Crach growled even louder.

'Everyone heard,' spoke Geralt, 'Baron Tigg tell us about the famous heroes taken from their parents on the strength of the same oath that Urcheon received from King Roegner. But why should anyone want such an oath? You know the answer, Urcheon of Erlenwald. It creates a powerful, indissoluble tie of destiny between the person demanding the oath and its object, the child-surprise. Such a child, marked by blind fate, can be destined for extraordinary things. It can play an incredibly important role in the life of the person to whom fate has tied it. That is why, Urcheon, you demanded the prize you claim today. You don't want the throne of Cintra. You want the princess.'

'It is exactly as you say, knight unknown to me,' Urcheon laughed out loud. 'That is exactly what I claim! Give me the one who is my destiny!'

'That,' said Geralt, 'will have to be proved.'

'You dare doubt it? After the queen confirmed the truth of my words? After what you've just said?'

'Yes. Because you didn't tell us everything. Roegner knew the power of the Law of Surprise and the gravity of the oath he took. And he took it because he knew law and custom have a power which protects such oaths, ensuring they are only fulfilled when the force of destiny confirms them. I declare, Urcheon, that you have no right to the princess as yet. You will win her only when—'

'When what?'

'When the princess herself agrees to leave with you. This is what the Law of Surprise states. It is the child's, not the parent's, consent which confirms the oath, which proves that the child was born under the shadow of destiny. That's why you returned after fifteen years, Urcheon, and that's the condition King Roegner stipulated in his oath.'

'Who are you?'

'I am Geralt of Rivia.'

‘Who are you, Geralt of Rivia, to claim to be an oracle in matters of laws and customs?’

‘He knows this law better than anyone else,’ Mousesack said in a hoarse voice, ‘because it applied to him once. He was taken from his home because he was what his father hadn’t expected to find on his return. Because he was destined for other things. And by the power of destiny he became what he is.’

‘And what is he?’

‘A witcher.’

In the silence that reigned the guardhouse bell struck, announcing midnight in a dull tone. Everyone shuddered and raised their heads. Mousesack watched Geralt with surprise. But it was Urcheon who flinched most noticeably and moved uneasily. His hands, clad in their armour gauntlets, fell to his sides lifelessly, and the spiked helmet swayed unsteadily.

The strange, unknown Force suddenly grew thicker, filling the hall like a grey mist.

‘It’s true,’ said Calanthe. ‘Geralt, present here, is a witcher. His trade is worthy of respect and esteem. He has sacrificed himself to protect us from monsters and nightmares born in the night, those sent by powers ominous and harmful to man. He kills the horrors and monsters that await us in the forests and ravines. And those which have the audacity to enter our dwellings.’ Urcheon was silent. ‘And so,’ continued the queen, raising her ringed hand, ‘let the law be fulfilled, let the oath which you, Urcheon of Erlenwald, insist should be satisfied, be satisfied. Midnight has struck. Your vow no longer binds you. Lift your visor. Before my daughter expresses her will, before she decides her destiny, let her see your face. We all wish to see your face.’

Urcheon of Erlenwald slowly raised his armoured hand, pulled at the helmet’s fastenings, grabbed it by the iron horn and threw it against the floor with a crash. Someone shouted, someone swore, someone sucked in their breath with a whistle. On the queen’s face appeared a wicked, very wicked, smile. A cruel smile of triumph.

Above the wide, semi-circular breastplate two bulbous, black, button eyes looked out. Eyes set to either side of a blunt, elongated muzzle covered in reddish bristles and full of sharp white fangs. Urcheon’s head and neck bristled with a brush of short, grey, twitching prickles.

‘This is how I look,’ spoke the creature, ‘which you well knew,

Calanthe. Roegner, in telling you of his oath, wouldn't have omitted describing me. Urcheon of Erlenwald to whom – despite my appearance – Roegner swore his oath. You prepared well for my arrival, queen. Your own vassals have pointed out your haughty and contemptuous refusal to keep Roegner's word. When your attempt to set the other suitors on me didn't succeed, you still had a killer witcher in reserve, ready at your right-hand. And finally, common, low deceit. You wanted to humiliate me, Calanthe. Know that it is yourself you have humiliated.'

'Enough,' Calanthe stood up and rested her clenched fist on her hip. 'Let's put an end to this. Pavetta! You see who, or rather what, is standing in front of you, claiming you for himself. In accordance with the Law of Surprise and eternal custom, the decision is yours. Answer. One word from you is enough. Yes, and you become the property, the conquest, of this monster. No, and you will never have to see him again.'

The Force pulsating in the hall was squeezing Geralt's temples like an iron vice, buzzing in his ears, making the hair on his neck stand on end. The witcher looked at Mousesack's whitening knuckles, clenched at the edge of the table. At the trickle of sweat running down the queen's cheek. At the breadcrumbs on the table, moving like insects, forming runes, dispersing and again gathering into one word: CAREFUL!

'Pavetta!' Calanthe repeated. 'Answer. Do you choose to leave with this creature?'

Pavetta raised her head. 'Yes.'

The Force filling the hall echoed her, rumbling hollowly in the arches of the vault. No one, absolutely no one, made the slightest sound.

Calanthe very slowly, collapsed into her throne. Her face was completely expressionless.

'Everyone heard,' Urcheon's calm voice resounded in the silence. 'You, too, Calanthe. As did you, witcher, cunning, hired thug. My rights have been established. Truth and destiny have triumphed over lies and deviousness. What do you have left, noble queen, disguised witcher? Cold steel?' No one answered. 'I'd like to leave with Pavetta immediately,' continued Urcheon, his bristles stirring as he snapped his jaw shut, 'but I won't deny myself one small pleasure. It is you, Calanthe, who will lead your daughter here to me and place her white hand in mine.'

Calanthe slowly turned her head in the witcher's direction. Her eyes expressed a command. Geralt didn't move, sensing that the Force condensing in the air was concentrated on him. Only on him. Now he understood. The queen's eyes narrowed, her lips quivered . . .

'What?! What's this?' yelled Crach an Craite, jumping up. 'Her white hand? In his? The princess with this bristly stinker? With this . . . pig's snout?'

'And I wanted to fight him like a knight!' Rainfarn chimed in. 'This horror, this beast! Loose the dogs on him! The dogs!'

'Guards!' cried Calanthe.

Everything happened at once. Crach an Craite seized a knife from the table and knocked his chair over with a crash. Obeying Eist's command Draig Bon-Dhu, without a thought, whacked the back of his head with his bagpipes, as hard as he could. Crach dropped onto the table between a sturgeon in grey sauce and the few remaining arched ribs of a roast boar. Rainfarn leapt towards Urcheon, flashing a dagger drawn from his sleeve. Coodcoodak, springing up, kicked a stool under his feet which Rainfarn jumped agilely, but a moment's delay was enough – Urcheon deceived him with a short feint and forced him to his knees with a mighty blow from his armoured fist. Coodcoodak fell to snatch the dagger from Rainfarn but was stopped by Prince Windhalm, who clung to his thigh like a bloodhound.

Guards, armed with guisarmes and lances, ran in from the entrance. Calanthe, upright and threatening, with an authoritative, abrupt gesture indicated Urcheon to them. Pavetta started to shout, Eist Tuirseach to curse. Everyone jumped up, not quite knowing what to do.

'Kill him!' shouted the queen.

Urcheon, huffing angrily and baring his fangs, turned to face the attacking guards. He was unarmed but clad in spiked steel, from which the points of the guisarmes bounced with a clang. But the blows knocked him back, straight onto Rainfarn, who was just getting up and immobilised him by grabbing his legs. Urcheon let out a roar and, with his iron elbow-guards, deflected the blades aimed at his head. Rainfarn jabbed him with his dagger but the blade slid off the breast-plate. The guards, crossing their spear-shafts, pinned him to the sculpted chimney. Rainfarn, who was hanging onto his belt, found a chink in the armour and dug the dagger into it. Urcheon curled up.

‘Dunyyyyyyy!’ Pavetta shrilled as she jumped onto the chair.

The witcher, sword in hand, sprang onto the table and ran towards the fighting men, knocking plates, dishes and goblets all over the place. He knew there wasn’t much time. Pavetta’s cries were sounding more and more unnatural. Rainfarn was raising his dagger to stab again.

Geralt cut, springing from the table into a crouch. Rainfarn wailed and staggered to the wall. The witcher spun and, with the centre of his blade, slashed a guard who was trying to dig the sharp tongue of his lance between Urcheon’s apron and breast- plate. The guard tumbled to the ground, losing his helmet. More guards came running in from the entrance.

‘This is not befitting!’ roared Eist Tuirseach, grabbing a chair. He shattered the unwieldly piece of furniture against the floor with great force and, with what remained in his hand, threw himself at those advancing on Urcheon.

Urcheon, caught by two guisarme hooks at the same time, collapsed with a clang, cried out and huffed as he was dragged along the floor. A third guard raised his lance to stab down and Geralt cut him in the temple with the point of his sword. Those dragging Urcheon stepped back quickly, throwing down their guisarmes, while those approaching from the entrance backed away from the remnants of chair brandished by Eist like the magic sword Balmur in the hand of the legendary Zatreta Voruta.

Pavetta’s cries reached a peak and suddenly broke off. Geralt, sensing what was about to happen, fell to the floor watching for a greenish flash. He felt an excruciating pain in his ears, heard a terrible crash and a horrifying wail ripped from numerous throats. And then the princess’s even, monotonous and vibrating cry.

The table, scattering dishes and food all around, was rising and spinning; heavy chairs were flying around the hall and shattering against the walls; tapestries and hangings were flapping, raising clouds of dust. Cries and the dry crack of guisarme shafts snapping like sticks came from the entrance.

The throne, with Calanthe sitting on it, sprang up and flew across the hall like an arrow, smashing into the wall with a crash and falling apart. The queen slid to the floor like a ragged puppet. Eist Tuirseach, barely on his feet, threw himself towards her, took her in his arms and sheltered her from the hail pelting against the walls and floor with his body.

Geralt, grasping the medallion in his hand, slithered as quickly as he could towards Mousesack, miraculously still on his knees, who was lifting a short hawthorn wand with a rat's skull affixed to the tip. On the wall behind the druid a tapestry depicting the siege and fire of Fortress Ortagar was burning with very real flames.

Pavetta wailed. Turning round and round, she lashed everything and everybody with her cries as if with a whip. Anyone who tried to stand tumbled to the ground or was flattened against the wall. An enormous silver sauce-boat in the shape of a many-oared vessel with an upturned bow came whistling through the air in front of Geralt's eyes and knocked down the voivode with the hard-to-remember name just as he was trying to dodge it. Plaster rained down silently as the table rotated beneath the ceiling, with Crach an Craite flattened on it and throwing down vile curses.

Geralt crawled to Mousesack and they hid behind the heap formed by Fodcat of Strept, a barrel of beer, Drogodar, a chair and Drogodar's lute.

'It's pure, primordial Force!' the druid yelled over the racket and clatter. 'She's got no control over it!'

'I know!' Geralt yelled back. A roast pheasant with a few striped feathers still stuck in its rump, fell from nowhere and thumped him in the back.

'She has to be restrained! The walls are starting to crack!'

'I can see!'

'Ready?'

'Yes!'

'One! Two! Now!'

They both hit her simultaneously, Geralt with the Sign of Aard and Mousesack with a terrible, three-staged curse powerful enough to make the floor melt. The chair on which the princess was standing disintegrated into splinters. Pavetta barely noticed – she hung in the air within a transparent green sphere. Without ceasing to shout, she turned her head towards them and her petite face shrunk into a sinister grimace.

'By all the demons—!' roared Mousesack.

'Careful!' shouted the witcher, curling up. 'Block her, Mousesack! Block her or it's the end of us!'

The table thudded heavily to the ground, shattering its trestle and

everything beneath it. Crach an Craite, who was lying on the table, was thrown into the air. A heavy rain of plates and remnants of food fell; crystal carafes exploded as they hit the ground. The cornice broke away from the wall, rumbling like thunder, making the floors of the castle quake.

'Everything's letting go!' Mousesack shouted, aiming his wand at the princess. 'The whole Force is going to fall on us!'

Geralt, with a blow of his sword, deflected a huge double-pronged fork which was flying straight at the druid.

'Block it, Mousesack!'

Emerald eyes sent two flashes of green lightning at them. They coiled into blinding, whirling funnels from the centres of which the Force – like a battering ram which exploded the skull, put out the eyes and paralysed the breath – descended on them. Together with the Force, glass, majolica, platters, candlesticks, bones, nibbled loaves of bread, planks, slats and smouldering firewood from the hearth poured over them. Crying wildly like a great capercaillie, Castellan Haxo flew over their heads. The enormous head of a boiled carp splattered against Geralt's chest, on the bear passant sable and damsel of Fourhorn.

Through Mousesack's wall-shattering curses, through his own shouting and the wailing of the wounded, the din, clatter and racket, through Pavetta's wailing, the witcher suddenly heard the most terrible sound.

Coodcoodak, on his knees, was strangling Draig Bon-Dhu's bagpipes with his hands, while, with his head thrown back, he shouted over the monstrous sounds emerging from the bag, wailed and roared, cackled and croaked, bawled and squawked in a cacophony of sounds made by all known, unknown, domestic, wild and mythical animals.

Pavetta fell silent, horrified, and looked at the baron with her mouth agape. The Force eased off abruptly.

'Now!' yelled Mousesack, waving his wand. 'Now, witcher!'

They hit her. The greenish sphere surrounding the princess burst under their blow like a soap bubble and the vacuum instantly sucked in the Force raging through the room. Pavetta flopped heavily to the ground and started to weep.

After the pandemonium a moment's silence rang in their ears; then, with difficulty, laboriously, voices started to break through

the rubble and destruction, through the broken furniture and the inert bodies.

'*Cuach op arse, ghoul y badraigh mal an cuach*,' spat Crach an Craite, spraying blood from his bitten lip.

'Control yourself, Crach,' said Mousesack with effort, shaking buckwheat from his front. 'There are women present.'

'Calanthe. My beloved. My Calanthe!' Eist Tuirseach said in the pauses between kisses.

The queen opened her eyes but didn't try to free herself from his embrace.

'Eist. People are watching,' she said.

'Let them watch.'

'Would somebody care to explain what that was?' asked Marshal Vissegerd, crawling from beneath a fallen tapestry.

'No,' said the witcher.

'A doctor!' Windhalm of Attre, leaning over Rainfarn, shouted shrilly.

'Water!' Wieldhill, one of the brothers from Strept, called, stifling the smouldering tapestry with his jacket. 'Water, quickly!'

'And beer!' Coodcoodak croaked.

A few knights, still able to stand, were trying to lift Pavetta, but she pushed their hands aside, got up on her own and, unsteadily, walked towards the hearth. There, with his back resting against the wall, sat Urcheon, awkwardly trying to remove his blood-smeared armour.

'The youth of today,' snorted Mousesack, looking in their direction. 'They start early! They've only got one thing on their minds.'

'What's that?'

'Didn't you know, witcher, that a virgin, that is one who's untouched, wouldn't be able to use the Force?'

'To hell with her virginity,' muttered Geralt. 'Where did she get such a gift anyway? Neither Calanthe nor Roegner—'

'She inherited it, missing a generation, and no mistake,' said the druid. 'Her grandmother, Adalia, could raise a drawbridge with a twitch of her eyebrows. Hey, Geralt, look at that! She still hasn't had enough!'

Calanthe, supported by Eist Tuirseach's arm, indicated the wounded Urcheon to the guards. Geralt and Mousesack approached quickly but unnecessarily. The guards recoiled from the semi-reclining figure and, whispering and muttering, backed away.

Urcheon's monstrous snout softened, blurred and was beginning to lose its contours. The spikes and bristles rippled and became black, shiny, wavy hair and a beard which bordered a pale, angular, masculine face, dominated by a prominent nose.

'What . . .' stammered Eist Tuirseach. 'Who's that? Urcheon?'

'Duny,' said Pavetta softly.

Calanthe turned away with pursed lips.

'Cursed?' murmured Eist. 'But how—'

'Midnight has struck,' said the witcher. 'Just this minute. The bell we heard before was early. The bell-ringer's mistake. Am I right, Calanthe?'

'Right, right,' groaned the man called Duny, answering instead of the queen, who had no intention of replying anyway. 'But maybe instead of standing there talking, someone could help me with this armour and call a doctor. That madman Rainfarn stabbed me under the ribs.'

'What do we need a doctor for?' said Mousesack, taking out his wand.

'Enough.' Calanthe straightened and raised her head proudly. 'Enough of this. When all this is over, I want to see you in my chamber. All of you, as you stand. Eist, Pavetta, Mousesack, Geralt and you . . . Duny. Mousesack?'

'Yes, your Majesty.'

'That wand of yours . . . I've bruised my backbone. And thereabouts.'

'At your command, your Majesty.'

III

‘. . . a curse,’ continued Duny, rubbing his temple. ‘Since birth. I never found a reason for it, or who did it to me. From midnight to dawn, an ordinary man, from dawn . . . you saw what. Akerspaark, my father, wanted to hide it. People are superstitious in Maecht; spells and curses in the royal family could prove fatal for the dynasty. One of my father’s knights took me away from court and brought me up. The two of us wandered around the world – the knight errant and his squire, and later, when he died, I journeyed alone. I can’t remember who told me that a child-surprise could free me from the curse. Not long after that I met Roegner. The rest you know.’

‘The rest we know, or can guess,’ nodded Calanthe. ‘Especially that you didn’t wait the fifteen years agreed upon with Roegner but turned my daughter’s head before that. Pavetta! Since when?’

The princess lowered her head and raised a finger.

‘There. You little sorceress. Right under my nose! Let me just find out who let him into the castle at night! Let me at the ladies-in-waiting you went gathering primroses with. Primroses, dammit! Well, what am I to do with you now?’

‘Calanthe—’ began Eist.

‘Hold on, Tuirseach. I haven’t finished yet. Duny, the matter’s become very complicated. You’ve been with Pavetta for a year now, and what? And nothing. So you negotiated the oath from the wrong father. Destiny has made a fool of you. What irony, as Geralt of Rivia, present here, is wont to say.’

‘To hell with destiny, oaths and irony,’ grimaced Duny. ‘I love Pavetta and she loves me, that’s all that counts. You can’t stand in the way of our happiness.’

‘I can, Duny, I can, and how.’ Calanthe smiled one of her unfailing smiles. ‘You’re lucky I don’t want to. I have a certain debt towards you, Duny. I’d made up my mind . . . I ought to ask your forgiveness, but I hate doing that. So I’m giving you Pavetta and we’ll be quits. Pavetta? You haven’t changed your mind, have you?’

The princess shook her head eagerly.

‘Thank you, your Majesty. Thank you,’ smiled Duny. ‘You’re a wise and generous queen.’

‘Of course I am. And beautiful.’

‘And beautiful.’

‘You can both stay in Cintra if you wish. The people here are less superstitious than the inhabitants of Maecht and adjust to things quicker. Besides, even as Urcheon you were quite pleasant. But you can’t count on having the throne just yet. I intend to reign a little longer beside the new king of Cintra. The noble Eist Tuirseach of Skellige has made me a very interesting proposition.’

‘Calanthe—’

‘Yes, Eist, I accept. I’ve never before listened to a confession of love while lying on the floor amidst fragments of my own throne but . . . How did you put it, Duny? This is all that counts and I don’t advise anyone to stand in the way of my happiness. And you, what are you staring at? I’m not as old as you think.’

‘Today’s youth,’ muttered Mousesack. ‘The apple doesn’t fall far —’

‘What are you muttering, sorcerer?’

‘Nothing, ma’am.’

‘Good. While we’re at it, I’ve got a proposition for you, Mousesack. Pavetta’s going to need a teacher. She ought to learn how to use her gift. I like this castle, and I’d prefer it to remain standing. It might fall apart at my talented daughter’s next attack of hysteria. How about it, Druid?’

‘I’m honoured.’

‘I think,’ the queen turned her head towards the window. ‘It’s dawn. Time to—’

She suddenly turned to where Pavetta and Duny were whispering to each other, holding hands, their foreheads all but touching.

‘Duny!’

‘Yes, your Majesty?’

‘Do you hear? It’s dawn! It’s already light. And you . . .’

Geralt glanced at Mousesack and both started laughing.

‘And why are you so happy, sorcerers? Can’t you see—?’

‘We can, we can,’ Geralt assured her.

‘We were waiting until you saw for yourself,’ snorted Mousesack. ‘I was wondering when you’d catch on.’

‘To what?’

‘That you’ve lifted the curse. It’s you who’s lifted it,’ said the witcher. ‘The moment you said “I’m giving you Pavetta” destiny was fulfilled.’

‘Exactly,’ confirmed the druid.

‘Oh gods,’ said Duny slowly. ‘So, finally. Damn, I thought I’d be happier, that some sort of trumpets would play or . . . Force of habit. Your Majesty! Thank you. Pavetta, do you hear?’

‘Mhm,’ said the princess without raising her eyes.

‘And so,’ sighed Calanthe, looking at Geralt with tired eyes, ‘all’s well that ends well. Don’t you agree, witcher? The curse has been lifted, two weddings are on their way, it’ll take about a month to repair the throne-room, there are four dead, countless wounded and Rainfarn of Attre is half-dead. Let’s celebrate. Do you know, witcher, that there was a moment when I wanted to have you—’

‘I know.’

‘But now I have to do you justice. I demanded a result and got one. Cintra is allied to Skellige. My daughter’s marrying the right man. For a moment I thought all this would have been fulfilled according to destiny anyway, even if I hadn’t had you brought in for the feast and sat you next to me. But I was wrong. Rainfarn’s dagger could have changed destiny. And Rainfarn was stopped by a sword held by a witcher. You’ve done an honest job, Geralt. Now it’s a question of price. Tell me what you want.’

‘Hold on,’ said Duny, fingering his bandaged side. ‘A question of price, you say. It is I who am in debt, it’s up to me—’

‘Don’t interrupt.’ Calanthe narrowed her eyes. ‘Your mother-in-law hates being interrupted. Remember that. And you should know that you’re not in any debt. It so happens that you were the subject of my agreement with Geralt. I said we’re quits and I don’t see the sense of my having to endlessly apologise to you for it. But the agreement still binds me. Well, Geralt. Your price.’

‘Very well,’ said the witcher. ‘I ask for your green sash, Calanthe. May it always remind me of the colour of the eyes of the most beautiful queen I have ever known.’

Calanthe laughed, and unfastened her emerald necklace.

‘This trinket,’ she said, ‘has stones of the right hue. Keep it, and the memory.’

‘May I speak?’ asked Duny modestly.

‘But of course, Son-in-law, please do, please do.’

‘I still say I am in your debt, witcher. It is my life that Rainfarn’s dagger endangered. I would have been beaten to death by the guards without you. If there’s talk of a price then I should be the one to pay. I assure you I can afford it. What do you ask, Geralt?’

‘Duny,’ said Geralt slowly, ‘a witcher who is asked such a question has to ask to have it repeated.’

‘I repeat, therefore. Because, you see, I am in your debt for still another reason. When I found out who you were, there in the hall, I hated you and thought very badly of you. I took you for a blind, bloodthirsty tool, for someone who kills coldly and without question, who wipes his blade clean of blood and counts the cash. But I’ve become convinced that the witcher’s profession is worthy of respect. You protect us not only from the evil lurking in the darkness, but also from that which lies within ourselves. It’s a shame there are so few of you.’

Calanthe smiled.

For the first time that night Geralt was inclined to believe it was genuine.

‘My son-in-law has spoken well. I have to add two words to what he said. Precisely two. Forgive, Geralt.’

‘And I,’ said Duny, ‘ask again. What do you ask for?’

‘Duny,’ said Geralt seriously, ‘Calanthe, Pavetta. And you, righteous knight Tuirseach, future king of Cintra. In order to become a witcher, you have to be born in the shadow of destiny, and very few are born like that. That’s why there are so few of us. We’re growing old, dying, without anyone to pass our knowledge, our gifts, on to. We lack successors. And this world is full of Evil which waits for the day none of us are left.’

‘Geralt,’ whispered Calanthe.

‘Yes, you’re not wrong, queen. Duny! You will give me that which you already have but do not know. I’ll return to Cintra in six years to see if destiny has been kind to me.’

‘Pavetta,’ Duny opened his eyes wide. ‘Surely you’re not—’

‘Pavetta!’ exclaimed Calanthe. ‘Are you . . . are you—?’

The princess lowered her eyes and blushed. Then replied.

THE VOICE OF REASON 5

‘Geralt! Hey! Are you there?’

He raised his head from the coarse, yellowed pages of *The History of the World* by Roderick de Novembre, an interesting if controversial work which he had been studying since the previous day.

‘Yes, I am. What’s happened, Nenneke? Do you need me?’

‘You’ve got a guest.’

‘Again? Who’s it this time? Duke Hereward himself?’

‘No. It’s Dandilion this time, your fellow. That idler, parasite and good-for-nothing, that priest of art, the bright-shining star of the ballad and love poem. As usual he’s radiant with fame, puffed up like a pig’s bladder and stinking of beer. Do you want to see him?’

‘Of course. He’s my friend, after all.’

Nenneke, peeved, shrugged her shoulders. ‘I can’t understand that friendship. He’s your absolute opposite.’

‘Opposites attract.’

‘Obviously. There, he’s coming,’ she indicated with her head. ‘Your famous poet.’

‘He really is a famous poet, Nenneke. Surely you’re not going to claim you’ve never heard his ballads.’

‘I’ve heard them.’ The priestess winced. ‘Yes, indeed. Well, I don’t know much about it, but maybe the ability to jump from touching lyricism to obscenities so easily is a talent. Never mind. Forgive me, but I won’t keep you company. I’m not in the mood for either his poetry or his vulgar jokes.’

A peal of laughter and the strumming of a lute resounded in the corridor and there, on the threshold of the library, stood Dandilion in a lilac jerkin with lace cuffs, his hat askew. The troubadour bowed exaggeratedly at the sight of Nenneke, the heron feather pinned to his hat sweeping the floor.

‘My deepest respects, venerable mother,’ he whined stupidly. ‘Praise be the Great Melitele and her priestesses, the springs of virtue and wisdom—’

‘Stop talking bullshit,’ snorted Nenneke. ‘And don’t call me mother. The very idea that you could be my son fills me with horror.’

She turned on her heel and left, her trailing robe rustling. Dandilion, aping her, sketched a parody bow.

‘She hasn’t changed a bit,’ he said cheerfully. ‘She still can’t take a joke. She’s furious because I chatted a bit to the gate-keeper when I got here, a pretty blonde with long lashes and a virgin’s plait reaching down to her cute little bottom, which it would be a sin not to pinch. So I did and Nenneke, who had just arrived . . . Ah, what the deuce. Greetings, Geralt.’

‘Greetings, Dandilion. How did you know I was here?’

The poet straightened himself and yanked his trousers up. ‘I was in Wyzim,’ he said. ‘I heard about the striga, and that you were wounded. I guessed where you would come to recuperate. I see you’re well now, are you?’

‘You see correctly, but try explaining that to Nenneke. Sit, let’s talk.’

Dandilion sat and peeped into the book lying on the lectern. ‘History?’ he smiled. ‘Roderick de Novembre? I’ve read him, I have. History was second on my list of favourite subjects when I was studying at the Academy in Oxenfurt.’

‘What was first?’

‘Geography,’ said the poet seriously. ‘The atlas was bigger and it was easier to hide a demijohn of vodka behind it.’

Geralt laughed dryly, got up, removed Lunin and Tyrss’s *The Arcane Mysteries of Magic and Alchemy* from the shelf and pulled a round-bellied vessel wrapped in straw from behind the bulky volume and into the light of day.

‘Oho.’ The bard visibly cheered up. ‘Wisdom and inspiration, I see, are still to be found in libraries. Oooh! I like this! Plum, isn’t it? Yes, this is true alchemy. This is a philosopher’s stone well worth studying. Your health, brother. Ooooh, it’s strong as the plague!’

‘What brings you here?’ Geralt took the demijohn over from the poet, took a sip and started to cough, fingering his bandaged neck. ‘Where are you going?’

‘Nowhere. That is, I could go where you’re going. I could keep you company. Do you intend staying here long?’

‘Not long. The local duke let it be known I’m not welcome.’

‘Hereward?’ Dandilion knew all the kings, princes, lords and feudal lords from Jaruga to the Dragon Mountains. ‘Don’t you give a damn. He won’t dare fall foul of Nenneke, or Melitele. The people would set fire to his castle.’

‘I don’t want any trouble. And I’ve been sitting here for too long anyway. I’m going south, Dandilion. Far south. I won’t find any work here. Civilisation. What the hell do they need a witcher here for? When I ask after employment, they look at me as if I’m a freak.’

‘What are you talking about? What civilisation? I crossed Buina a week ago and heard all sorts of stories as I rode through the country. Apparently there are water sprites here, myriapodans, chimerea, flying drakes, every possible filth. You should be up to your ears in work.’

‘Stories, well, I’ve heard them too. Half of them are either made up or exaggerated. No, Dandilion. The world is changing. Something’s coming to an end.’

The poet took a long pull at the demijohn, narrowed his eyes and sighed heavily. ‘Are you crying over your sad fate as a witcher again? And philosophising on top of that? I perceive the disastrous effects of inappropriate literature, because the fact that the world is changing occurred even to that old fart Roderick de Novembre. The changeability of the world is, as it happens, the only thesis in this treatise you can agree with. But it’s not so innovative you have to ply me with it and put on the face of a great thinker – which doesn’t suit you in the least.’

Instead of answering Geralt took a sip from the demijohn.

‘Yes, yes,’ sighed Dandilion anew. ‘The world is changing, the sun sets, and the vodka is coming to an end. What else, in your opinion, is coming to an end? You mentioned something about endings, philosopher.’

‘I’ll give you a couple of examples,’ said Geralt after a moment’s silence, ‘all from two months this side of the Buina. One day I ride up and what do I see? A bridge. And under that bridge sits a troll and demands every passerby pays him. Those who refuse have a leg injured, sometimes both. So I go to the alderman: “How much will you give me for that troll?” He’s amazed. “What are you talking about?” he asks, “Who will repair the bridge if the troll’s not there? He repairs it regularly with the sweat of his brow, solid work, first rate. It’s cheaper to pay his toll.” So I ride on, and what do I see? A

forktail. Not very big, about four yards nose-tip to tail-tip. It's flying, carrying a sheep in its talons. I go to the village. "How much?" I ask, "will you pay me for the forktail?" The peasants fall on their knees. "No!" they shout, "it's our baron's youngest daughter's favourite dragon. If a scale falls from its back, the baron will burn our hamlet, and skin us." I ride on, and I'm getting hungrier and hungrier. I ask around for work. Certainly it's there, but what work? To catch a rusalka for one man, a nymph for another, a dryad for a third . . . They've gone completely mad – the villages are teeming with girls but they want humanoids. Another asks me to kill a mecopteran and bring him a bone from its hand because, crushed and poured into a soup, it cures impotence—'

'That's rubbish,' interrupted Dandilion. 'I've tried it. It doesn't strengthen anything and it makes the soup taste of old socks. But if people believe it and are inclined to pay—'

'I'm not going to kill mecopterans. Nor any other harmless creatures.'

'Then you'll go hungry. Unless you change your line of work.'

'To what?'

'Whatever. Become a priest. You wouldn't be bad at it with all your scruples, your morality, your knowledge of people and of everything. The fact that you don't believe in any gods shouldn't be a problem – I don't know many priests who do. Become a priest and stop feeling sorry for yourself.'

'I'm not feeling sorry for myself. I'm stating the facts.'

Dandilion crossed his legs and examined his worn sole with interest. 'You remind me, Geralt, of an old fisherman who, towards the end of his life, discovers that fish stink and the breeze from the sea makes your bones ache. Be consistent. Talking and regretting won't get you anywhere. If I were to find that the demand for poetry had come to an end, I'd hang up my lute and become a gardener. I'd grow roses.'

'Nonsense. You're not capable of giving it up.'

'Well,' agreed the poet, still staring at his sole, 'maybe not. But our professions differ somewhat. The demand for poetry and the sound of lute strings will never decline. It's worse with your trade. You witchers, after all, deprive yourselves of work, slowly but surely. The better and the more conscientiously you work, the less work there is for you. After all, your goal is a world without monsters, a world which is peaceful and safe. A world where

witchers are unnecessary. A paradox, isn't it?'

'True.'

'In the past, when unicorns still existed, there was quite a large group of girls who took care of their virtue in order to be able to hunt them. Do you remember ? And the ratcatchers with pipes? Everybody was fighting over their services. But they were finished off by alchemists and their effective poisons and then domesticated ferrets and weasels. The little animals were cheaper, nicer and didn't guzzle so much beer. Notice the analogy?'

'I do.'

'So use other people's experiences. The unicorn virgins, when they lost their jobs, immediately popped their cherry. Some, eager to make up for the years of sacrifice, became famous far and wide for their technique and zeal. The ratcatchers . . . Well, you'd better not copy them, because they, to a man, took to drink and went to the dogs. Well, now it looks as if the time's come for witchers. You're reading Roderick de Novembre? As far as I remember, there are mentions of witchers there, of the first ones who started work some three hundred years ago. In the days when the peasants used to go to reap the harvest in armed bands, when villages were surrounded by a triple stockade, when merchant caravans looked like the march of regular troops, and loaded catapults stood on the ramparts of the few towns night and day. Because it was us, human beings, who were the intruders here. This land was ruled by dragons, manticores, griffins and amphisboenas, vampires and werewolves, striga, kikimoras, chimerae and flying drakes. And this land had to be taken from them bit by bit, every valley, every mountain pass, every forest and every meadow. And we didn't manage that without the invaluable help of witchers. But those times have gone, Geralt, irrevocably gone. The baron won't allow a forktail to be killed because it's the last draconid for a thousand miles and no longer gives rise to fear but rather to compassion and nostalgia for times passed. The troll under the bridge gets on with people. He's not a monster used to frighten children. He's a relic and a local attraction – and a useful one at that. And chimerae, manticores and amphisboenas? They dwell in virgin forests and inaccessible mountains—'

'So I was right. Something is coming to an end. Whether you like it or not, something's coming to an end.'

'I don't like you mouthing banal platitudes. I don't like your expression when you do it. What's happening to you? I don't

recognise you, Geralt. Ah, plague on it, let's go south as soon as possible, to those wild countries. As soon as you've cut down a couple of monsters, your blues will disappear. And there's supposed to be a fair number of monsters down there. They say that when an old woman's tired of life, she goes alone and weaponless into the woods to collect brushwood. The consequences are guaranteed. You should go and settle there for good.'

'Maybe I should. But I won't.'

'Why? It's easier for a witcher to make money there.'

'Easier to make money,' Geralt took a sip from the demijohn. 'But harder to spend it. And on top of that, they eat pearl barley and millet, the beer tastes like piss, the girls don't wash and the mosquitoes bite.'

Dandilion chuckled loudly and rested his head against the bookshelf, on the leather-bound volumes.

'Millet and mosquitoes! That reminds me of our first expedition together to the edge of the world,' he said. 'Do you remember ? We met at the fête in Gulet and you persuaded me—'

'You persuaded me! You had to flee from Gulet as fast as your horse could carry you because the girl you'd knocked up under the musicians' podium had four sturdy brothers. They were looking for you all over town, threatening to geld you and cover you in pitch and sawdust. That's why you hung on to me then.'

'And you almost jumped out of your pants with joy to have a companion. Until then you only had your horse for company. But you're right, it was as you say. I did have to disappear for a while, and the Valley of Flowers seemed just right for my purpose. It was, after all, supposed to be the edge of the inhabited world, the last outpost of civilisation, the furthest point on the border of two worlds . . . Remember?'

'I remember.'

THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

I

Dandilion came down the steps of the inn carefully, carrying two tankards dripping with froth. Cursing under his breath he squeezed through a group of curious children and crossed the yard at a diagonal, avoiding the cowpats.

A number of villagers had already gathered round the table in the courtyard where the witcher was talking to the alderman. The poet set the tankards down and found a seat. He realised straight away that the conversation hadn't advanced a jot during his short absence.

'I'm a witcher, sir,' Geralt repeated for the umpteenth time, wiping beer froth from his lips. 'I don't sell anything. I don't go around enlisting men for the army and I don't know how to treat glanders. I'm a witcher.'

'It's a profession,' explained Dandilion yet again. 'A witcher, do you understand ? He kills strigas and spectres. He exterminates all sorts of vermin. Professionally, for money. Do you get it, alderman?'

'Aha!' The alderman's brow, deeply furrowed in thought, grew smoother. 'A witcher! You should have said so right away!'

'Exactly,' agreed Geralt. 'So now I'll ask you: is there any work to be found around here for me?'

'Aaaa.' The alderman quite visibly started to think again. 'Work? Maybe those . . . Well . . . werethings? You're asking are there any werethings hereabouts?'

The witcher smiled and nodded, rubbing an itching eyelid with his knuckles.

'That there are,' the alderman concluded after a fair while. 'Only look ye yonder, see ye those mountains? There's elves live there, that there is their kingdom. Their palaces, hear ye, are all of pure gold. Oh aye, sir! Elves, I tell ye. 'Tis awful. He who yonder goes, never returns.'

'I thought so,' said Geralt coldly. 'Which is precisely why I don't intend going there.'

Dandilion chuckled impudently.

The alderman pondered a long while, just as Geralt had expected.

'Aha,' he said at last. 'Well, aye. But there be other werethings here too. From the land of elves they come, to be sure. Oh, sir, there

be many, many. ‘Tis hard to count them all. But the worst, that be the Bane, am I right, my good men?’

The ‘good men’ came to life and besieged the table from all sides.

‘Bane!’ said one. ‘Aye, aye, ’tis true what the alderman says. A pale virgin, she walks the cottages at daybreak, and the children, they die!’

‘And imps,’ added another, a soldier from the watchtower. ‘They tangle up the horses’ manes in the stables!’

‘And bats! There be bats here!’

‘And myriapodans! You come up all in spots because of them!’

The next few minutes passed in a recital of the monsters which plagued the local peasants with their dishonourable doings, or their simple existence. Geralt and Dandilion learnt of misguides and mamunes, which prevent an honest peasant from finding his way home in a drunken stupour, of the flying drake which drinks milk from cows, of the head on spider’s legs which runs around in the forest, of hobolds which wear red hats and about a dangerous pike which tears linen from women’s hands as they wash it – and just you wait and it’ll be at the women themselves. They weren’t spared hearing that old Nan the Hag flies on a broom at night and performs abortions in the day, that the miller tampers with the flour by mixing it with powdered acorns and that a certain Duda believed the royal steward to be a thief and scoundrel.

Geralt listened to all this calmly, nodding with feigned interest, and asked a few questions about the roads and layout of the land, after which he rose and nodded to Dandilion.

‘Well, take care, my good people,’ he said. ‘I’ll be back soon, then we’ll see what can be done.’

They rode away in silence alongside the cottages and fences, accompanied by yapping dogs and screaming children.

‘Geralt,’ said Dandilion, standing in the stirrups to pick a fine apple from a branch which stretched over the orchard fence, ‘all the way you’ve been complaining about it being harder and harder to find work. Yet from what I just heard, it looks as if you could work here without break until winter. You’d make a penny or two, and I’d have some beautiful subjects for my ballads. So explain why we’re riding on.’

‘I wouldn’t make a penny, Dandilion.’

‘Why?’

‘Because there wasn’t a word of truth in what they said.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘None of the creatures they mentioned exist.’

‘You’re joking!’ Dandilion spat out a pip and threw the apple core at a patched mongrel. ‘No, it’s impossible. I was watching them carefully, and I know people. They weren’t lying.’

‘No,’ the witcher agreed. ‘They weren’t lying. They firmly believed it all. Which doesn’t change the facts.’

The poet was silent for a while.

‘None of those monsters . . . None? It can’t be. Something of what they listed must be here. At least one! Admit it.’

‘All right. I admit it. One does exist for sure.’

‘Ha! What?’

‘A bat.’

They rode out beyond the last fences, on to a highway between beds yellow with oilseed and cornfields rolling in the wind. Loaded carts travelled past them in the opposite direction. The bard pulled his leg over the saddle-bow, rested his lute on his knee and strummed nostalgic tunes, waving from time to time at the giggling, scantily clad girls wandering along the sides of the road carrying rakes on their robust shoulders.

‘Geralt,’ he said suddenly, ‘but monsters do exist. Maybe not as many as before, maybe they don’t lurk behind every tree in the forest, but they are there. They exist. So how do you account for people inventing ones, then? What’s more, believing in what they invent? Eh, famous witcher? Haven’t you wondered why?’

‘I have, famous poet. And I know why.’

‘I’m curious.’

‘People,’ Geralt turned his head, ‘like to invent monsters and monstrosities. Then they seem less monstrous themselves. When they get blind-drunk, cheat, steal, beat their wives, starve an old woman, when they kill a trapped fox with an axe or riddle the last existing unicorn with arrows, they like to think that the Bane entering cottages at daybreak is more monstrous than they are. They feel better then. They find it easier to live.’

‘I’ll remember that,’ said Dandilion, after a moment’s silence. ‘I’ll find some rhymes and compose a ballad about it.’

‘Do. But don’t expect a great applause.’

They rode slowly but lost the last cottages of the hamlet from sight. Soon they had climbed the row of forested hills.

‘Ha.’ Dandilion halted his horse and looked around. ‘Look, Geralt. Isn’t it beautiful here? Idyllic, damn it. A feast for the eyes!’

The land sloped gently down to a mosaic of flat, even fields picked out in variously coloured crops. In the middle, round and regular like a leaf of clover, sparkled the deep waters of three lakes surrounded by dark strips of alder thickets. The horizon was traced by a misty blue line of mountains rising above the black, shapeless stretch of forest.

‘We’re riding on, Dandilion.’

The road led straight towards the lakes alongside dykes and ponds hidden by alder trees and filled with quacking mallards, garganeys, herons and grebes. The richness of bird life was surprising alongside the signs of human activity – the dykes were well maintained and covered with fascines, while the sluice gates had been reinforced with stones and beams. The outlet boxes, which were not in the least rotten, trickled merrily with water. Canoes and jetties were visible in the reeds by the lakes and bars of set nets and fish-pots were poking out of the deep waters.

Dandilion suddenly looked around.

‘Someone’s following us,’ he said, excited. ‘In a cart!’

‘Incredible,’ scoffed the witcher without looking around. ‘In a cart? And I thought that the locals rode on bats.’

‘Do you know what?’ growled the troubadour. ‘The closer we get to the edge of the world, the sharper your wit. I dread to think what it will come to!’

They weren’t riding fast and the empty cart, drawn by two piebald horses, quickly caught up with them.

‘Wooooooaaaaahhhh!’ The driver brought the horses to a halt just behind them. He was wearing a sheepskin over his bare skin and his hair reached down to his brows. ‘The gods be praised, noble sirs!’

‘We, too,’ replied Dandilion, familiar with the custom, ‘praise them.’

‘If we want to,’ murmured the witcher.

‘I call myself Nettly,’ announced the carter. ‘I was watching ye speak to the alderman at Upper Posada. I know ye tae be a witcher.’

Geralt let go of the reins and let his mare snort at the roadside nettles.

'I did hear,' Nettly continued, 'the alderman prattle ye stories. I marked your expression and 'twas nae strange to me. In a long time now I've nae heard such balderdash and lies.'

Dandilion laughed.

Geralt was looking at the peasant attentively, silently.

Nettly cleared his throat. 'Care ye nae to be hired for real, proper work, sir?' he asked. 'There'd be something I have for ye.'

'And what is that?'

Nettly didn't lower his eyes. 'It be nae good to speak of business on the road. Let us drive on to my home, to Lower Posada. There we'll speak. Anyways, 'tis that way ye be heading.'

'Why are you so sure?'

'As 'cos ye have nae other way here, and yer horses' noses be turned in that direction, not their butts.'

Dandilion laughed again. 'What do you say to that, Geralt?'

'Nothing,' said the witcher. 'It's no good to talk on the road. On our way then, honourable Nettly.'

'Tie ye the horses to the frame, and sit yerselves down in the cart,' the peasant proposed. 'It be more comfortable for ye. Why rack yer arses on the saddle?'

'Too true.'

They climbed onto the cart. The witcher stretched out comfortably on the straw. Dandilion, evidently afraid of getting his elegant green jerkin dirty, sat on the plank. Nettly clucked his tongue at the horses and the vehicle clattered along the beam-reinforced dyke.

They crossed a bridge over a canal overgrown with water-lilies and duckweed, and passed a strip of cut meadows. Cultivated fields stretched as far as the eye could see.

'It's hard to believe that this should be the edge of the world, the edge of civilisation,' said Dandilion. 'Just look, Geralt. Rye like gold, and a mounted peasant could hide in that corn. Or that oilseed, look, how enormous.'

'You know about agriculture?'

'We poets have to know about everything,' said Dandilion

haughtily. ‘Otherwise we’d compromise our work. One has to learn, my dear fellow, learn. The fate of the world depends on agriculture, so it’s good to know about it. Agriculture feeds, clothes, protects from the cold, provides entertainment and supports art.’

‘You’ve exaggerated a bit with the entertainment and art.’

‘And booze, what’s that made of?’

‘I get it.’

‘Not very much, you don’t. Learn. Look at those purple flowers. They’re lupins.’

‘They’s be vetch, to be true,’ interrupted Nettly. ‘Have ye nae seen lupins, or what? But ye have hit exact with one thing, sir. Everything seeds mightily here, and grows as to make the heart sing. That be why ’tis called the Valley of Flowers. That be why our forefathers settled here, first ridding the land of the elves.’

‘The Valley of Flowers, that’s Dol Blathanna,’ Dandilion nudged the witcher, who was stretched out on the straw, with his elbow. ‘You paying attention? The elves have gone but their name remains. Lack of imagination. And how do you get on with the elves here, dear host? You’ve got them in the mountains across the path, after all.’

‘We nae mix with each other. Each to his own.’

‘The best solution,’ said the poet. ‘Isn’t that right, Geralt?’

The witcher didn’t reply.

II

‘Thank you for the spread.’ Geralt licked the bone spoon clean and dropped it into the empty bowl. ‘A hundred thanks, dear host. And now, if you permit, we’ll get down to business.’

‘Well, that we can,’ agreed Nettly. ‘What say ye, Dhun?’

Dhun, the elder of Lower Posada, a huge man with a gloomy expression, nodded to the girls who swiftly removed the dishes from the table and left the room, to the obvious regret of Dandilion who had been grinning at them ever since the feast began, and making them giggle at his gross jokes.

‘I’m listening,’ said Geralt, looking at the window from where the rapping of an axe and the sound of a saw drifted. Some sort of woodwork was going on in the yard and the sharp, resinous smell was penetrating the room. ‘Tell me how I can be of use to you.’

Nettly glanced at Dhun.

The elder of the village nodded and cleared his throat. ‘Well, it be like this,’ he said. ‘There be this field hereabouts—’

Geralt kicked Dandilion – who was preparing to make a spiteful comment – under the table.

‘—a field,’ continued Dhun. ‘Be I right, Nettly? A long time, that field there, it lay fallow, but we set it to the plough and now, ’tis on it we sow hemp, hops and flax. It be a grand piece of field, I tell ye. Stretches right up to the forest—’

‘And what?’ The poet couldn’t help himself. ‘What’s on that field there?’

‘Well,’ Dhun raised his head and scratched himself behind the ear. ‘Well, there be a deovel prowls there.’

‘What?’ snorted Dandilion. ‘A what?’

‘I tell ye: a deovel.’

‘What deovel?’

‘What can he be? A deovel and that be it.’

‘Devils don’t exist!’

‘Don’t interrupt, Dandilion,’ said Geralt in a calm voice. ‘And go on, honourable Dhun.’

‘I tell ye: it’s a deovel.’

‘I heard you.’ Geralt could be incredibly patient when he chose. ‘Tell me, what does he look like, where did he come from, how does he bother you? One thing at a time, if you please.’

‘Well,’ Dhun raised his gnarled hand and started to count with great difficulty, folding his fingers over, one at a time, ‘one thing at a time. Forsooth, ye be a wise man. Well, it be like this. He looks, sir, like a deovel, for all the world like a deovel. Where did he come from? Well, nowhere. Crash, bang, wallop and there we have him: a deovel. And bother us, forsooth he doesnae bother us overly. There be times he even helps.’

‘Helps?’ cackled Dandilion, trying to remove a fly from his beer. ‘A devil?’

‘Don’t interrupt, Dandilion. Carry on, Dhun, sir. How does he help you, this, as you say—’

‘Deovel,’ repeated the freeman with emphasis. ‘Well, this be how he helps: he fertilises the land, he turns the soil, he gets rid of the moles, scares birds away, watches over the turnips and beetroots. Oh, and he eats the caterpillars he does, they as do hatch in the cabbages. But the cabbages, he eats them too, forsooth. Nothing but guzzle, be what he does. Just like a deovel.’

Dandilion cackled again, then flicked a beer-drenched fly at a cat sleeping by the hearth. The cat opened one eye and glanced at the bard reproachfully.

‘Nevertheless,’ the witcher said calmly, ‘you’re ready to pay me to get rid of him, am I right? In other words, you don’t want him in the vicinity?’

‘And who,’ Dhun looked at him gloomily, ‘would care to have a deovel on his birthright soil? This be our land since forever, bestowed upon us by the king and it has nought to do with the deovel. We spit on his help. We’ve got hands ourselves, have we not? And he, sir, is nay a deovel but a malicious beast and has got so much, forgive the word, shite in his head as be hard to bear. There be no knowing what will come into his head. Once he fouled the well, then chased a lass, frightening and threatening to fuck her. He steals, sir, our belongings and victuals. He destroys and breaks things, makes a nuisance of himself, churns the dykes, digs ditches like some muskrat or beaver – the water from one pond trickled out completely and the carp in it died. He smoked a pipe in the haystack he did, the son-of-a-whore, and all the hay it went up in smoke—’

‘I see,’ interrupted Geralt. ‘So he does bother you.’

‘Nay,’ Dhun shook his head. ‘He doesnae bother us. He be simply up to mischief, that’s what he be.’

Dandilion turned to the window, muffling his laughter.

The witcher kept silent.

‘Oh, what be there to talk about,’ said Nettly who had been silent until then. ‘Ye be a witcher, nae? So do ye something about this deovel. It be work ye be looking for in Upper Posada, I heard so myself. So ye have work. We’ll pay ye what needs be. But take note: we don’t want ye killing the deovel. No way.’

The witcher raised his head and smiled nastily. ‘Interesting,’ he said. ‘Unusual, I’d say.’

‘What?’ frowned Dhun.

‘An unusual condition. Why all this mercy?’

‘He should nae be killed,’ Dhun frowned even more, ‘because in this Valley—’

‘He should nae and that be it,’ interrupted Nettly. ‘Only catch him, sir, or drive him off yon o’er the seventh mountain. And ye will nae be hard done by when ye be paid.’

The witcher stayed silent, still smiling.

‘Seal it, will ye, the deal?’ asked Dhun.

‘First, I’d like a look at him, this devil of yours.’

The freemen glanced at each other.

‘It be yer right,’ said Nettly, then stood up. ‘And yer will. The deovel he do prowl the whole neighbourhood at night but at day he dwells somewhere in the hemp. Or among the old willows on the marshland. Ye can take a look at him there. We won’t hasten ye. Ye be wanting rest, then rest as long as ye will. Ye will nae go wanting in comfort and food as befits the custom of hospitality. Take care.’

‘Geralt.’ Dandilion jolted up from his stool and looked out into the yard at the freemen walking away from the cottage. ‘I can’t understand anything anymore. A day hasn’t gone by since our chat about imagined monsters and you suddenly get yourself hired hunting devils. And everybody – except ignorant freemen obviously – knows that devils are an invention, they’re mythical creatures. What’s this unexpected zeal of yours supposed to mean? Knowing you a little as I do, I take it you haven’t abased yourself so as to get

us bed, board and lodging, have you?'

'Indeed,' grimaced Geralt. 'It does look as if you know me a little, singer.'

'In that case, I don't understand.'

'What is there to understand?'

'There's no such things as devils!' yelled the poet, shaking the cat from sleep once and for all. 'No such thing! To the devil with it, devils don't exist!'

'True,' Geralt smiled. 'But Dandilion, I could never resist the temptation of having a look at something that doesn't exist.'

III

‘One thing is certain,’ muttered the witcher, sweeping his eyes over the tangled jungle of hemp spreading before them. ‘this devil is not stupid.’

‘How did you deduce that?’ Dandilion was curious. ‘From the fact that he’s sitting in an impenetrable thicket? Any old hare has enough brains for that.’

‘It’s a question of the special qualities of hemp. A field of this size emits a strong aura against magic. Most spells will be useless here. And there, look, do you see those poles? Those are hops – their pollen has the same effect. It’s not mere chance. The rascal senses the aura and knows he’s safe here.’

Dandilion coughed and adjusted his breeches. ‘I’m curious.’ He scratched his forehead beneath his hat, ‘How are you going to go about it, Geralt? I’ve never seen you work. I take it you know a thing or two about catching devils – I’m trying to recall some ballads. There was one about a devil and a woman. Rude, but amusing. The woman, you see—’

‘Spare me, Dandilion.’

‘As you wish. I only wanted to be helpful, that’s all. And you shouldn’t scorn ancient songs. There’s wisdom in them, accumulated over generations. There’s a ballad about a farmhand called Slow, who—’

‘Stop wittering. We have to earn our board and lodging.’

‘What do you want to do?’

‘Rummage around a bit in the hemp.’

‘That’s original,’ snorted the troubadour. ‘Though not too refined.’

‘And you, how would you go about it?’

‘Intelligently,’ Dandilion sniffed. ‘Craftily. With a hounding, for example. I’d chase the devil out of the thicket, chase him on horseback, in the open field, and lasso him. What do you think of that?’

‘Interesting. Who knows, maybe it could be done, if you took part – because at least two of us are needed for an enterprise like that. But we’re not going hunting yet. I want to find out what this thing is, this devil. That’s why I’m going to rummage about in the hemp.’

‘Hey!’ The bard had only just noticed. ‘You haven’t brought your sword!’

‘What for? I know some ballads about devils, too. Neither the woman nor Slow the farmhand used a sword.’

‘Hmm . . .’ Dandilion looked around. ‘Do we have to squeeze through the very middle of this thicket?’

‘You don’t have to. You can go back to the village and wait for me.’

‘Oh, no,’ protested the poet. ‘And miss a chance like this? I want to see a devil too, see if he’s as terrible as they claim. I was asking if we have to force our way through the hemp when there’s a path.’

‘Quite right,’ Geralt shaded his eyes with his hand. ‘There is a path. So let’s use it.’

‘And what if it’s the devil’s path?’

‘All the better. We won’t have to walk too far.’

‘Do you know, Geralt,’ babbled the bard, following the witcher along the narrow, uneven path among the hemp. ‘I always thought the devil was just a metaphor invented for cursing: “go to the devil”, “to the devil with it”, “may the devil”. Lowlanders say: “The devils are bringing us guests”, while dwarves have “Duvvel hoael” when they get something wrong, and call poor-blooded livestock devvelsheyss. And in the Old Language, there’s a saying, “A d’yaebl aep arse”, which means—’

‘I know what it means. You’re babbling, Dandilion.’

Dandilion stopped talking, took off the hat decorated with a heron’s feather, fanned himself with it and wiped his sweaty brow. The humid, stifling heat, intensified by the smell of grass and weeds in blossom, dominated the thicket. The path curved a little and, just beyond the bend, ended in a small clearing which had been stamped in the weeds.

‘Look, Dandilion.’

In the very centre of the clearing lay a large, flat stone, and on it stood several clay bowls. An almost burnt-out tallow candle was set among the bowls. Geralt saw some grains of corn and broad beans among the unrecognisable pips and seeds stuck in the flakes of melted fat.

‘As I suspected,’ he muttered. ‘They’re bringing him offerings.’

‘That’s just it,’ said the poet, indicating the candle. ‘And they

burn a tallow candle for the devil. But they're feeding him seeds, I see, as if he were a finch. Plague, what a bloody pigsty. Everything here is all sticky with honey and birch tar. What—'

The bard's next words were drowned by a loud, sinister bleating. Something rustled and stamped in the hemp, then the strangest creature Geralt had ever seen emerged from the thicket.

The creature was about half a rod tall with bulging eyes and a goat's horns and beard. The mouth, a soft, bushy slit, also brought a chewing goat to mind. Its nether regions were covered with long, thick, dark-red hair right down to the cleft hooves. The devil had a long tail ending in a brush-like tassel which wagged energetically.

'Uk! Uk!' barked the monster, stamping his hooves. 'What do you want here? Leave! Leave or I'll ram you down. Uk! Uk!'

'Has anyone ever kicked your arse, little goat?' Dandilion couldn't stop himself.

'Uk! Uk! Beeeeee!' bleated the goathorn in agreement, or denial, or simply bleating for the sake of it.

'Shut up, Dandilion,' growled the witcher. 'Not a word.'

'Blebleblebeeeee!' The creature gurgled furiously, his lips parting wide to expose yellow horse-like teeth. 'Uk! Uk! Bleubeeeeubleuuuuubleeeeeeee! '

'Most certainly,' nodded Dandilion, 'you can take the barrel-organ and bell when you go home—'

'Stop it, damn you,' hissed Geralt. 'Keep your stupid jokes to yourself—'

'Jokes!' roared the goathorn loudly and leapt up. 'Jokes? New jokers have come, have they? They've brought iron balls, have they? I'll give you iron balls, you scoundrels, you. Uk! Uk! Uk! You want to joke, do you? Here are some jokes for you! Here are your balls!'

The creature sprang up and gave a sudden swipe with his hand. Dandilion howled and sat down hard on the path, clasping his forehead. The creature bleated and aimed again. Something whizzed past Geralt's ear.

'Here are your balls!' Brrreee!'

An iron ball, an inch in diameter, thwacked the witcher in the shoulder and the next hit Dandilion in the knee. The poet cursed foully and scrambled away, Geralt running after him as balls

whizzed above his head.

‘Uk! Uk!’ screamed the goathorn, leaping up and down. ‘I’ll give you balls! You shitty jokers!’

Another ball whizzed through the air. Dandilion cursed even more foully as he grabbed the back of his head. Geralt threw himself to one side, among the hemp, but didn’t avoid the ball that hit him in the shoulder. The goathorn’s aim was true and he appeared to have an endless supply of balls. The witcher, stumbling through the thicket, heard yet another triumphant bleat from the victorious goathorn, followed by the whistle of a flying ball, a curse and the patter of Dandilion’s feet scurrying away along the path.

And then silence fell.

IV

‘Well, well, Geralt.’ Dandilion held a horseshoe he’d cooled in a bucket to his forehead. ‘That’s not what I expected. A horned freak with a goatee like a shaggy billy-goat, and he chased you away like some upstart. And I got it in the head. Look at that bump!’

‘That’s the sixth time you’ve shown it to me. And it’s no more interesting now than it was the first time.’

‘How charming. And I thought I’d be safe with you!’

‘I didn’t ask you to traipse after me in the hemp, and I did ask you to keep that foul tongue of yours quiet. You didn’t listen, so now you can suffer. In silence, please, because they’re just coming.’

Nettly and Dhun walked into the dayroom. Behind them hobbled a grey-haired old woman, twisted as a pretzel, led by a fair-haired and painfully thin teenage girl.

‘Honourable Dhun, honourable Nettly,’ the witcher began without introduction. ‘I asked you, before I left, whether you yourselves had already tried to do something with that devil of yours. You told me you hadn’t done anything. I’ve grounds to think otherwise. I await your explanation.’

The villagers murmured amongst themselves, after which Dhun coughed into his fist and took a step forward. ‘Ye be right, sir. Asking forgiveness. We lied – it be guilt devours us. We wanted to outwit the deovel ourselves, for him to go away—’

‘By what means?’

‘Here in this Valley,’ said Dhun slowly, ‘there be monsters in the past. Flying dragons, earth myriapodans, were-brawls, ghosts, gigantous spiders and various vipers. And all the times we be searching in our great booke for a way to deal with all that vermin.’

‘What great book?’

‘Show the booke, old woman. Booke, I say. The great booke! I’ll be on the boil in a minute! Deaf as a doorknob, she be! Lille, tell the old woman to show the booke!’

The girl tore the huge book from the talonned fingers of the old woman and handed it to the witcher.

‘In this here great booke,’ continued Dhun, ‘which be in our family clan for time immemorial, be ways to deal with every monster, spell and wonder in the world that has been, is, or will be.’

Geralt turned the heavy, thick, greasy, dust-encrusted volume in his hands. The girl was still standing in front of him, wringing her apron in her hands. She was older than he had initially thought – her delicate figure had deceived him, so different from the robust build of the other girls in the village.

He lay the book down on the table and turned its heavy wooden cover. ‘Take a look at this, Dandilion.’

‘The first Runes,’ the bard worked out, peering over his shoulder, the horseshoe still pressed to his forehead. ‘The writing used before the modern alphabet. Still based on elfin runes and dwarves’ ideograms. A funny sentence construction, but that’s how they spoke then. Interesting etchings and illuminations. It’s not often you get to see something like this, Geralt, and if you do, it’s in libraries belonging to temples and not villages at the edge of the world. By all the gods, where did you get that from, dear peasants? Surely you’re not going to try to convince me that you can read this? Woman? Can you read the First Runes? Can you read any runes?’

‘Whaaaat?’

The fair-haired girl moved closer to the woman and whispered something into her ear.

‘Read?’ the crony revealed her toothless gums in a smile. ‘Me? No, sweetheart. ’Tis a skill I’ve ne’er mastered.’

‘Explain to me,’ said Geralt coldly, turning to Dhun and Nettly, ‘how do you use the book if you can’t read runes?’

‘Always the oldest woman knows what stands written in the booke,’ said Dhun gloomily. ‘And what she knows, she teaches some young one, when ’tis time for her to turn to earth. Heed ye, yerselves, how ’tis time for our old woman. So our old woman has taken Lille in and she be teaching her. But for now, ’tis the old woman knows best.’

‘The old witch and the young witch,’ muttered Dandilion.

‘The old woman knows the whole book by heart?’ Geralt asked with disbelief. ‘Is that right, Grandma?’

‘Nae the whole, oh nae,’ answered the woman, again through Lille, ‘only what stands written by the picture.’

‘Ah,’ Geralt opened the book at random. The picture on the torn page depicted a dappled pig with horns in the shape of a lyre. ‘Well then – what’s written here?’

The old woman smacked her lips, took a careful look at the

etching, then shut her eyes.

‘The horned aurochs or Taurus,’ she recited, ‘erroneously called bison by ignoramuses. It hath horns and useth them to ram—’

‘Enough. Very good, indeed.’ the witcher turned several sticky pages. ‘And here?’

‘Cloud sprites and wind sprites be varied. Some rain pour, some wind roar, and others hurl their thunder. Harvests to protect from them, takest thou a knife of iron, new, of a mouse’s droppings a half ounce, of a grey heron’s fat—’

‘Good, well done. Hmm . . . And here? What’s this?’

The etching showed a dishevelled monstrosity with enormous eyes and even larger teeth, riding a horse. In its right hand, the monstrous being wielded a substantial sword, in its left, a bag of money.

‘A witchman,’ mumbled the woman. ‘Called by some a witcher. To summon him is most dangerous, albeit one must; for when against the monster and the vermin there be no aid, the witchman can contrive. But careful one must be—’

‘Enough,’ muttered Geralt. ‘Enough, Grandma. Thank you.’

‘No, no,’ protested Dandilion with a malicious smile. ‘How does it go on? What a greatly interesting book! Go on, Granny, go on.’

‘Eeee . . . But careful one must be to touch not the witchman, for thus the mange can one acquire. And lasses do from him hide away, for lustful the witchman is above all measure—’

‘Quite correct, spot on,’ laughed the poet, and Lille, so it seemed to Geralt, smiled almost imperceptibly.

‘—though the witchman greatly covetous and greedy for gold be,’ mumbled the old woman, half-closing her eyes, ‘giveth ye not such a one more than: for a drowner, one silver penny or three halves; for a werecat, silver pennies two; for a plumard, silver pennies—’

‘Those were the days,’ muttered the witcher. ‘Thank you, Grandma. And now show us where it speaks of the devil and what the book says about devils. This time ’tis grateful I’d be to heareth more, for to learn the ways and meanes ye did use to deal with him most curious am I.’

‘Careful, Geralt,’ chuckled Dandilion. ‘You’re starting to fall into their jargon. It’s an infectious mannerism.’

The woman, controlling her shaking hands with difficulty, turned

several pages. The witcher and the poet leaned over the table. The etching did, in effect, show the ball-thrower: horned, hairy, tailed and smiling maliciously.

'The deovel,' recited the woman. 'Also called "willower" or "sylvan". For livestock and domestic fowl, a tiresome and great pest is he. Be it your will to chase him from your hamlet, takest thou—'

'Well, well,' murmured Dandilion.

'—takest thou of nuts, one fistful,' continued the woman, running her finger along the parchment. 'Next, takest thou of iron balls a second fistful. Of honey an utricle, of birch tar a second. Of grey soap a firkin; of soft cheese another. There where the deovel dwelleth, goest thou when 'tis night. Commenceth then to eat the nuts. Anon, the deovel who hath great greed, will hasten and ask if they are tasty indeed. Givest to him then the balls of iron—'

'Damn you,' murmured Dandilion. 'Pox take—'

'Quiet,' said Geralt. 'Well, Grandma. Go on.'

'. . . having broken his teeth he will be attentive as thou eatest the honey. Of said honey will he himself desire. Givest him of birch tar, then yourself eateth soft cheese. Soon, hearest thou, will the deovel grumbleth and tumbleth, but makest of it as naught. Yet if the deovel desireth soft cheese, givest him soap. For soap the deovel withstandeth not—'

'You got to the soap?' interrupted Geralt with a stony expression turning towards Dhun and Nettly.

'In no way,' groaned Nettly. 'If only we had got to the balls. But he gave us what for when he bit a ball—'

'And who told you to give him so many?' Dandilion was enraged. 'It stands written in the book, one fistful to take. Yet ye gaveth of balls a sackful! Ye furnished him with ammunition for two years, the fools ye be!'

'Careful,' smiled the witcher. 'You're starting to fall into their jargon. It's infectious.'

'Thank you.'

Geralt suddenly raised his head and looked into the eyes of the girl standing by the woman. Lille didn't lower her eyes. They were pale and wildly blue. 'Why are you bringing the devil offerings in the form of grain?' he asked sharply. 'After all, it's obvious that he's a typical herbivore.'

Lille didn't answer.

'I asked you a question, girl. Don't be frightened, you won't get the mange by talking to me.'

'Don't ask her anything, sir,' said Nettly, with obvious unease in his voice. 'Lille . . . She . . . She be strange. She won't answer you, don't force her.'

Geralt kept looking into Lille's eyes, and Lille still met his gaze. He felt a shiver run down his back and creep along his shoulders.

'Why didn't you attack the devil with stancheons and pitchforks, ' he raised his voice. 'Why didn't you set a trap for him? If you'd wanted to, his goat's head would already be spiked on a pole to frighten crows away. You warned me not to kill him. Why? You forbade it, didn't you, Lille?'

Dhun got up from the bench. His head almost touched the beams.

'Leave, lass,' he growled. 'Take the old woman and leave.'

'Who is she, honourable Dhun?' the witcher demanded as the door closed behind Lille and the woman. 'Who is that girl? Why does she enjoy more respect from you than that bloody book?'

'It be nae yer business.' Dhun looked at him, and there was no friendliness in his eyes. 'Persecute wise women in your own town, burn stakes in yer own land. There has been none of it here, nor will there be.'

'You didn't understand me,' said the witcher coldly.

'Because I did nae try,' growled Dhun.

'I noticed,' Geralt said through his teeth, making no effort to be cordial. 'But be so gracious as to understand something, honourable Dhun. We have no agreement. I haven't committed myself to you in any way. You have no reason to believe that you've bought yourself a witcher who, for a silver penny or three halves, will do what you can't do yourselves. Or don't want to do. Or aren't allowed to. No, honourable Dhun. You have not bought yourself a witcher yet, and I don't think you'll succeed in doing so. Not with your reluctance to understand.'

Dhun remained silent, measuring Geralt with a gloomy stare.

Nettly cleared his throat and wriggled on the bench, shuffling his rag sandals on the dirt floor, then suddenly straightened up.

'Witcher, sir,' he said. 'Do nae be enraged. We will tell ye, what and how. Dhun?'

The elder of the village nodded and sat down.

‘As we be riding here,’ began Nettly, ‘ye did notice how everything here grows, the great harvests we have? There be nae many places ye see all grow like this, if there be any such. Seedlings and seeds be so important to us that ’tis with them we pay our levies and we sell them and use them to barter—’

‘What’s that got to do with the devil?’

‘The deovel was wont to make a nuisance of himself and play silly tricks, and then he be starting to steal a great deal of grain. At the beginning, we be bringing him a little to the stone in the hemp, thinking his fill he’d eat and leave us in peace. Naught of it. With a vengeance he went on stealing. And when we started to hide our supplies in shops and sheds, well locked and bolted, ’tis furious he grew, sir, he roared, bleated. “Uk! Uk!” he called, and when he goes “Uk! Uk!” ye’d do best to run for yer life. He threatened to—’

‘—screw,’ Dandilion threw in with a ribald smile.

‘That too,’ agreed Nettly. ‘Oh, and he mentioned a fire. Talk long as we may, he could nae steal so ’tis levies he demanded. He ordered grain and other goods be brought him by the sackful. Riled we were then and intending to beat his tailed arse. But—’ The freeman cleared his throat and lowered his head.

‘Ye need nae beat about the bush,’ said Dhun suddenly. ‘We judged the witcher wrong. Tell him everything, Nettly.’

‘The old woman forbade us to beat the devil,’ said Nettly quickly, ‘but we know ’tis Lille, because the woman . . . The woman only says what Lille tell her to. And we . . . Ye know yerself, sir. We listen.’

‘I’ve noticed.’ Geralt twisted his lips in a smile. ‘The woman can only waggle her chin and mumble a text which she doesn’t understand herself. And you stare at the girl, with gaping mouths, as if she were the statue of a goddess. You avoid her eyes but try to guess her wishes. And her wishes are your command. Who is this Lille of yours?’

‘But ye have guessed that, sir. A prophetess. A Wise One. But say naught of this to anyone. We ask ye. If word were to get to the steward, or, gods forbid, to the viceroy—’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Geralt seriously. ‘I know what that means and I won’t betray you.’

The strange women and girls, called prophetesses or Wise Ones,

who could be found in villages, didn't enjoy the favour of those noblemen who collected levies and profited from farming. Farmers always consulted prophetesses on everything and believed them, blindly and boundlessly. Decisions based on their advice were often completely contrary to the politics of lords and overlords. Geralt had heard of incomprehensible decrees – the slaughter of entire pedigree herds, the cessation of sowing or harvesting, and even the migration of entire villages. Local lords therefore opposed the superstition, often brutally, and freemen very quickly learnt to hide the Wise Ones. But they didn't stop listening to their advice. Because experience proved the Wise Ones were always right in the long run.

'Lille did not permit us to kill the deovel,' continued Nettly. 'She told us to do what the booke says. As ye well know, it did nae work out. There has already been trouble with the steward. If we give less grain in levy than be normal, 'tis bawl he will, shout and fulminate. Thus we have nay even squeaked to him of the deovel, the reason being the steward be ruthless and knows cruelly little about jokes. And then ye happened along. We asked Lille if we could . . . hire ye—'

'And?'

'She said, through the woman, that she need first of all to look at ye.'

'And she did.'

'That she did. And accepted ye she has, that we know. We can tell what Lille accepts and what she doesnae.'

'She never said a word to me.'

'She ne'er has spoken word to anyone – save the old woman. But if she had not accepted ye, she would nay have entered the room for all in the world—'

'Hm . . .' Geralt reflected. 'That's interesting. A prophetess who, instead of prophesying, doesn't say a word. How did she come to be among you?'

'We nae know, witcher, sir,' muttered Dhun. 'But as for the old woman, so the older folk remember, it be like this. The old woman afore her took a close-tongued girl under her wing too, one as which came from no one knows. And that girl she be our old woman. My grandfather would say the old woman be reborn that way. Like the moon she be reborn in the sky and ever new she be. Do nae laugh—'

‘I’m not laughing.’ Geralt shook his head. ‘I’ve seen too much to laugh at things like that. Nor do I intend to poke my nose into your affairs, honourable Dhun. My questions aim to establish the bond between Lille and the devil. You’ve probably realised yourselves that one exists. So if you’re anxious to be on good terms with your prophetess, then I can give you only one way to deal with the devil: you must get to like him.’

‘Know ye, sir,’ said Nettly, ‘it be nae only a matter of the deovel. Lille does nae let us harm anything. Any creature.’

‘Of course,’ Dandilion butted in, ‘country prophetesses grow from the same tree as druids. And a druid will go so far as to wish the gadfly sucking his blood to enjoy its meal.’

‘Ye hits it on the head,’ Nettly faintly smiled. ‘Ye hits the nail right on the head. ’Twas the same with us and the wild boars that dug up our vegetable beds. Look out the window: beds as pretty as a picture. We have found a way, Lille doesnae even know. What the eyes do nay see, the heart will nae miss. Understand?’

‘I understand,’ muttered Geralt. ‘And how. But we can’t move forward. Lille or no Lille, your devil is a sylvan. An exceptionally rare but intelligent creature. I won’t kill him, my code doesn’t allow it.’

‘If he be intelligent,’ said Dhun, ‘go speak reason to him.’

‘Just so,’ Nettly joined in. ‘If the deovel has brains that will mean he steals grain according to reason. So ye, witcher, find out what he wants. He does nae eat that grain, after all – not so much, at least. So what does he want grain for? To spite us? What does he want? Find out and chase him off in some witcher way. Will ye do that?’

‘I’ll try,’ decided Geralt. ‘But . . .’

‘But what?’

‘Your book, my friends, is out of date. Do you see what I’m getting at?’

‘Well, forsooth,’ grunted Dhun, ‘not really.’

‘I’ll explain. Honourable Dhun, honourable Nettly, if you’re counting on my help costing you a silver penny or three halves, then you are bloody well mistaken.’

V

‘Hey!’

A rustle, an angry *Uk! Uk!* and the snapping of stakes, reached them from the thicket.

‘Hey!’ repeated the witcher, prudently remaining hidden. ‘Show yourself, willower.’

‘Willower yourself.’

‘So what is it? Devil?’

‘Devil yourself.’ The sylvan poked his head out from the hemp, baring his teeth. ‘What do you want?’

‘To talk.’

‘Are you making fun of me or what? Do you think I don’t know who you are? The peasants hired you to throw me out of here, eh?’

‘That’s right,’ admitted Geralt indifferently. ‘And that’s precisely what I wanted to chat to you about. What if we were to come to an understanding?’

‘That’s where it hurts,’ bleated the sylvan. ‘You’d like to get off lightly, wouldn’t you? Without making an effort, eh? Pull the other one! Life, my good man, means competition. The best man wins. If you want to win with me, prove you’re the best. Instead of coming to an understanding, we’ll have competitions. The winner dictates the conditions. I propose a race from here to the old willow on the dyke.’

‘I don’t know where the dyke is, or the old willow.’

‘I wouldn’t suggest the race if you knew. I like competitions but I don’t like losing.’

‘I’ve noticed. No, we won’t race each other. It’s very hot today.’

‘Pity. So maybe we’ll pit ourselves against each other in a different way?’ The sylvan bared his yellow teeth and picked up a large stone from the ground. ‘Do you know the game “Who shouts loudest?” I shout first. Close your eyes.’

‘I have a different proposition.’

‘I’m all ears.’

‘You leave here without any competitions, races or shouting. Of your own accord, without being forced.’

‘You can shove such a proposition a *d’yeabl aep arse*.’ The devil demonstrated his knowledge of the Old Language. ‘I won’t leave here. I like it here.’

‘But you’ve made too much of a nuisance of yourself here. Your pranks have gone too far.’

‘*Duvvelsheyss* to you with my pranks.’ The sylvan, as it turned out, also knew the dwarves’ tongue. ‘And your proposition is also worth as much as a duvvelsheyss. I’m not going anywhere unless you beat me at some game. Shall I give you a chance? We’ll play at riddles if you don’t like physical games. I’ll give you a riddle in a minute and if you guess it, you win and I leave. If you don’t, I stay and you leave. Rack your brains because the riddle isn’t easy.’

Before Geralt could protest the sylvan bleated, stamped his hooves, whipped the ground with his tail and recited:

Little pink leaves, pods small and full,
It grows in soft clay, not far from the stream,
On a long stalk, its flower is moist,
But to a cat, please show it not,
’Cos if you do, he’ll eat the lot.

Well, what is it? Guess.’

‘I haven’t the faintest idea,’ the witcher said, not even trying to think it over. ‘Sweet pea, perhaps?’

‘Wrong. You lose.’

‘And what is the correct answer? What has . . . hmm . . . moist pods?’

‘Cabbage.’

‘Listen,’ growled Geralt. ‘You’re starting to get on my nerves.’

‘I warned you,’ chuckled the sylvan, ‘that the riddle wasn’t easy. Tough. I won, I stay. And you leave. I wish you, sir, a cold farewell.’

‘Just a moment.’ The witcher surreptitiously slipped a hand into his pocket. ‘And my riddle? I have the right to a revenge match, haven’t I?’

‘No!’ protested the devil. ‘I might not guess it, after all. Do you take me for a fool?’

‘No,’ Geralt shook his head. ‘I take you for a spiteful, arrogant dope. We’re going to play quite a new game shortly, one which you don’t know.’

‘Ha! After all! What game?’

‘The game is called,’ said the witcher slowly, ‘don’t do unto, others what you would not have them do to you”. You don’t have to close your eyes.’

Geralt stooped in a lightning throw; the one-inch iron ball whizzed sharply through the air and thwacked the sylvan straight between the horns. The creature collapsed onto his back as if hit by a thunderbolt. Geralt dived between the poles and grabbed him by one shaggy leg. The sylvan bleated and kicked. The witcher sheltered his head with his arm, but to little effect. The sylvan, despite his mean posture, kicked with the strength of an enraged mule. The witcher tried and failed to catch a kicking hoof. The sylvan flapped, thrashed his hands on the ground and kicked him again in the forehead. The witcher cursed, feeling the sylvan’s leg slip from his fingers. Both, having parted, rolled in opposite directions, kicked the poles with a crash and tangled themselves up in the creeping hemp.

The sylvan was the first to jump up, and, lowering his horned head, charged. But Geralt was already on his feet and effortlessly dodged the attack, grabbed the creature by a horn, tugged hard, threw him to the ground and crushed him with his knees. The sylvan bleated and spat straight into the witcher’s eyes like a camel suffering from excess saliva. The witcher instinctively stepped back without releasing the devil’s horns. The sylvan, trying to toss his head, kicked with both hooves at once and – strangely – hit the mark with both. Geralt swore nastily, but didn’t release his grip. He pulled the sylvan up, pinned him to the creaking poles and kicked him in a shaggy knee with all his might, then he leant over and spat right into his ear. The sylvan howled and snapped his blunt teeth.

‘Don’t do unto others . . .’ panted the witcher, ‘. . . what you would not have them do to you. Shall we play on?’ The sylvan gurgled, howled and spat fiercely, but Geralt held him firmly by the horns and pressed his head down hard, making the spittle hit the sylvan’s own hooves, which tore at the ground, sending up clouds of dust and weeds.

The next few minutes passed in an intense skirmish and exchange of insults and kicks. If Geralt was pleased about anything, it was only that nobody could see him – for it was a truly ridiculous sight.

The force of the next kick tore the combatants apart and threw them in opposite directions, into the hemp thicket. The sylvan got up before the witcher and rushed to escape, limping heavily. Geralt,

panting and wiping his brow, rushed in pursuit. They forced their way through the hemp and ran into the hops. The witcher heard the pounding of a galloping horse, the sound he'd been waiting for.

'Here, Dandilion! Here!' he yelled. 'In the hops!'

He saw the mount breast right in front of him and was knocked over. He bounced off the horse as though it were a rock and tumbled onto his back. The world darkened. He managed to roll to the side, behind the hop poles, to avoid the hooves. He sprung up nimbly but another rider rode into him, knocking him down again. Then suddenly, someone threw themselves at him and pinned him to the ground.

Then there was a flash, and a piercing pain in the back of his head.

And darkness.

VI

There was sand on his lips. When he tried to spit it out he realised he was lying face-down on the ground. And he was tied up. He raised his head a little and heard voices.

He was lying on the forest floor, by a pine tree. Some twenty paces away stood unsaddled horses. They were obscured behind the feathery fronds of ferns, but one of those horses was, without a doubt, Dandilion's chestnut.

'Three sacks of corn,' he heard. 'Good, Torque. Very good. You've done well.'

'That's not all,' said the bleating voice, which could only be the sylvan devil. 'Look at this, Galarr. It looks like beans but it's completely white. And the size of it! And this, this is called oilseed. They make oil from it.'

Geralt squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them again. No, it wasn't a dream. The devil and Galarr, whoever he was, were using the Old Language, the language of elves. But the words corn, beans, and oilseed were in the common tongue.

'And this? What's this?' asked Galarr.

'Flaxseed. Flax, you know? You make shirts from flax. It's much cheaper than silk, and more hardwearing. It's quite a complicated process as far as I know but I'll find out the ins and outs.'

'As long as it takes root, this flax of yours; as long as it doesn't go to waste like the turnip,' grumbled Galarr, in the same strange Volapuk. 'Try to get some new turnip seedlings, Torque.'

'Have no fear,' bleated the sylvan. 'There's no problem with that here. Everything grows like hell. I'll get you some, don't worry.'

'And one more thing,' said Galarr. 'Finally find out what that three-field system of theirs is all about.'

The witcher carefully raised his head and tried to turn round.

'Geralt . . .' he heard a whisper. 'Are you awake?'

'Dandilion . . .' he whispered back. 'Where are we . . .? What's happening?'

Dandilion only grunted quietly. Geralt had had enough. He cursed, tensed himself and turned on to his side.

In the middle of the glade stood the sylvan devil with – as he now

knew – the sweet name of Torque. He was busy loading sacks, bags and packs on to the horses. He was being helped by a slim, tall man who could only be Galarr. The latter, hearing the witcher move, turned around. His hair was black with a distinct hint of dark blue. He had sharp features, big, bright eyes and pointed ears.

Galarr was an elf. An elf from the mountains. A pure-blooded Aen Seidhe, a representative of the Old People.

Galarr wasn't alone. Six more sat at the edge of the glade. One was busy emptying Dandilion's packs, another strummed the troubadour's lute. The remainder, gathered around an untied sack, were greedily devouring turnips and raw carrots.

'Vanadain, Toruviel,' said Galarr, indicating the prisoners with a nod of his head. 'Vedrai! Enn'le!'

Torque jumped up and bleated. 'No, Galarr ! No! Filavandrel has forbidden it! Have you forgotten?'

'No, I haven't forgotten.' Galarr threw two tied sacks across the horse's back. 'But we have to check if they haven't loosened the knots.'

'What do you want from us?' the troubadour moaned as one of the elves knocked him to the ground with his knee and checked the knots. 'Why are you holding us prisoners? What do you want? I'm Dandilion, a poe—'

Geralt heard the sound of a blow. He turned round, twisted his head.

The elf standing over Dandilion had black eyes and raven hair, which fell luxuriantly over her shoulders, except for two thin plaits braided at her temples. She was wearing a short leather camisole over a loose shirt of green satin, and tight woollen leggings tucked into riding boots. Her hips were wrapped around with a coloured shawl which reached halfway down her thighs.

'*Que glosse?*' she asked, looking at the witcher and playing with the hilt of the long dagger in her belt. '*Que l'en pavienn, ell'ea?*'

'*Nell'ea*,' he contested. '*T'en pavienn, Aen Seidhe*.'

'Did you hear?' The elf turned to her companion, the tall Seidhe who, not bothering to check Geralt's knots, was strumming away at Dandilion's lute with an expression of indifference on his long face. 'Did you hear, Vanadain? The ape-man can talk! He can even be impertinent!'

Seidhe shrugged, making the feathers decorating his jacket rustle.

‘All the more reason to gag him, Toruviel.’

The elf leant over Geralt. She had long lashes, an unnaturally pale complexion and parched, cracked lips. She wore a necklace of carved golden birch pieces on a thong, wrapped around her neck several times.

‘Well, say something else, ape-man,’ she hissed. ‘We’ll see what your throat, so used to barking, is capable of.’

‘What’s this? Do you need an excuse to hit a bound man?’ The witcher turned over on his back with an effort and spat out the sand. ‘Hit me without any excuses. I’ve seen how you like it. Let off some steam.’

The elf straightened. ‘I’ve already let off some steam on you, while your hands were free,’ she said. ‘I rode you down and swiped you on the head. And I’ll also finish you off when the time comes.’

He didn’t answer.

‘I’d much rather stab you from close-up, looking you in the eyes,’ continued the elf. ‘But you stink most hideously, human, so I’ll shoot you.’

‘As you wish.’ The witcher shrugged, as far as the knots let him. ‘Do as you like, noble Aen Seidhe. You shouldn’t miss a tied-up, motionless target.’

The elf stood over him, legs spread, and leant down, flashing her teeth.

‘No, I shouldn’t,’ she hissed. ‘I hit whatever I want. But you can be sure you won’t die from the first arrow. Or the second. I’ll try to make sure you can feel yourself dying.’

‘Don’t come so close,’ he grimaced, pretending to be repulsed. ‘You stink most hideously, Aen Seidhe.’

The elf jumped back, rocked on her narrow hips and forcefully kicked him in the thigh. Geralt drew his legs in and curled up, knowing where she was aiming next. He succeeded, and got her boot in the hip, so hard his teeth rattled.

The tall elf standing next to her echoed each kick with a sharp chord on the lute.

‘Leave him, Toruviel!’ bleated the sylvan. ‘Have you gone mad? Galarr, tell her to stop!’

‘*Thaesse!*’ shrieked Toruviel, and kicked the witcher again. The tall Seidhe tore so violently at the strings that one snapped with a

protracted whine.

‘Enough of that! Enough, for gods’ sake!’ Dandilion yelled fretfully, wriggling and tumbling in the ropes. ‘Why are you bullying him, you stupid whore? Leave us alone! And you leave my lute alone, all right?’

Toruviel turned to him with an angry grimace on her cracked lips. ‘Musician!’ she growled. ‘A human, yet a musician! A lutenist! ’

Without a word, she pulled the instrument from the tall elf’s hand, forcefully smashed the lute against the pine and threw the remains, tangled in the strings, on Dandilion’s chest.

‘Play on a cow’s horn, you savage, not a lute.’

The poet turned as white as death, his lips quivered. Geralt, feeling cold fury rising up somewhere within him, drew Toruviel’s eyes with his own.

‘What are you staring at?’ hissed the elf, leaning over. ‘Filthy ape-man! Do you want me to gouge out those insect eyes of yours?’

Her necklace hung down just above him. The witcher tensed, lunged, and caught the necklace in his teeth, tugging powerfully, curling his legs in and turning on his side.

Toruviel lost her balance and fell on top of him.

Geralt wriggled in the ropes like a fish, crushed the elf beneath him, tossed his head back with such force that the vertebrae in his neck cracked and, with all his might, butted her in the face with his forehead. Toruviel howled and struggled.

They pulled him off her brutally and, tugging at his clothes and hair, lifted him. One of them struck him; he felt rings cut the skin over his cheekbone and the forest danced and swam in front of his eyes. He saw Toruviel lurch to her knees, blood pouring from her nose and mouth. The elf wrenched the dagger from its sheath but gave a sob, hunched over, grasped her face and dropped her head between her knees.

The tall elf in the jacket adorned with colourful feathers took the dagger from her hand and approached the witcher. He smiled as he raised the blade. Geralt saw him through a red haze; blood from his forehead, which he’d cut against Toruviel’s teeth, poured into his eye-sockets.

‘No!’ bleated Torque, running up to the elf and hanging on to his arm. ‘Don’t kill him! No!’

‘*Voe’rle, Vanadain*,’ a sonorous voice suddenly commanded. ‘*Quess aen? Caelm, evellienn! Galarr!*’

Geralt turned his head as far as the fist clutching his hair permitted.

The horse which had just reached the glade was as white as snow, its mane long, soft and silky as a woman’s hair. The hair of the rider sitting in the sumptuous saddle was identical in colour, pulled back at the forehead by a bandana studded with sapphires.

Torque, bleating now and then, ran up to the horse, caught hold of the stirrup and showered the white-haired elf with a torrent of words. The Seidhe interrupted him with an authoritative gesture and jumped down from his saddle. He approached Toruviel, who was being supported by two elves, and carefully removed the bloodied handkerchief from her face. Toruviel gave a heartrending groan. The Seidhe shook his head and approached the witcher. His burning black eyes, shining like stars in his pale face, had dark rings beneath them, as if he had not slept for several nights in a row.

‘You stink even when bound,’ he said quietly in unaccented common tongue. ‘Like a basilisk. I’ll draw my conclusions from that.’

‘Toruviel started it,’ bleated the devil. ‘She kicked him when he was tied up, as if she’d lost her mind—’

With a gesture the elf ordered him to be quiet. At his command the other Seidhe dragged the witcher and Dandilion under the pine tree and fastened them to the trunk with belts. Then they all knelt by the prostrate Toruviel, sheltering her. After a moment Geralt heard her yell and fight in their arms.

‘I didn’t want this,’ said the sylvan, still standing next to them. ‘I didn’t, human. I didn’t know they’d arrive just when we—When they stunned you and tied your companion up, I asked them to leave you there, in the hops. But—’

‘They couldn’t leave any witnesses,’ muttered the witcher.

‘Surely they won’t kill us, will they?’ groaned Dandilion. ‘Surely they won’t . . .’

Torque said nothing, wiggling his soft nose.

‘Bloody hell.’ The poet groaned. ‘They’re going to kill us? What’s all this about, Geralt? What did we witness?’

‘Our sylvan friend is on a special mission in the Valley of Flowers. Am I right, Torque? At the elves’ request he’s stealing seeds,

seedlings, knowledge about farming . . . What else, devil?'

'Whatever I can,' bleated Torque. 'Everything they need. And show me something they don't need. They're starving in the mountains, especially in winter. And they know nothing about farming. And before they've learned to domesticate game or poultry, and to cultivate what they can in their plots of land . . . They haven't got the time, human.'

'I don't care a shit about their time. What have I done to them?' groaned Dandilion. 'What wrong have I done them?'

'Think carefully,' said the white-haired elf, approaching without a sound, 'and maybe you can answer the question yourself.'

'He's simply taking revenge for all the wrong that man has done the elves.' The witcher smiled wryly. 'It's all the same to him who he takes his revenge on. Don't be deluded by his noble bearing and elaborate speech, Dandilion. He's no different than the black-eyes who knocked us down. He has to unload his powerless hatred on somebody.'

The elf picked up Dandilion's shattered lute. For a moment, he looked at the ruined instrument in silence, and finally threw it into the bushes.

'If I wanted to give vent to hatred or a desire for revenge,' he said, playing with a pair of soft white leather gloves, 'I'd storm the valley at night, burn down the village and kill the villagers. Childishly simple. They don't even put out a guard. They don't see or hear us when they come to the forest. Can there be anything simpler, anything easier, than a swift, silent arrow from behind a tree? But we're not hunting you. It is you, man with strange eyes, who is hunting our friend, the sylvan Torque.'

'Eeeeee, that's exaggerating,' bleated the devil. 'What hunt? We were having a bit of fun—'

'It is you humans who hate anything that differs from you, be it only by the shape of its ears,' the elf went on calmly, paying no attention to the sylvan. 'That's why you took our land from us, drove us from our homes, forced us into the savage mountains. You took our Dol Blathanna, the Valley of Flowers. I am Filavandrel aen Fidhail of Silver Towers, of the Feleaorn family from White Ships. Now, exiled and hounded to the edge of the world, I am Filavandrel of the Edge of the World.'

'The world is huge,' muttered the witcher. 'We can find room. There's enough space.'

‘The world is huge,’ repeated the elf. ‘That’s true, human. But you have changed this world. At first, you used force to change it. You treated it as you treat anything that falls into your hands. Now it looks as if the world has started to fit in with you. It’s given way to you. It’s given in.’

Geralt didn’t reply.

‘Torque spoke the truth,’ continued Filavandrel. ‘Yes, we are starving. Yes, we are threatened with annihilation. The sun shines differently, the air is different, water is not as it used to be. The things we used to eat, made use of, are dying, diminishing, deteriorating. We never cultivated the land. Unlike you humans we never tore at it with hoes and ploughs. To you, the earth pays a bloody tribute. It bestowed gifts on us. You tear the earth’s treasures from it by force. For us, the earth gave birth and blossomed because it loved us. Well, no love lasts forever. But we still want to survive.’

‘Instead of stealing grain, you can buy it. As much as you need. You still have a great many things that humans consider valuable. You can trade.’

Filavandrel smiled contemptuously. ‘With you? Never.’

Geralt frowned, breaking up the dried blood on his cheek. ‘The devil with you then, and your arrogance and contempt. By refusing to cohabit you’re condemning yourselves to annihilation. To cohabit, to come to an understanding, that’s your only chance.’

Filavandrel leaned forwards, his eyes blazing.

‘Cohabit on your terms?’ he asked in a changed, yet still calm, voice. ‘Acknowledging your sovereignty? Losing our identity? Cohabit as what? Slaves? Pariahs? Cohabit with you from beyond the walls you’ve built to fence yourselves away in towns? Cohabit with your women and hang for it? Or look on at what half-blood children must live with? Why are you avoiding my eyes, strange human? How do you find cohabiting with neighbours from whom, after all, you do differ somewhat?’

‘I manage.’ The witcher looked him straight in the eyes. ‘I manage because I have to. Because I’ve no other way out. Because I’ve overcome the vanity and pride of being different. I’ve understood that they are a pitiful defence against being different. Because I’ve understood that the sun shines differently when something changes, but I’m not the axis of those changes. The sun shines differently, but it will continue to shine, and jumping at it with a hoe isn’t going to

do anything. We've got to accept facts, elf. That's what we've got to learn.'

'That's what you want, isn't it?' With his wrist Filavandrel wiped away the sweat above his white brows. 'Is that what you want to impose on others? The conviction that your time has come, your human era and age, and that what you're doing to other races is as natural as the rising and the setting of the sun? That everybody has to come to terms with it, to accept it? And you accuse me of vanity? And what are the views you're proclaiming? Why don't you humans finally realise that your domination of the world is as natural and repellant as lice multiplying in a sheepskin coat? You could propose we cohabit with lice and get the same reaction – and I'd listen to the lice as attentively if they, in return for our acknowledgment of their supremacy, were to agree to allow common use of the coat.'

'So don't waste time discussing it with such an unpleasant insect, elf,' said the witcher, barely able to control his voice. 'I'm surprised you want to arouse a feeling of guilt and repentance in such a louse as me. You're pitiful, Filavandrel. You're embittered, hungry for revenge and conscious of your own powerlessness. Go on, thrust the sword into me. Revenge yourself on the whole human race. You'll see what relief that'll bring you. First kick me in the balls or the teeth, like Toruviel.'

Filavandrel turned his head.

'Toruviel is sick,' he said.

'I know that disease and its symptoms.' Geralt spat over his shoulder. 'The treatment I gave her ought to help.'

'This conversation is senseless,' Filavandrel stepped away. 'I'm sorry we've got to kill you. Revenge has nothing to do with it, it's purely practical. Torque has to carry on with his task and no one can suspect who he's doing it for. We can't afford to go to war with you, and we won't be taken in by trade and exchange. We're not so naïve that we don't know your merchants are just outposts of your way of life. We know what follows them. And what sort of cohabitation they bring.'

'Elf,' Dandilion, who had remained silent until now, said quietly, 'I've got friends. People who'll pay ransom for us. In the form of provisions, if you like, or any form. Think about it. After all, those stolen seeds aren't going to save you—'

'Nothing will save them anymore,' Geralt interrupted him. 'Don't grovel, Dandilion, don't beg him. It's pointless and pitiful.'

‘For someone who has lived such a short time,’ Filavandrel forced a smile, ‘you show an astounding disdain for death, human.’

‘Your mother gives birth to you only once and only once do you die,’ the witcher said calmly. ‘An appropriate philosophy for a louse, don’t you agree? And your longevity? I pity you, Filavandrel.’

The elf raised his eyebrows.

‘Why?’

‘You’re pathetic, with your little stolen sacks of seeds on pack horses, with your handful of grain, that tiny crumb thanks to which you plan to survive. And with that mission of yours which is supposed to turn your thoughts from imminent annihilation. Because you know this is the end. Nothing will sprout or yield crops on the plateaux, nothing will save you now. But you live long, and you will live very long in arrogant isolation, fewer and fewer of you, growing weaker and weaker, more and more bitter. And you know what’ll happen then, Filavandrel. You know that desperate young men with the eyes of hundred-year-old men and withered, barren and sick girls like Toruviel will lead those who can still hold a sword and bow in their hands, down into the valleys. You’ll come down into the blossoming valleys to meet death, wanting to die honourably, in battle, and not in sick beds of misery, where anaemia, tuberculosis and scurvy will send you. Then, long-living Aen Seidhe, you’ll remember me. You’ll remember that I pitied you. And you’ll understand that I was right.’

‘Time will tell who was right,’ said the elf quietly. ‘And herein lies the advantage of longevity. I’ve got a chance of finding out, if only because of that stolen handful of grain. You won’t have a chance like that. You’ll die shortly.’

‘Spare him, at least,’ Geralt indicated Dandilion with his head. ‘No, not out of lofty mercy. Out of common sense. Nobody’s going to ask after me, but they are going to take revenge for him.’

‘You judge my common sense poorly,’ the elf said after some hesitation. ‘If he survives thanks to you he’ll undoubtedly feel obliged to avenge you.’

‘You can be sure of that!’ Dandilion burst out, pale as death. ‘You can be sure, you son-of-a-bitch. Kill me too, because I promise otherwise I’ll set the world against you. You’ll see what lice from a fur coat can do! We’ll finish you off even if we have to level those mountains of yours to the ground! You can be sure of that!’

‘How stupid you are, Dandilion,’ sighed the witcher.

‘Your mother gives birth to you only once and only once do you die,’ said the poet haughtily, the effect somewhat spoilt by his teeth rattling like castanets.

‘That settles it.’ Filavandrel took his gloves from his belt and pulled them on. ‘It’s time to end this.’

At his command the elves positioned themselves opposite Geralt and Dandilion with bows. They did it quickly; they’d obviously been waiting for this a long time. One of them, the witcher noticed, was still chewing a turnip. Toruviel, her mouth and nose bandaged with cloth and birch bark, stood next to the archers. Without a bow.

‘Shall I bind your eyes?’ asked Filavandrel.

‘Go away.’ The witcher turned his head. ‘Go—’

‘*A d’yeable aep arse*,’ Dandilion finished for him, his teeth chattering.

‘Oh, no!’ the sylvan suddenly bleated, running up and sheltering the condemned men with his body. ‘Have you lost your mind? Filavandrel! This is not what we agreed! Not this! You were supposed to take them up to the mountains, hold them somewhere in some cave, until we’d finished—’

‘Torque,’ said the elf, ‘I can’t. I can’t risk it. Did you see what he did to Toruviel while tied up? I can’t risk it.’

‘I don’t care what you can or can’t! What do you imagine? You think I’ll let you murder them? Here, on my land? Right next to my hamlet? You accursed idiots! Get out of here with your bows or I’ll ram you down. Uk! Uk!’

‘Torque.’ Filavandrel rested his hands on his belt. ‘This is necessary.’

‘Duvvelsheyss, not necessary!’

‘Move aside, Torque.’

The sylvan shook his ears, bleated even louder, stared and bent his elbow in an abusive gesture popular among dwarves.

‘You’re not going to murder anybody here! Get on your horses and out into the mountains, beyond the passes! Otherwise you’ll have to kill me too!’

‘Be reasonable,’ said the white-haired elf slowly. ‘If we let them live, people are going to learn what you’re doing. They’ll catch you and torture you. You know what they’re like, after all.’

‘I do,’ bleated the sylvan still sheltering Geralt and Dandilion. ‘It turns out I know them better than I know you! And, verily, I don’t know who to side with. I regret allying myself with you, Filavandrel!’

‘You wanted to,’ said the elf coldly, giving a signal to the archers. ‘You wanted to, Torque. *L’sparellean! Evellienn!*’

The elves drew arrows from their quivers. ‘Go away, Torque,’ said Geralt, gritting his teeth. ‘It’s senseless. Get aside.’ The sylvan, without budging from the spot, showed him the dwarves’ gesture.

‘I can hear . . . music . . .’ Dandilion suddenly sobbed.

‘It happens,’ said the witcher, looking at the arrowheads. ‘Don’t worry. There’s no shame in fear.’

Filavandrel’s face changed, screwed up in a strange grimace. The white-haired Seidhe suddenly turned round and gave a shout to the archers. They lowered their weapons.

Lille entered the glade.

She was no longer a skinny peasant girl in a sackcloth dress. Through the grasses covering the glade walked – no, not walked – floated a queen, radiant, golden-haired, fiery-eyed, ravishing. The Queen of the Fields, decorated with garlands of flowers, ears of corn, bunches of herbs. At her left-hand side a young stag pattered on stiff legs, at her right rustled an enormous hedgehog.

‘Dana Meadbh,’ said Filavandrel with veneration. And then bowed and knelt.

The remaining elves also knelt; slowly, reluctantly, they fell to their knees one after the other and bowed their heads low in veneration. Toruviel was the last to kneel.

‘*Hael*, Dana Meadbh,’ repeated Filavandrel.

Lille didn’t answer. She stopped several paces short of the elf and swept her blue eyes over Dandilion and Geralt. Torque, while bowing, started cutting through the knots. None of the Seidhe moved.

Lille stood in front of Filavandrel. She didn’t say anything, didn’t make the slightest sound, but the witcher saw the changes on the elf’s face, sensed the aura surrounding them and was in no doubt they were communicating. The devil suddenly pulled at his sleeve.

‘Your friend,’ he bleated quietly, ‘has decided to faint. Right on time. What shall we do?’

‘Slap him across the face a couple of times.’

‘With pleasure.’

Filavandrel got up from his knees. At his command the elves fell to saddling the horses as quick as lightning.

‘Come with us, Dana Meadbh,’ said the white-haired elf. ‘We need you. Don’t abandon us, Eternal One. Don’t deprive us of your love. We’ll die without it.’

Lille slowly shook her head and indicated east, the direction of the mountains. The elf bowed, crumpling the ornate reins of his white-maned mount in his hands.

Dandilion walked up, pale and dumbfounded, supported by the sylvan. Lille looked at him and smiled. She looked into the witcher’s eyes. She looked long. She didn’t say a word. Words weren’t necessary.

Most of the elves were already in their saddles when Filavandrel and Toruviel approached. Geralt looked into the elf’s black eyes, visible above the bandages.

‘Toruviel . . .’ he said. And didn’t finish.

The elf nodded. From her saddle-bow, she took a lute, a marvellous instrument of light, tastefully inlaid wood with a slender, engraved neck. Without a word, she handed the lute to Dandilion. The poet accepted the instrument and smiled. Also without a word, but his eyes said a great deal.

‘Farewell, strange human,’ Filavandrel said quietly to Geralt. ‘You’re right. Words aren’t necessary. They won’t change anything. ’

Geralt remained silent.

‘After some consideration,’ added the Seidhe, ‘I’ve come to the conclusion that you were right. When you pitied us. So goodbye. Goodbye until we meet again, on the day when we descend into the valleys to die honourably. We’ll look out for you then, Toruviel and I. Don’t let us down.’

For a long time, they looked at each other in silence. And then the witcher answered briefly and simply:

‘I’ll try.’

VII

‘By the gods, Geralt.’ Dandilion stopped playing, hugged the lute and touched it with his cheek. ‘This wood sings on its own! These strings are alive! What wonderful tonality! Bloody hell, a couple of kicks and a bit of fear is a pretty low price to pay for such a superb lute. I’d have let myself be kicked from dawn to dusk if I’d known what I was going to get. Geralt? Are you listening to me at all?’

‘It’s difficult not to hear you two.’ Geralt raised his head from the book and glanced at the sylvan, who was still stubbornly squeaking on a peculiar set of pipes made from reeds of various lengths. ‘I hear you, the whole neighbourhood hears you.’

‘Duvvelsheyss, not neighbourhood,’ Torque put his pipes aside. ‘A desert, that’s what it is. A wilderness. A shit-hole. Eh, I miss my hemp!’

‘He misses his hemp,’ laughed Dandilion, carefully turning the delicately engraved lute pegs. ‘You should have sat in the thicket quiet as a dormouse instead of scaring girls, destroying dykes and sullying the well. I think you’re going to be more careful now and give up your tricks, eh, Torque?’

‘I like tricks,’ declared the sylvan, baring his teeth. ‘And I can’t imagine life without them. But have it your way, I promise to be more careful on new territory. I’ll be more restrained.’

The night was cloudy and windy. The gale beat down the reeds and rustled in the branches of the bushes surrounding their camp. Dandilion threw some dry twigs into the fire. Torque wriggled around on his makeshift bed, swiping mosquitoes away with his tail. A fish leapt in the lake with a splash.

‘I’ll describe our whole expedition to the edge of the world in a ballad,’ declared Dandilion. ‘And I’ll describe you in it, too, Torque.’

‘Don’t think you’ll get away with it,’ growled the sylvan. ‘I’ll write a ballad too then and describe you, but in such a way as you won’t be able to show your face in decent company for twelve years. So watch out! Geralt?’

‘What?’

‘Have you read anything interesting in that book which you so disgracefully wheedled out of those freemen?’

‘I have.’

‘So read it to us, before the fire burns out.’

‘Yes, yes,’ Dandilion strummed the melodious strings of Toruviel’s lute, ‘read us something, Geralt.’

The witcher leant on his elbow, edging the volume closer to the fire.

‘“Glimpsed she may be,”’ he began, ‘“during the time of sumor, from the days of Mai and Juyn to the days of October, but most oft this haps on the Feste of the Scythe, which ancients would call Lammas. She revealeth herself as the Fairhaired Ladie, in flowers all, and all that liveth followeth her path and clingeth to her, as one, plant or beast. Hence her name is Lyfia. Ancients call her Danamebi and venerate her greatly. Even the Bearded, albeit in mountains not on fields they dwell, respect and call her Bloemenmagde.” ’

‘Danamebi,’ muttered Dandilion. ‘Dana Meadbh, the Lady of the Fields.’

‘“Whence Lyfia treads the earth blossometh and bringeth forth, and abundantly doth each creature breed, such is her might. All nations to her offer sacrifice of harvest in vain hope their field not another’s will by Lyfia visited be. Because it is also said that there cometh a day at end when Lyfia will come to settle among that tribe which above all others will rise, but these be mere womenfolk tales. Because, forsooth, the wise do say that Lyfia loveth but one land and that which groweth on it and liveth alike, with no difference, be it the smallest of common apple trees or the most wretched of insects, and all nations are no more to her than that thinnest of trees because, forsooth, they too will be gone and new, different tribes will follow. But Lyfia eternal is, was and ever shall be until the end of time.”’

‘Until the end of time!’ sang the troubadour and strummed his lute. Torque joined in with a high trill on his reed pipes. ‘Hail, Lady of the Fields! For the harvest, for the flowers in Dol Blathanna, but also for the hide of the undersigned, which you saved from being riddled with arrows. Do you know what? – I’m going to tell you something.’ He stopped playing, hugged the lute like a child and grew sad. ‘I don’t think I’ll mention the elves and the difficulties they’ve got to struggle with, in the ballad. There’d be no shortage of scum wanting to go into the mountains . . . Why hasten the—’ The troubadour grew silent.

‘Go on, finish,’ said Torque bitterly. ‘You wanted to say: hasten what can’t be avoided. The inevitable.’

‘Let’s not talk about it,’ interrupted Geralt. ‘Why talk about it? Words aren’t necessary. Follow Lille’s example.’

‘She spoke to the elf telepathically,’ muttered the bard. ‘I sensed it. I’m right, aren’t I, Geralt? After all, you can sense communication like that. Did you understand what . . . What she was getting across to the elf?’

‘Some of it.’

‘What was she talking about?’

‘Hope. That things renew themselves, and won’t stop doing so.’

‘Is that all?’

‘That was enough.’

‘Hm . . . Geralt? Lille lives in the village, among people. Do you think that—’

‘—that she’ll stay with them? Here, in Dol Blathanna? Maybe. If . . .’

‘If what?’

‘If people prove worthy of it. If the edge of the world remains the edge of the world. If we respect the boundaries. But enough of this talk, boys. Time to sleep.’

‘True. It’s nearly midnight, the fire’s burning out. I’ll sit up for a little while yet. I’ve always found it easiest to invent rhymes beside a dying fire. And I need a title for my ballad. A nice title.’

‘Maybe *The Edge of the World*?’

‘Banal,’ snorted the poet. ‘Even if it really is the edge, it’s got to be described differently. Metaphorically. I take it you know what a metaphor is, Geralt? Hmm . . . Let me think . . . “Where . . .” Bloody hell. “Where—”’

‘Goodnight,’ said the devil.

THE VOICE OF REASON 6

The witcher unlaced his shirt and peeled the wet linen from his neck. It was very warm in the cave, hot, even, the air hung heavy and moist, the humidity condensing in droplets on the moss-covered boulders and basalt blocks of the walls.

Plants were everywhere. They grew out of beds hewn into the bedrock and filled with peat, in enormous chests, troughs and flowerpots. They climbed up rocks, up wooden trellises and stakes. Geralt examined them with interest, recognising some rare specimens – those which made up the ingredients of a witcher's medicines and elixirs, magical philtres and a sorcerer's decoctions, and others, even rarer, whose qualities he could only guess at. Some he didn't know at all, or hadn't even heard of. He saw stretches of star-leafed melilote, compact balls of puffheads pouring out of huge flowerpots, shoots of arenaria strewn with berries as red as blood. He recognised the meaty, thickly-veined leaves of fastaim, the crimson-golden ovals of measure-me-nots and the dark arrows of sawcuts. He noticed pinnated pondblood moss huddled against stone blocks, the glistening tubers of raven's eye and the tiger-striped petals of the mousetail orchid.

In the shady part of the grotto bulged caps of the sewant mushroom, grey as stones in a field. Not far from them grew reachcluster, an antidote to every known toxin and venom. The modest yellow-grey brushes peering from chests deeply sunken into the ground revealed scarix, a root with powerful and universal medicinal qualities.

The centre of the cave was taken up by aqueous plants. Geralt saw vats full of hornwort and turtle duckweed, and tanks covered in a compact skin of liverwort, fodder for the parasitic giant oyster. Glass reservoirs full of gnarled rhizomes of the hallucinogenic bitip, slender, dark-green cryptocorines and clusters of nematodes. Muddy, silted troughs were breeding grounds for innumerable phycomycetes, algae, moulds and swamp lichen.

Nenneke, rolling up the sleeves of her priestess's robe, took a pair of scissors and a little bone rake from her basket and got to work. Geralt sat on a bench between shafts of light falling through huge crystal blocks in the cave's vault.

The priestess muttered and hummed under her breath, deftly

plunging her hands into the thicket of leaves and shoots, snipping with her scissors and filling the basket with bunches of weeds. She adjusted the stakes and frames supporting the plants and, now and again, turned the soil with her small rake. Sometimes, muttering angrily, she pulled out dried or rotted stalks, threw them into the humus containers as food for mushrooms and other squamous and snake-like twisted plants which the witcher didn't recognise. He wasn't even sure they were plants at all – it seemed to him the glistening rhizomes moved a little, stretching their hair-like offshoots towards the priestess's hands.

It was warm. Very warm.

'Geralt?'

'Yes?' He fought off an overwhelming sleepiness. Nenneke, playing with her scissors, was looking at him from behind the huge pinnated leaves of sand-spurry flybush.

'Don't leave yet. Stay. A few more days.'

'No, Nenneke. It's time for me to be on my way.'

'Why the hurry? You don't have to worry about Hereward. And let that vagabond Dandilion go and break his neck on his own. Stay, Geralt.'

'No, Nenneke.'

The priestess snipped with scissors. 'Are you in such haste to leave the temple because you're afraid that she'll find you here?'

'Yes,' he admitted reluctantly. 'You've guessed.'

'It wasn't exactly difficult,' she muttered. 'But don't worry. Yennefer's already been here. Two months ago. She won't be back in a hurry, because we quarrelled. No, not because of you. She didn't ask about you.'

'She didn't ask?'

'That's where it hurts,' the priestess laughed. 'You're egocentric, like all men. There's nothing worse than a lack of interest, is there? Than indifference? No, but don't lose heart. I know Yennefer only too well. She didn't ask anything, but she did look around attentively, looking for signs of you. And she's mighty furious at you, that I did feel.'

'What did you quarrel about?'

'Nothing that would interest you.'

‘I know anyway.’

‘I don’t think so,’ said Nenneke calmly, adjusting the stakes. ‘You know her very superficially. As, incidentally, she knows you. It’s quite typical of the relationship which binds you, or did bind you. Both parties aren’t capable of anything other than a strongly emotional evaluation of the consequences, while ignoring the causes.’

‘She came looking for a cure,’ he remarked coldly. ‘That’s what you quarrelled about, admit it.’

‘I won’t admit anything.’

The witcher got up and stood in full light under one of the crystal sheets in the grotto’s vault.

‘Come here a minute, Nenneke. Take a look at this.’ He unknotted a secret pocket in his belt, dug out a tiny bundle, a miniature purse made of goat-leather, and poured the contents into his palm.

‘Two diamonds, a ruby, three pretty nephrites, and an interesting agate.’ Nenneke was knowledgeable about everything. ‘How much did they cost you?’

‘Two and a half thousand Temeria orens. Payment for the Wyzim striga.’

‘For a torn neck,’ grimaced the priestess. ‘Oh, well, it’s a question of price. But you did well to turn cash into these trinkets. The oren is weak and the cost of stones in Wyzim isn’t high; it’s too near to the dwarves’ mines in Mahakam. If you sell those in Novigrad, you’ll get at least five hundred Novigrad crowns, and the crown, at present, stands at six and a half orens and is going up.’

‘I’d like you to take them.’

‘For safe-keeping?’

‘No. Keep the nephrites for the temple as, shall we say, my offering to the goddess Melitele. And the remaining stones . . . are for her. For Yennefer. Give them to her when she comes to visit you again, which will no doubt be soon.’

Nenneke looked him straight in the eyes.

‘I wouldn’t do this if I were you. You’ll make her even more furious, if that’s possible, believe me. Leave everything as it is, because you’re no longer in a position to mend anything or make anything better. Running away from her, you behaved . . . well, let’s say, in a manner not particularly worthy of a mature man. By trying

to wipe away your guilt with precious stones, you'll behave like a very, very over-mature man. I really don't know what sort of man I can stand less.'

'She was too possessive,' he muttered, turning away his face. 'I couldn't stand it. She treated me like—'

'Stop it,' she said sharply. 'Don't cry on my shoulder. I'm not your mother, and I won't be your confidante either. I don't give a shit how she treated you and I care even less how you treated her. And I don't intend to be a go-between or give these stupid jewels to her. If you want to be a fool, do it without using me as an intermediary.'

'You misunderstand. I'm not thinking of appeasing or bribing her. But I do owe her something, and the treatment she wants to undergo is apparently very costly. I want to help her, that's all.'

'You're more of an idiot than I thought.' Nenneke picked up the basket from the ground. 'A costly treatment? Help? Geralt, these jewels of yours are, to her, knick-knacks not worth spitting on. Do you know how much Yennefer can earn for getting rid of an unwanted pregnancy for a great lady?'

'I do happen to know. And that she earns even more for curing infertility. It's a shame she can't help herself in that respect. That's why she's seeking help from others – like you.'

'No one can help her, it's impossible. She's a sorceress. Like most female magicians, her ovaries are atrophied and it's irreversible. She'll never be able to have children.'

'Not all sorceresses are handicapped in this respect. I know something about that, and you do, too.'

Nenneke closed her eyes. 'Yes, I do.'

'Something can't be a rule if there are exceptions to it. And please don't give me any banal untruths about exceptions proving the rule. Tell me something about exceptions as such.'

'Only one thing,' she said coldly, 'can be said about exceptions. They exist. Nothing more. But Yennefer . . . Well, unfortunately, she isn't an exception. At least not as regards the handicap we're talking about. In other respects it's hard to find a greater exception than her.'

'Sorcerers,' Geralt wasn't put off by Nenneke's coldness, or her allusion, 'have raised the dead. I know of proven cases. And it seems to me that raising the dead is harder than reversing the atrophy of any organs.'

‘You’re mistaken. Because I don’t know of one single, proven, fully successful case of reversing atrophy or regenerating endocrine glands. Geralt, that’s enough. This is beginning to sound like a consultation. You don’t know anything about these things. I do. And if I tell you that Yennefer has paid for certain gifts by losing others, then that’s how it is.’

‘If it’s so clear then I don’t understand why she keeps on trying to __’

‘You understand very little,’ interrupted the priestess. ‘Bloody little. Stop worrying about Yennefer’s complaints and think about your own. Your body was also subjected to changes which are irreversible. She surprises you, but what about you? It ought to be clear to you too, that you’re never going to be human, but you still keep trying to be one. Making human mistakes. Mistakes a witcher shouldn’t be making.’

He leant against the wall of the cave and wiped the sweat from his brow.

‘You’re not answering,’ stated Nenneke, smiling faintly. ‘I’m not surprised. It’s not easy to speak with the voice of reason. You’re sick, Geralt. You’re not fully fit. You react to elixirs badly. You’ve got a rapid pulse rate, the dilation of your eyes is slow, your reactions are delayed. You can’t get the simplest Signs right. And you want to hit the trail? You have to be treated. You need therapy. And before that, a trance.’

‘Is that why you sent Iola to me? As part of the therapy? To make the trance easier?’

‘You’re a fool!’

‘But not to such an extent.’

Nenneke turned away and slipped her hands among the meaty stalks of creepers which the witcher didn’t recognise.

‘Well, have it your way,’ she said easily. ‘Yes, I sent her to you. As part of the therapy. And let me tell you, it worked. Your reactions were much better the following day. You were calmer. And Iola needed some therapy, too. Don’t be angry.’

‘I’m not angry because of the therapy, or because of Iola.’

‘But at the voice of reason you’re hearing?’

He didn’t answer.

‘A trance is necessary,’ repeated Nenneke, glancing around at her

cave garden. ‘Iola’s ready. She’s made both physical and psychic contact with you. If you want to leave, let’s do it tonight.’

‘No. I don’t want to. Look, Nenneke, Iola might start to prophesy during the trance. To predict, read the future.’

‘That’s just it.’

‘Exactly. And I don’t want to know the future. How could I do what I’m doing if I knew it? Besides, I know it anyway.’

‘Are you sure?’ He didn’t answer. ‘Oh, well, all right,’ she sighed. ‘Let’s go. Oh, and Geralt? I don’t mean to pry but tell me . . . How did you meet? You and Yennefer? How did it all start?’

The witcher smiled. ‘It started with me and Dandilion not having anything for breakfast and deciding to catch some fish.’

‘Am I to understand that instead of fish you caught Yennefer?’

‘I’ll tell you what happened. But maybe after supper. I’m hungry.’

‘Let’s go then. I’ve got everything I need.’

The witcher made a move towards the exit and once more looked around the cave hothouse.

‘Nenneke?’

‘Aha?’

‘Half of the plants you’ve got here don’t grow anywhere else anymore. Am I right?’

‘Yes. More than half.’

‘How come?’

‘If I said it was through the goddess Melitele’s grace, I daresay that wouldn’t be enough for you, would it?’

‘I daresay it wouldn’t.’

‘That’s what I thought.’ Nenneke smiled. ‘You see, Geralt, this bright sun of ours is still shining, but not quite the way it used to. Read the great books if you like. But if you don’t want to waste time on it maybe you’ll be happy with the explanation that the crystal roof acts like a filter. It eliminates the lethal rays which are increasingly found in sunlight. That’s why plants which you can’t see growing wild anywhere in the world grow here.’

‘I understand,’ nodded the witcher. ‘And us, Nenneke? What about us? The sun shines on us, too. Shouldn’t we shelter under a roof like that?’

‘In principle, yes,’ sighed the priestess. ‘But . . .’

‘But what?’

‘It’s too late.’

THE LAST WISH

I

The catfish stuck its barbelled head above the surface, tugged with force, splashed, stirred the water and flashed its white belly.

‘Careful, Dandilion!’ shouted the witcher, digging his heels into the wet sand. ‘Hold him, damn it!’

‘I am holding him . . .’ groaned the poet. ‘Heavens, what a monster! It’s a leviathan, not a fish! There’ll be some good eating on that, dear gods!’

‘Loosen it. Loosen it or the line will snap!’

The catfish clung to the bed and threw itself against the current towards the bend in the river. The line hissed as Dandilion’s and Geralt’s gloves smouldered.

‘Pull, Geralt, pull! Don’t loosen it or it’ll get tangled up in the roots!’

‘The line will snap!’

‘No, it won’t. Pull!’

They hunched up and pulled. The line cut the water with a hiss, vibrated and scattered droplets which glistened like mercury in the rising sun. The catfish suddenly surfaced, set the water seething just below the surface, and the tension of the line eased. They quickly started to gather up the slack.

‘We’ll smoke it,’ panted Dandilion. ‘We’ll take it to the village and get it smoked. And we’ll use the head for soup!’

‘Careful !’

Feeling the shallows under its belly, the catfish threw half of its twelve-foot-long body out of the water, tossed its head, whacked its flat tail and took a sharp dive into the depths. Their gloves smouldered anew.

‘Pull, pull! To the bank, the son-of-a-bitch!’

‘The line is creaking! Loosen it, Dandilion!’

‘It’ll hold, don’t worry! We’ll cook the head . . . for soup . . .’

The catfish, dragged near to the bank again, surged and strained furiously against them as if to let them know he wasn’t that easy to get into the pot. The spray flew six feet into the air.

‘We’ll sell the skin . . .’ Dandilion, red with effort, pulled the line

with both hands. ‘And the barbels . . . We’ll use the barbels to make —’

Nobody ever found out what the poet was going to make from the catfish’s barbels. The line snapped with a crack and both fishermen, losing their balance, fell onto the wet sand.

‘Bloody hell!’ Dandilion yelled so loud that the echo resounded through the osiers. ‘So much grub escaped ! I hope you die, you son-of-a-catfish.’

‘I told you,’ Geralt shook his wet trousers. ‘I told you not to use force when you pull. You screwed up, my friend. You make as good a fisherman as a goat’s arse makes a trumpet.’

‘That’s not true.’ The troubadour was outraged. ‘It’s my doing that the monster took the bait in the first place.’

‘Oh really? You didn’t lift a finger to help me set the line. You played the lute and hollered so the whole neighbourhood could hear you, nothing more.’

‘You’re wrong,’ Dandilion bared his teeth. ‘When you fell asleep, you see, I took the grubs off the hook and attached a dead crow, which I’d found in the bushes. I wanted to see your face in the morning when you pulled the crow out. And the catfish took the crow. Your grubs would have caught shit-all.’

‘They would have, they would have.’ The witcher spat into the water, winding the line on to a little wooden rake. ‘But it snapped because you tugged like an idiot. Wind up the rest of the lines instead of gabbling. The sun’s already up, it’s time to go. I’m going to pack up.’

‘Geralt!’

‘What?’

‘There’s something on the other line, too . . . No, dammit, it only got caught. Hell, it’s holding like a stone, I can’t do it! Ah, that’s it . . . Ha, ha, look what I’m bringing in. It must be the wreck of a barge from King Dezmod’s time! What great stuff! Look, Geralt!’

Dandilion was clearly exaggerating; the clump of rotted ropes, net and algae pulled out of the water was impressive but it was far from being the size of a barge dating from the days of the legendary king. The bard scattered the jumble over the bank and began to dig around in it with the tip of his shoe. The algae was alive with leeches, scuds and little crabs.

‘Ha! Look what I’ve found!’

Geralt approached, curious. The find was a chipped stoneware jar, something like a two-handled amphora, tangled up in netting, black with rotten algae, colonies of caddis-larvae and snails, dripping with stinking slime.

'Ha!' Dandilion exclaimed again, proudly. 'Do you know what this is?'

'It's an old pot.'

'You're wrong,' declared the troubadour, scraping away shells and hardened, shiny clay. 'This is a charmed jar. There's a djinn inside who'll fulfil my three wishes.'

The witcher snorted.

'You can laugh,' Dandilion finished his scraping, bent over and rinsed the amphora. 'But there's a seal on the spigot and a wizard's mark on the seal.'

'What mark? Let's see.'

'Oh, sure.' The poet hid the jar behind his back. 'And what more do you want? I'm the one who found it and I need all the wishes.'

'Don't touch that seal! Leave it alone!'

'Let go, I tell you! It's mine!'

'Dandilion, be careful!'

'Sure!'

'Don't touch it! Oh, bloody hell!'

The jar fell to the sand during their scuffle, and luminous red smoke burst forth.

The witcher jumped back and rushed towards the camp for his sword. Dandilion, folding his arms across his chest, didn't move.

The smoke pulsated and collected in an irregular sphere level with Dandilion's eyes. The sphere formed a six-foot-wide distorted head with no nose, enormous eyes and a sort of beak.

'Djinn!' said Dandilion, stamping his foot. 'I freed thee and as of this day, I am thy lord. My wishes—'

The head snapped its beak, which wasn't really a beak but something in the shape of drooping, deformed and ever-changing lips.

'Run!' yelled the witcher. 'Run, Dandilion!'

'My wishes,' continued the poet, 'are as follows. Firstly, may

Valdo Marx, the troubadour of Cidaris, die of apoplexy as soon as possible. Secondly, there's a count's daughter in Caelf called Virginia who refuses all advances. May she succumb to mine. Thirdly—'

No one ever found out Dandilion's third wish.

Two monstrous paws emerged from the horrible head and grabbed the bard by the throat. Dandilion screeched.

Geralt reached the head in three leaps, swiped his silver sword and slashed it through the middle. The air howled, the head exhaled smoke and rapidly doubled in diameter. The monstrous jaw, now also much larger, flew open, snapped and whistled; the paws pulled the struggling Dandilion around and crushed him to the ground.

The witcher crossed his fingers in the Sign of Aard and threw as much energy as he could muster at the head. The energy materialised in a blinding beam, sliced through the glow surrounding the head and hit its mark. The boom was so loud that it stabbed Geralt's ears, and the air sucked in by the implosion made the willows rustle. The roar of the monster was deafening as it grew even larger, but it released the poet, soared up, circled and, waving its paws, flew away over the water.

The witcher rushed to pull Dandilion – who was lying motionless – away. At that moment, his fingers touched a round object buried in the sand.

It was a brass seal decorated with the sign of a broken cross and a nine-pointed star.

The head, suspended above the river, had become the size of a haystack, while the open, roaring jaws looked like the gates of an average-sized barn. Stretching out its paws, the monster attacked.

Geralt, not having the least idea of what to do, squeezed the seal in his fist and, extending his hand towards the assailant, screamed out the words of an exorcism a priestess had once taught him. He had never used those words until now because, in principle, he didn't believe in superstitions.

The effect surpassed his expectations.

The seal hissed and grew hot, burning his hand. The gigantic head froze in the air, suspended, motionless above the river. It hung like that for a moment then, at last, it began to howl, roar, and dispersed into a pulsating bundle of smoke, into a huge, whirling

cloud. The cloud whined shrilly and whisked upstream with incredible speed, leaving a trail of churned-up water on the surface. In a matter of seconds, it had disappeared into the distance; only a dwindling howl lingered across the water.

The witcher rushed to the poet, cowering on the sand.

‘Dandilion? Are you dead? Dandilion, damn it! What’s the matter with you?’

The poet jerked his head, shook his hands and opened his mouth to scream. Geralt grimaced and narrowed his eyes – Dandilion had a trained – loud – tenor voice and, when frightened, could reach extraordinary registers. But what emerged from the bard’s throat was a barely audible, hoarse croak.

‘Dandilion! What’s the matter with you? Answer me!’

‘Hhhh . . . eeee . . . kheeeee . . . theeee whhhhorrrrrrre . . .’

‘Are you in pain? What’s the matter? Dandilion!’

‘Hhhh . . . Whhhooo . . .’

‘Don’t say anything. If everything’s all right, nod.’

Dandilion grimaced and, with great difficulty, nodded and then immediately turned on his side, curled up and – choking and coughing – vomited blood.

Geralt cursed.

II

‘By all the gods!’ The guard stepped back and lowered the lantern. ‘What’s the matter with him?’

‘Let us through, my good man,’ said the witcher quietly, supporting Dandilion, who was huddled up in the saddle. ‘We’re in great haste, as you see.’

‘I do.’ The guard swallowed, looking at the poet’s pale face and chin covered in black, dried blood. ‘Wounded ? It looks terrible, sir.’

‘I’m in haste,’ repeated Geralt. ‘We’ve been travelling since dawn. Let us through, please.’

‘We can’t,’ said the other guard. ‘You’re only allowed through between sunrise and sunset. None may pass at night. That’s the order. There’s no way through for anyone unless they’ve got a letter of safe-conduct from the king or the mayor. Or they’re nobility with a coat of arms.’

Dandilion croaked, huddled up even more, resting his forehead on the horse’s mane, shuddered, shook and retched dryly. Another stream of blood trickled down the branched, dried pattern on his mount’s neck.

‘My good men,’ Geralt said as calmly as he could, ‘you can see for yourselves how badly he fares. I have to find someone who can treat him. Let us through. Please.’

‘Don’t ask.’ The guard leant on his halberd. ‘Orders are orders. I’ll go to the pillory if I let you through. They’ll chase me from service, and then how will I feed my children? No, sir, I can’t. Take your friend down from the horse and put him in the room in the barbican. We’ll dress him and he’ll last out until dawn, if that’s his fate. It’s not long now.’

‘A dressing’s not enough.’ The witcher ground his teeth. ‘We need a healer, a priest, a gifted doctor—’

‘You wouldn’t be waking up anyone like that at night anyway,’ said the second guard. ‘The most we can do is see that you don’t have to camp out under the gate until dawn. It’s warm in there and there’s somewhere to put your friend; he’ll fare better there than in the saddle. Come on, let us help you lower him from the horse.’

It was warm, stuffy and cosy in the room within the barbican. A fire crackled merrily in the hearth, and behind it a cricket chirped fiercely.

Three men sat at the heavy square table laid with jugs and plates.

‘Forgive us for disturbing you, squires . . .’ said the guard, holding Dandilion up. ‘I trust you won’t mind . . . This one here is a knight, hmm . . . And the other one is wounded, so I thought—’

‘You thought well,’ one of the men turned his slender, sharp, expressive face towards them and got up. ‘Here, lay him down on the pallet.’

The man was an elf, like the other one sitting at the table. Both, judging by their clothes, which were a typical mixture of human and elven fashion, were elves who had settled and integrated. The third man, who looked the eldest, was human, a knight, judging by the way he was dressed and by his salt-and-pepper hair, cut to fit beneath a helmet.

‘I’m Chireadan,’ the taller of the elves, with an expressive face, introduced himself. As was usual with representatives of the Old People, it was difficult to guess his age; he could have been twenty or one hundred and twenty. ‘This is my cousin Errdil. And this nobleman is the knight Vratimir.’

‘A nobleman,’ muttered Geralt, but a closer look at the coat of arms embroidered on his tunic shattered his hopes: a shield divided per cross and bearing golden lilies was cut diagonally by a silver bar. Vratimir was not only illegitimate but came from a mixed, human-nonhuman union. As a result, although he was entitled to use a coat of arms, he couldn’t consider himself a true nobleman, and the privilege of crossing the city gate after dusk most certainly wasn’t extended to him.

‘Unfortunately,’ – the witcher’s scrutiny did not escape the elf’s attention – ‘we, too, have to remain here until dawn. The law knows no exceptions, at least not for the likes of us. We invite you to join our company, sir knight.’

‘Geralt, of Rivia,’ the witcher introduced himself. ‘A witcher, not a knight.’

‘What’s the matter with him?’ Chireadan indicated Dandilion, whom the guards had laid on a pallet in the meantime. ‘It looks like poisoning. If it is poisoning, then I can help. I’ve got some good medicine with me.’

Geralt sat down, then quickly gave a guarded account of events at the river. The elves looked at each other, and the knight spat through his teeth and frowned.

‘Extraordinary,’ Chireadan remarked. ‘What could it have been?’

‘A djinn in a bottle,’ muttered Vratimir. ‘Like a fairy tale—’

‘Not quite.’ Geralt indicated Dandilion, curled up on the pallet. ‘I don’t know of any fairy tale that ends like this.’

‘That poor fellow’s injuries,’ said Chireadan, ‘are evidently of a magical nature. I fear that my medicine will not be of much use. But I can at least lessen his suffering. Have you already given him a remedy, Geralt?’

‘A painkilling elixir.’

‘Come and help me. You can hold his head up.’

Dandilion greedily drank the medicine, diluted with wine, choked on his last sip, wheezed and covered the leather pillow with spittle.

‘I know him,’ Errdil said. ‘He’s Dandilion, the troubadour and poet. I saw him singing at the court of King Ethain in Cidaris once.’

‘A troubadour,’ repeated Chireadan, looking at Geralt. ‘That’s bad. Very bad. The muscles of his neck and throat are attacked. Changes in his vocal cords are starting to take place. The spell’s action has to be halted as soon as possible otherwise . . . This might be irreversible.’

‘That means . . . Does that mean he won’t be able to talk?’

‘Talk, yes. Maybe. Not sing.’

Geralt sat down at the table without saying a word and rested his forehead on his clenched fists.

‘A wizard,’ said Vratimir. ‘A magical remedy or a curative spell is needed. You have to take him to some other town, witcher.’

‘What?’ Geralt raised his head. ‘And here, in Rinde? Isn’t there a wizard here?’

‘Magicians are hard to come by in the whole of Redania,’ said the knight. ‘Isn’t that true? Ever since King Heribert placed an exorbitant tax on spells, magicians have boycotted the capital and those towns which are rigorous in executing the king’s edicts. And the councillors of Rinde are famous for their zeal in this respect. Chireadan, Errdil, am I right?’

‘You are,’ confirmed Errdil. ‘But . . . Chireadan, may I?’

‘You have to,’ said Chireadan, looking at the witcher. ‘There’s no point in making a secret of it; everyone knows anyway. There’s a sorceress staying in the town right now, Geralt.’

‘Incognito, no doubt?’

‘Not very,’ smiled the elf. ‘The sorceress in question is something of an individualist. She’s ignoring both the boycott imposed on Rinde by the Council of Wizards, and the disposition of the local councillors, and is doing rather splendidly out of it: the boycott means there’s tremendous demand for magical services here and, of course, the sorceress isn’t paying any levies.’

‘And the town council puts up with it?’

‘The sorceress is staying with a merchant, a trade broker from Novigrad, who is also the honorary ambassador. Nobody can touch her there. She has asylum.’

‘It’s more like house arrest than asylum,’ corrected Errdil. ‘She’s just about imprisoned there. But she has no shortage of clients. Rich clients. She ostentatiously makes light of the councillors, holds balls and extravagant parties—’

‘While the councillors are furious, turn whoever they can against her and tarnish her reputation as best they can,’ Chireadan cut in. ‘They spread foul rumours about her and hope, no doubt, that the Novigrad hierarchy will forbid the merchant to grant her asylum.’

‘I don’t like meddling in things like that,’ muttered Geralt, ‘but I’ve got no choice. What’s the merchant-ambassador’s name?’

‘Beau Berrant.’

The witcher thought that Chireadan grimaced as he pronounced the name.

‘Oh well, it really is your only hope. Or rather, the only hope for that poor fellow moaning on the bed. But whether the sorceress will want to help you . . . I don’t know.’

‘Be careful when you go there,’ said Errdil. ‘The mayor’s spies are watching the house. You know what to do if they stop you. Money opens all doors.’

‘I’ll go as soon as they open the gates. What’s the sorceress called ?’

Geralt thought he detected a slight flush on Chireadan’s expressive face. But it could have been the glow from the fire in the hearth.

‘Yennefer of Vergerberg.’

III

‘My lord’s asleep,’ repeated the doorman, looking down at Geralt. He was taller by a head and nearly twice as broad in the shoulders. ‘Are you deaf, you vagabond? The lord’s asleep, I said.’

‘Then let him sleep,’ agreed the witcher. ‘I’ve not got business with your lord but with the lady who is staying here.’

‘Business, you say.’ The doorman, as it turned out, was surprisingly witty for someone of such stature and appearance. ‘Then go, you loiterer, to the whorehouse to satisfy your need. Scram.’

Geralt unfastened the purse on his belt and, holding it by the straps, weighed it in his palm.

‘You won’t bribe me,’ the Cerberus said proudly.

‘I don’t intend to.’

The porter was too huge to have the reflexes which would let him dodge or shield himself from a quick blow given by an ordinary man. He didn’t even have time to blink before the witcher’s blow landed. The heavy purse struck him in the temple with a metallic crash. He collapsed against the door, grabbing the frame with both hands. Geralt tore him away from it with a kick in the knee, shoved him with his shoulder and fetched him another blow with the purse. The doorman’s eyes grew hazy and diverged in a comical squint, and his legs folded under him like two pen-knives. The witcher, seeing the strapping fellow moving, although almost unconscious, walloped him with force for the third time, right on the crown of his head.

‘Money,’ he muttered, ‘opens all doors.’

It was dark in the vestibule. A loud snoring came from the door on the left. The witcher peeped in carefully. A fat woman, her nightdress hitched up above her hips, was asleep on a tumbled pallet, snoring and snorting through her nose. It wasn’t the most beautiful sight. Geralt dragged the porter into the little room and closed the door.

On the right was another door, half-opened, and behind it stone steps led down. The witcher was about to pass them when an indistinct curse, a clatter and the dry crash of a vessel cracking reached him from below.

The room was a big kitchen, full of utensils, smelling of herbs and

resinous wood. On the stone floor, among fragments of a clay jug, knelt a completely naked man with his head hanging low.

‘Apple juice, bloody hell,’ he mumbled, shaking his head like a sheep which had rammed a wall by a mistake. ‘Apple . . . juice. Where . . . Where’re the servants?’

‘I beg your pardon?’ the witcher asked politely.

The man raised his head and swallowed. His eyes were vague and very bloodshot.

‘She wants juice from apples,’ he stated, then got up with evident difficulty, sat down on a chest covered with a sheepskin coat, and leant against the stove. ‘I have to . . . take it upstairs because—’

‘Do I have the pleasure of speaking to the merchant Beau Berrant?’

‘Quieter,’ the man grimaced painfully. ‘Don’t yell. Listen, in that barrel there . . . Juice. Apple. Pour it into something . . . and help me get upstairs, all right?’

Geralt shrugged, then nodded sympathetically. He generally avoided overdoing the alcohol but the state in which the merchant found himself was not entirely unknown to him. He found a jug and a tin mug among the crockery and drew some juice from the barrel. He heard snoring and turned. Beau Berrant was fast asleep, his head hanging on his chest.

For a moment, the witcher considered pouring juice over him to wake him up, but he changed his mind. He left the kitchen, carrying the jug. The corridor ended in a heavy inlaid door. He entered carefully, opening it just enough to slip inside. It was dark, so he dilated his pupils. And wrinkled his nose.

A heavy smell of sour wine, candles and overripe fruit hung in the air. And something else, that brought to mind a mixture of the scents of lilac and gooseberries.

He looked around. The table in the middle of the chamber bore a battlefield of jugs, carafes, goblets, silver plates, dishes and ivory-handled cutlery. A creased tablecloth, which had been pushed aside, was soaked in wine, covered in purple stains and stiff with wax which had trickled down the candlesticks. Orange peel glowed like flowers among plum and peach stones, pear cores and grape stalks. A goblet had fallen over and smashed. The other was in one piece, half full, with a turkey bone sticking out of it. Next to the goblet stood a black, high-heeled slipper. It was made of basilisk

skin. There wasn't a more expensive raw material which could be used in the making of shoes.

The other slipper lay under a chair on top of a carelessly discarded black dress with white frills and an embroidered flowery pattern.

For a moment Geralt stood undecided, struggling with embarrassment and the desire to turn on his heel and leave. But that would have meant his tussle with the Cerberus below had been unnecessary. And the witcher didn't like doing anything unnecessarily. He noticed winding stairs in the corner of the chamber.

On the steps he found four withered white roses and a napkin stained with wine and crimson lipstick. The scent of lilac and gooseberries grew stronger. The stairs led to a bedroom, the floor of which was covered in an enormous, shaggy animal skin. A white shirt with lace cuffs, and umpteen white roses, lay on the skin. And a black stocking.

The other stocking hung from one of the four engraved posts which supported the domed canopy over the bed. The engravings on the posts depicted nymphs and fauns in various positions. Some of the positions were interesting. Others funny. Many repeated themselves.

Geralt cleared his throat loudly, looking at the abundant black locks visible from under the eiderdown. The eiderdown moved and moaned. Geralt cleared his throat even louder.

'Beau?' the abundance of black locks asked indistinctly. 'Have you brought the juice?'

'Yes.'

A pale triangular face, violet eyes and narrow, slightly contorted lips appeared beneath the black tresses.

'Ooooh . . .' The lips became even more contorted. 'Ooooh . . . I'm dying of thirst . . .'

'Here you are.'

The woman sat up, scrambling out of the bedclothes. She had pretty shoulders, a shapely neck and, around it, a black velvet choker with a star-shaped jewel sparkling with diamonds. Apart from the choker she had nothing on.

'Thank you.' She took the mug from his hand, drank greedily, then raised her arms and touched her temples. The eiderdown

slipped down even further. Geralt averted his eyes – politely, but unwillingly.

'Who are you?' asked the black-haired woman, narrowing her eyes and covering herself with the eiderdown. 'What are you doing here? And where, dammit, is Berrant?'

'Which question shall I answer first?'

He immediately regretted his sarcasm. The woman raised her hand and a golden streak shot out from her fingers. Geralt reacted instinctively, crossing both hands in the Sign of Heliotrope, and caught the spell just in front of his face, but the discharge was so strong that it threw him back against the wall. He sank to the floor.

'No need!' he shouted, seeing the woman raise her hand again. 'Lady Yennefer! I come in peace, with no evil intentions!'

A stamping came from the stairs and servants loomed in the bedroom doorway.

'Lady Yennefer!'

'Leave,' the sorceress ordered calmly. 'I don't need you. You're paid to keep an eye on the house. But since this individual has, nevertheless, managed to get in, I'll take care of him myself. Pass that on to Berrant. And prepare a bath for me.'

The witcher got up with difficulty. Yennefer observed him in silence, narrowing her eyes.

'You parried my spell,' she finally said. 'You're not a sorcerer, that's obvious. But you reacted exceptionally fast. Tell me who you are, stranger who has come in peace. And I advise you to speak quickly.'

'I'm Geralt of Rivia. A witcher.'

Yennefer leant out of the bed, grasping a faun – engraved on the pole – by a piece of anatomy well adapted to being grasped. Without taking her eyes off Geralt, she picked a coat with a fur collar up off the floor and wrapped herself up in it tightly before getting up. She poured herself another mug of juice without hurrying, drank it in one go, coughed and came closer. Geralt discreetly rubbed his lower back which, a moment ago, had collided painfully with the wall.

'Geralt of Rivia,' repeated the sorceress, looking at him from behind black lashes. 'How did you get in here? And for what reason? You didn't hurt Berrant, I hope?'

‘No. I didn’t. Lady Yennefer, I need your help.’

‘A witcher,’ she muttered, coming up even closer and wrapping the coat around her more tightly. ‘Not only is it the first one I’ve seen up close but it’s none other than the famous White Wolf. I’ve heard about you.’

‘I can imagine.’

‘I don’t know what you can imagine.’ She yawned, then came even closer. ‘May I?’ She touched his cheek and looked him in the eyes. He clenched his jaw. ‘Do your pupils automatically adapt to light or can you narrow and dilate them according to your will?’

‘Yennefer,’ he said calmly, ‘I rode nonstop all day from Rinde.

I waited all night for the gates to open. I gave your doorman, who didn’t want to let me in, a blow to the head. I disturbed your sleep and peace, discourteously and importunately. All because my friend needs help which only you can give him. Give it to him, please, and then, if you like, we can talk about mutations and aberrations.’

She took a step back and contorted her lips unpleasantly. ‘What sort of help do you mean?’

‘The regeneration of organs injured through magic. The throat, larynx and vocal cords. An injury caused by a scarlet mist. Or something very much like it.’

‘Very much like it,’ she repeated. ‘To put it in a nutshell, it wasn’t a scarlet mist which has injured your friend. So what was it? Speak out. Being torn from my sleep at dawn, I have neither the strength nor the desire to probe your brain.’

‘Hmm . . . It’s best I start from the beginning.’

‘Oh, no,’ she interrupted him. ‘If it’s all that complicated then wait. An aftertaste in my mouth, dishevelled hair, sticky eyes and other morning inconveniences strongly affect my perceptive faculties. Go downstairs to the bath-chamber in the cellar. I’ll be there in a minute and then you’ll tell me everything.’

‘Yennefer, I don’t want to be persistent but time is pressing. My friend—’

‘Geralt,’ she interrupted sharply, ‘I climbed out of bed for you and I didn’t intend to do that before the chime of midday. I’m prepared to do without breakfast. Do you know why? Because you brought me the apple juice. You were in a hurry, your head was troubled with your friend’s suffering, you forced your way in here, and yet you thought of a thirsty woman. You won me over, so my help is

not out of the question. But I won't do anything without hot water and soap. Go. Please.'

'Very well.'

'Geralt.'

'Yes,' he stopped on the threshold.

'Make use of the opportunity to have a bath yourself. I can not only guess the age and breed of your horse, but also its colour, by the smell.'

IV

She entered the bath-chamber just as Geralt, sitting naked on a tiny stool, was pouring water over himself from a bucket. He cleared his throat and modestly turned his back to her.

'Don't be embarrassed,' she said, throwing an armful of clothing on the hook. 'I don't faint at the sight of a naked man. Triss Merigold, a friend, says if you've seen one, you've seen them all.'

He got up, wrapping a towel round his hips.

'Beautiful scar,' she smiled, looking at his chest. 'What was it? Did you fall under the blade in a saw-mill?'

He didn't answer. The sorceress continued to observe him, tilting her head coquettishly.

'The first witcher I can look at from close up, and completely naked at that. Aha!' She leant over, listening. 'I can hear your heart beat. It's very slow. Can you control how much adrenalin you secrete? Oh, forgive me my professional curiosity. Apparently, you're touchy about the qualities of your own body. You're wont to describe these qualities using words which I greatly dislike, lapsing into pompous sarcasm with it, something I dislike even more.'

He didn't answer.

'Well, enough of that. My bath is getting cold.' Yennefer moved as if she wanted to discard her coat, then hesitated. 'I'll take my bath while you talk, to save time. But I don't want to embarrass you and, besides, we hardly know each other. So then, taking decency into account—'

'I'll turn round,' he proposed hesitantly.

'No. I have to see the eyes of the person I'm talking to. I've got a better idea.'

He heard an incantation being recited, felt his medallion quiver and saw the black coat softly slip to the floor. Then he heard the water splashing.

'Now I can't see your eyes, Yennefer,' he said. 'And that's a pity.'

The invisible sorceress snorted and splashed in the tub. 'Go on.'

Geralt finished struggling with his trousers, pulling them on under his towel, and sat on the bench. Buckling up his boots, he related the adventure by the river, cutting out most of the skirmish

with the catfish. Yennefer didn't seem the type to be interested in fishing.

When he got to the part where the cloud-creature escaped from the jar, the huge soapy sponge froze.

'Well, well,' he heard, 'that's interesting. A djinn in a bottle.'

'No djinn,' he contested. 'It was some variant of scarlet mist. Some new, unknown type—'

'The new and unknown type deserves to be called something,' said the invisible Yennefer. 'The name djinn is no worse than any other. Continue, please.'

He obeyed. The soap in the tub foamed relentlessly as he continued his tale, and the water overflowed. Something caught his eye. Looking more carefully he discerned outlines and shapes revealed by the soap covering the invisible Yennefer. They fascinated him to the extent that he was struck dumb.

'Go on!' a voice coming from nothingness, from above the outlines which so absorbed him, urged. 'What happened next?'

'That's all,' he said. 'I chased him away, that djinn, as you call him—'

'How?' The ladle rose and poured water. The soap vanished, as did the shapes.

Geralt sighed. 'With an incantation,' he said. 'An exorcism.'

'Which one?' The ladle poured water once more. The witcher started to observe the ladle's action more diligently because the water, albeit briefly, also revealed this and that. He repeated the incantation, substituting the vowel 'e' with an intake of breath, according to the safety rule. He thought he'd impress the sorceress by knowing the rule so he was surprised when he heard laughter coming from the tub.

'What's so funny?'

'That exorcism of yours . . .' The towel flew off its peg and suddenly began to wipe the rest of the outlines. 'Triss is going to kill herself laughing when I tell her. Who taught you that, witcher? That incantation?'

'A priestess from Huldra's sanctuary. It's a secret language of the temple—'

'Secret to some.' The towel slapped against the brim of the tub, water sprayed on to the floor and wet footprints marked the

sorceress's steps. 'That wasn't an incantation, Geralt. Nor would I advise you to repeat those words in other temples.'

'What was it, if not an incantation?' he asked, watching two black stockings outline shapely legs, one after the other.

'A witty saying.' Frilly knickers clung to nothing in an unusually interesting manner. 'If rather indecent.'

A white shirt with an enormous flower-shaped ruffle fluttered upwards and outlined Yennefer's body. She didn't, the witcher noticed, bother with the whalebone nonsense usually worn by women. She didn't have to.

'What saying?' he asked.

'Never mind.'

The cork sprang from a rectangular crystal bottle standing on the stool. The bath-chamber started to smell of lilac and gooseberries. The cork traced several circles and jumped back into place. The sorceress fastened the cuffs of her shirt, pulled on a dress and materialised.

'Fasten me up.' She turned her back to him while combing her hair with a tortoiseshell comb. He noticed that the comb had a long, sharp prong which could, if need be, easily take the place of a dagger.

He took a deliberately long time fastening her dress, one hook at a time, enjoying the scent of her hair, which fell halfway down her back in a black cascade.

'Going back to the bottle creature,' said Yennefer, putting diamond earrings in her ears, 'it's obvious that it wasn't your funny incantation that drove him away. The hypothesis that he discharged his fury on your friend and left seems closer to the truth.'

'Probably,' Geralt agreed, gloomily. 'I don't think he flew off to Cidaris to do away with Valdo Marx.'

'Who's Valdo Marx?'

'A troubadour who considers my companion, also a poet and musician, a talentless wastrel who panders to the taste of the masses.'

The sorceress turned round with a strange glimmer in her eyes. 'Could it be that your friend managed to express a wish?'

'Two. Both stupid. Why do you ask? This fulfilling of wishes by genies is nonsense, after all, djinns, spirits of the lamp—'

‘Clearly nonsense,’ repeated Yennefer with a smile. ‘Of course. It’s an invention, a fairy tale devoid of any sense, like all the legends in which good spirits and fortune tellers fulfil wishes. Stories like that are made up by poor simpletons, who can’t even dream of fulfilling their wishes and desires themselves. I’m pleased you’re not one of them, Geralt of Rivia. It makes you closer in spirit to me. If I want something, I don’t dream of it – I act. And I always get what I want.’

‘I don’t doubt it. Are you ready?’

‘I am.’ The sorceress finished fastening the straps of her slippers and stood up. Even in high heels, she wasn’t impressively tall. She shook her hair which, he found, had retained its picturesque, dishevelled and curling disarray despite the furious combing.

‘I’ve got a question, Geralt. The seal which closed the bottle . . . Has your friend still got it?’

The witcher reflected. He had the seal, not Dandilion. But experience had taught him that sorcerers shouldn’t be told too much.

‘Hmm . . . I think so.’ He deceived her as to the reason for his delay in replying. ‘Yes, he probably does. Why? Is the seal important?’

‘That’s a strange question,’ she said sharply, ‘for a witcher and a specialist in supernatural monstrosities. Someone who ought to know that such a seal is important enough not to touch. And not to let their friend touch.’

He clenched his jaw. The blow was well aimed.

‘Oh, well.’ Yennefer changed her tone to a much gentler one. ‘No one’s infallible and no witcher’s infallible, as we see. Everyone can make a mistake. Well, we can get it on our way. Where’s your comrade?’

‘Here, in Rinde. At Errdil’s. The elf’s.’

She looked at him carefully.

‘At Errdil’s?’ she repeated, contorting her lips in a smile. ‘I know where that is. And I gather his cousin Chireadan is there too?’

‘That’s right. But what—?’

‘Nothing,’ she interrupted, raised her arms and closed her eyes.

The medallion around the witcher’s neck pulsed, tugged at the chain.

On the damp bath-chamber wall shone the luminous outline of a door which framed a swirling phosphorescent milky nothingness. The witcher cursed. He didn't like magical portals, or travelling by them.

'Do we have to . . .' He cleared his throat. 'It's not far—'

'I can't walk the streets of this town,' she cut him short. 'They're not too crazy about me here. They might insult me and throw stones – or do something worse. Several people are effectively ruining my reputation here, thinking they can get away with it. Don't worry, my portals are safe.'

Geralt had once watched as only half a traveller using a safe portal flew through. The other half was never found. He knew of several cases where people had entered a portal and never been seen again.

The sorceress adjusted her hair again and pinned a pearl-embossed purse to her belt. The purse looked too small to hold anything other than a handful of coppers and a lipstick, but Geralt knew it was no ordinary purse.

'Hold me. Tighter. I'm not made of china. On our way!'

The medallion vibrated, something flashed and Geralt suddenly found himself in black nothingness, in penetrating cold. He couldn't see, hear or feel anything. Cold was all that his senses could register.

He wanted to curse, but didn't have time.

V

‘It’s an hour since she went in,’ Chireadan turned over the hourglass standing on the table. ‘I’m starting to get worried. Was Dandilion’s throat really so bad? Don’t you think we ought to go and have a look?’

‘She made it quite clear that she didn’t want us to.’ Geralt finished his mug of herb tea, grimacing dreadfully. He valued and liked the settled elves for their intelligence, calm reserve and sense of humour, but he couldn’t understand or share their taste in food or drink. ‘I don’t intend to disturb her, Chireadan. Magic requires time. It can take all day and night, as long as Dandilion gets better.’

‘Oh well, you’re right.’

A sound of hammering came from the room next door. Errdil, as it turned out, lived in a deserted inn which he had bought intending to renovate and then open with his wife, a quiet, taciturn elf. Vratimir, who had taken to their company after a night spent with the elves in the guardroom, volunteered to help with the repairs. He got down to renovating the wood panelling, working alongside the married couple, as soon as the confusion created by the witcher and Yennefer leaping through the wall in the flash of a portal had subsided.

‘I didn’t think you’d find it so easy, if I’m to be honest,’ Chireadan went on. ‘Yennefer isn’t the most spontaneous of people when it comes to help. Others’ troubles don’t particularly bother her, and don’t disturb her sleep. In a word, I’ve never heard of her helping anyone if there wasn’t something in it for her. I wonder what’s in it for her to help you and Dandilion.’

‘Aren’t you exaggerating?’ The witcher smiled. ‘I didn’t have such a bad impression of her. She likes to demonstrate her superiority, it’s true, but compared with other wizards, with that whole arrogant bunch, she’s walking charm and kindliness personified.’

Chireadan also smiled. ‘It’s almost as though you thought a scorpion were prettier than a spider,’ he said, ‘because it’s got such a lovely tail. Be careful, Geralt. You’re not the first to have judged her like that without knowing she’s turned her charm and beauty into weapons. Weapons she uses skilfully and without scruple. Which, of course, doesn’t change the fact that she’s a fascinating and good-looking woman. You wouldn’t disagree, would you?’

Geralt glanced keenly at the elf. For a second time, he thought he

saw traces of a blush on his face. It surprised him no less than Chireadan's words. Pure-blooded elves were not wont to admire human women, even the very beautiful ones, and Yennefer, although attractive in her own way, couldn't pass as a great beauty.

Each to their own taste but, in actual fact, not many would describe sorceresses as good-looking. Indeed, all of them came from social circles where the only fate for daughters would be marriage. Who would have thought of condemning their daughter to years of tedious studies and the tortures of somatic mutations if she could be given away in marriage and advantageously allied? Who wished to have a sorceress in their family? Despite the respect enjoyed by magicians, a sorceress's family did not benefit from her in the least because by the time the girl had completed her education, nothing tied her to her family anymore – only brotherhood counted, to the exclusion of all else. So only daughters with no chance of finding a husband become sorceresses.

Unlike priestesses and druidesses, who only unwillingly took ugly or crippled girls, sorcerers took anyone who showed evidence of a predisposition. If the child passed the first years of training, magic entered into the equation – straightening and evening out legs, repairing bones which had badly knitted, patching hare-lips, removing scars, birthmarks and pox scars. The young sorceress would become attractive because the prestige of her profession demanded it. The result was pseudo-pretty women with the angry and cold eyes of ugly girls. Girls who couldn't forget their ugliness had been covered by the mask of magic only for the prestige of their profession.

No, Geralt couldn't understand Chireadan. His eyes, the eyes of a witcher, registered too many details.

'No, Chireadan,' he answered. 'I wouldn't disagree. Thank you for the warning. But this only concerns Dandilion. He suffered at my side, in my presence. I didn't manage to save him and I couldn't help him. I'd sit on a scorpion with my bare backside if I knew it would help him.'

'That's precisely what you've got to beware of most.' The elf smiled enigmatically. 'Because Yennefer knows it and she likes to make the most of such knowledge. Don't trust her, Geralt. She's dangerous.'

He didn't answer.

Upstairs, the door squeaked. Yennefer stood at the stairs, leaning on the gallery balustrade.

‘Witcher, could you come here?’

‘Of course.’

The sorceress leant her back against the door of one of the few rooms with furniture, where they had put the suffering troubadour.

The witcher approached, watchful and silent. He saw her left shoulder, slightly higher than her right. Her nose, slightly too long. Her lips, a touch too narrow. Her chin, receding a little too much. Her brows a little too irregular. Her eyes . . .

He saw too many details. Quite unnecessarily.

‘How’s Dandilion?’

‘Do you doubt my capabilities?’

He continued watching. She had the figure of a twenty-year-old, although he preferred not to guess at her real age. She moved with natural, unaffected grace. No, there was no way of guessing what she had been like before, what had been improved. He stopped thinking about it; there wasn’t any sense.

‘Your talented friend will be well,’ she said. ‘He’ll recover his vocal talents.’

‘You have my gratitude, Yennefer.’

She smiled. ‘You’ll have an opportunity to prove it.’

‘Can I look in on him?’

She remained silent for a moment, watching him with a strange smile and drumming her fingers on the door-frame. ‘Of course. Go in.’

The medallion on the witcher’s neck started to quiver, sharply and rhythmically.

A glass sphere the size of a small watermelon, aflame with a milky light, lay in the centre of the floor. The sphere marked the heart of a precisely traced nine-pointed star whose arms reached the corners and walls of the small chamber. A red pentagram was inscribed within the star. The tips of the pentagram were marked by black candles standing in weirdly shaped holders. Black candles had also been lit at the head of the bed where Dandilion, covered with sheepskins, rested. The poet was breathing peacefully; he didn’t wheeze or rasp anymore and the rictus of pain had disappeared from his face, to be replaced by an idiotic smile of happiness.

‘He’s asleep,’ said Yennefer. ‘And dreaming.’

Geralt examined the patterns traced on the floor. The magic hidden within them was palpable, but he knew it was a dormant magic. It brought to mind the purr of a sleeping lion, without suggesting how the roar might sound.

'What is this, Yennefer?'

'A trap.'

'For what?'

'For you, for the time being.' The sorceress turned the key in the lock, then turned it over in her hand. The key disappeared.

'And thus I'm trapped,' he said coldly. 'What now? Are you going to assault my virtue?'

'Don't flatter yourself.' Yennefer sat on the edge of the bed. Dandilion, still smiling like a moron, groaned quietly. It was, without a doubt, a groan of bliss.

'What's this all about, Yennefer ? If it's a game, I don't know the rules.'

'I told you,' she began, 'that I always get what I want. As it happens, I desire something that Dandilion has. I'll get it from him and we can part ways. Don't worry, he won't come to any harm—'

'The things you've set on the floor,' he interrupted, 'are used to summon demons. Someone always comes to harm where demons are summoned. I won't allow it.'

'—not a hair of his head will be harmed,' continued the sorceress, without paying any attention to his words. 'His voice will be even more beautiful and he'll be very pleased, even happy. We'll all be happy. And we'll part with no ill-feelings or resentment.'

'Oh, Virginia,' moaned Dandilion without opening his eyes. 'Your breasts are so beautiful, more delicate than a swan's down . . . Virginia . . .'

'Has he lost his mind? Is he raving?'

'He's dreaming,' smiled Yennefer. 'His dream wish is being satisfied in his sleep. I probed his mind to the very depths. There wasn't much there. A few obscenities, several dreams and masses of poetry. But be that as it may. The seal which plugged the bottle with the djinn, Geralt, I know he doesn't have it. You do. Please give it to me.'

'What do you need the seal for?'

‘How should I answer your question?’ The sorceress smiled coquettishly. ‘Let’s try this: it’s none of your damned business, witcher. Does that satisfy you?’

‘No.’ His smile was equally nasty. ‘It doesn’t. But don’t reproach yourself for it, Yennefer. I’m not easily satisfied. Only those who are above average have managed so far.’

‘Pity. So you’ll remain unsatisfied. It’s your loss. The seal, please. Don’t pull that face, it doesn’t suit either your good looks or your complexion. In case you hadn’t noticed, let me tell you that you are now beginning to repay the gratitude you owe me. The seal is the first instalment for the price to be paid for the singer’s voice.’

‘I see you’ve divided the price into several instalments,’ he said coldly. ‘Fine. I might have expected that. But let it be a fair trade, Yennefer. I bought your help. And I’ll pay.’

She contorted her lips in a smile, but her violet eyes remained wide open and cold.

‘You shouldn’t have any doubts as to that, witcher.’

‘Me,’ he repeated. ‘Not Dandilion. I’m taking him to a safe place. When I’ve done that I’ll come back and pay your second instalment, and all the others. Because as to the first . . .’

He reached into a secret pocket of his belt and pulled out the brass seal with the sign of a star and broken cross.

‘Here, take it. Not as an instalment. Accept it from a witcher as proof of his gratitude for having treated him more kindly, albeit in a calculated manner, than the majority of your brethren would have done. Accept it as evidence of goodwill, which ought to convince you that, having seen to my friend’s safety, I’ll return to repay you. I didn’t see the scorpion amidst the flowers, Yennefer. I’m prepared to pay for my inattention.’

‘A pretty speech.’ The sorceress folded her arms. ‘Touching and pompous. Pity it’s in vain. I need Dandilion, so he’s staying here.’

‘He’s already been close to the creature you intend to draw here.’ Geralt indicated the patterns on the floor. ‘When you’ve finished your handiwork and brought the djinn here Dandilion is most certainly going to suffer despite all your promises, maybe even more than before. Because it’s the creature from the bottle that you want, isn’t it? Do you intend to master it, force it to serve you? You don’t have to answer, I know it’s none of my damned business. Do what you want, draw ten demons in if you like. But without

Dandilion. If you put him at risk, this will no longer be an honest trade, Yennefer, and you don't have the right to demand payment for that. I won't allow—' He broke off.

'I wondered when you'd feel it,' giggled the sorceress.

Geralt tensed his muscles and, clenching his jaw until it hurt, strained his entire will. It didn't help. He was paralysed, like a stone statue, like a post which had been dug into the ground. He couldn't even wiggle a toe.

'I knew you could deflect a spell thrown straight at you,' said Yennefer. 'I also knew that before you tried anything you'd try to impress me with your eloquence. You were talking while the spell hanging over you was working and slowly breaking you. Now you can only talk. But you don't have to impress me anymore. I know you're eloquent. Any further efforts in that direction will only spoil the effect.'

'Chireadan—' he said with an effort, still fighting the magical paralysis. 'Chireadan will realise that you're up to something. He'll soon work it out, suspect something any minute now, because he doesn't trust you, Yennefer. He hasn't trusted you from the start—'

The sorceress swept her hand in a broad gesture. The walls of the chamber became blurred and took on a uniform dull grey appearance and colour. The door disappeared, the windows disappeared, even the dusty curtains and pictures on the wall, splattered with flies, vanished.

'What if Chireadan does figure it out?' She grimaced maliciously. 'Is he going to run for help? Nobody will get through my barrier. But Chireadan's not going to run anywhere. He won't do anything against me. Anything. He's under my spell. No, it's not a question of black sorcery. I didn't do anything in that way. It's a simple question of body chemistry. He's fallen in love with me, the blockhead. Didn't you know? Can you imagine, he even intended to challenge Beau to a duel. A jealous elf. That rarely happens. Geralt, it's not for nothing that I chose this house.'

'Beau Berrant, Chireadan, Errdil, Dandilion. You really are heading for your goal as straight as you can. But me, Yennefer, you're not going to use me.'

'Oh I am, I am.' The sorceress got up from the bed and approached him, carefully avoiding the signs and symbols marked out on the floor. 'After all, I did say that you owe me something for curing the poet. It's a matter of a trifle, a small favour. After what

I've done, what I intend to do here in a moment, I'm leaving Rinde and I've still got unpaid accounts in this town. I've promised several people here something, and I always keep my promises. Since I won't have time to do so myself, you'll keep those promises for me.'

He wrestled with all his might. In vain.

'Don't struggle, my little witcher.' She smiled spitefully. 'It's pointless. You've got a strong will and quite a bit of resistance to magic but you can't contend with me and my spell. And don't act out a farce for me, don't try to charm me with your hard and insolent masculinity. You are the only one to think you're insolent and hard. You'd do anything for me in order to save your friend, even without spells at that. You'd pay any price. You'd lick my boots. And maybe something else, too, if I unexpectedly wished to amuse myself.'

He remained silent. Yennefer was standing in front of him, smiling and fiddling with the obsidian star sparkling with diamonds pinned to her velvet ribbon.

'I already knew what you were like,' she continued, 'after exchanging a few words with you in Beau's bedroom. And I knew what form of payment I'd demand from you. My accounts in Rinde could be settled by anyone, including Chireadan. But you're the one who's going to do it because you have to pay me. For your insolence, for the cold way you look at me, for the eyes which fish for every detail, for your stony face and sarcastic tone of voice. For thinking that you could stand face to face with Yennefer of Vergerberg and believe her to be full of self-admiration and arrogance, a calculating witch, while staring at her soapy tits. Pay up, Geralt of Rivia!'

She grabbed his hair with both hands and kissed him violently on the lips, sinking her teeth into them like a vampire. The medallion on his neck quivered and it felt to Geralt as if the chain was shrinking and strangling him. Something blazed in his head while a terrible humming filled his ears. He stopped seeing the sorceress's violet eyes and fell into darkness.

He was kneeling. Yennefer was talking to him in a gentle, soft voice.

'You remember?'

'Yes, my lady.' It was his own voice.

'So go and carry out my instructions.'

‘At your command, my lady.’

‘You may kiss my hand.’

‘Thank you, my lady.’

He felt himself approach her on his knees. Ten thousand bees buzzed in his head. Her hand smelt of lilac and gooseberries. Lilac and gooseberries . . . Lilac and gooseberries . . . A flash. Darkness.

A balustrade, stairs. Chireadan’s face.

‘Geralt! What’s the matter with you? Geralt, where are you going?’

‘I have to . . .’ His own voice. ‘I have to go—’

‘Oh, gods! Look at his eyes!’

Vratimir’s face, contorted with horror. Errdil’s face. And Chireadan’s voice.

‘No! Errdil ! Don’t touch him! Don’t try to stop him! Out of his way – get out of his way!’

The scent of lilac and gooseberries. Lilac and gooseberries . . .

A door. The explosion of sunlight. It’s hot. Humid. The scent of lilac and gooseberries. There’s going to be a storm, he thought.

And that was his last thought.

VI

Darkness. The scent . . .

Scent? No, smell. Stench of urine, rotten straw and wet rags. The stink of a smouldering torch stuck into an iron grip set in a wall of uneven stone blocks. A shadow thrown by the light of the torch, a shadow on the dirt floor—

The shadow of a grille.

The witcher cursed.

‘At last.’ He felt someone lift him up, rest his back against the damp wall. ‘I was beginning to worry, you didn’t regain consciousness for so long.’

‘Chireadan? Where – dammit, my head’s splitting – where are we?’

‘Where do you think?’

Geralt wiped his face and looked around. Three rogues were sitting by the opposite wall. He couldn’t see them clearly; they were sitting as far from the torch light as possible, in near complete darkness. Something which looked like a heap of rags crouched under the grille which separated them from the lit corridor. It was, in fact, a thin old man with a nose like a stork’s beak. The length of his matted stringy hair and the state of his clothes showed that he hadn’t arrived yesterday.

‘They’ve thrown us in the dungeon,’ he said gloomily.

‘I’m glad you’ve regained your ability to draw logical conclusions, ’ said the elf.

‘Bloody hell . . . And Dandilion? How long have we been here? How much time has gone by since—?’

‘I don’t know. I was unconscious, just like you, when I was thrown in here.’ Chireadan raked up the straw to sit more comfortably. ‘Is it important?’

‘And how, dammit! Yennefer—And Dandilion—Dandilion’s there, with her, and she’s planning—Hey, you! How long have we been in here?’

The other prisoners whispered among themselves. None replied.

‘Have you gone deaf?’ Geralt spat, still unable to get rid of the metallic taste in his mouth. ‘I’m asking you, what time of day is it?

Or night? Surely you know what time they feed you?'

They muttered again, cleared their throats. 'Sirs,' said one of them at last. 'Leave us in peace and don't talk to us. We be decent thieves, not some politicals. We didn't try to attack the authorities. We was only stealing.'

'That be it,' said another. 'You've your corner, we've ours. And let each look after his own.'

Chireadan snorted. The witcher spat.

'That's the way it goes,' mumbled the hairy old man with a long nose. 'Everyone in the clink guards his own corner and holds with his own.'

'And you, old man,' asked the elf sneeringly, 'are you with them or with us? Which camp do you count yourself in?'

'None,' he answered proudly, 'because I'm innocent.'

Geralt spat again. 'Chireadan?' he asked, rubbing his temple. 'This attempt on the authorities . . . Is it true?'

'Absolutely. You don't remember?'

'I walked out into the street . . . People were looking at me . . . Then . . . Then there was a shop—'

'A pawnbroker's.' The elf lowered his voice. 'You went into the pawnbroker's. As soon as you walked in, you punched the owner in the teeth. Hard. Very hard.'

The witcher ground his teeth and cursed.

'The pawnbroker fell,' Chireadan continued quietly. 'And you kicked him several times in delicate places. The assistant ran to help his master and you threw him out of the window, into the street.'

'I fear,' muttered Geralt, 'that wasn't the end of it.'

'Your fears are well founded. You left the pawnbroker's and marched down the centre of the street, jostling passersby and shouting some nonsense about a lady's honour. There was quite a crowd following you, Errdil, Vratimir and I among them. Then you stopped in front of Laurelnose the apothecary's house, went in, and were back in the street a moment later, dragging Laurelnose by the leg. And you made something of a speech to the crowd.'

'What sort of a speech?'

'To put it simply, you stated that a self-respecting man shouldn't ever call a professional harlot a whore because it's base and

repugnant, while using the word whore to describe a woman one has never knocked off or paid any money for doing so, is childish and punishable. The punishment, you announced, would be dealt there and then, and it would be fitting for a spoilt child. You thrust the apothecary's head between his knees, pulled down his pants and thrashed his arse with a belt.'

'Go on, Chireadan. Go on. Don't spare me.'

'You beat Laurelnose on the backside and the apothecary howled and sobbed, called to gods and men alike for help, begged for mercy – he even promised to be better in the future, but you clearly didn't believe him. Then several armed bandits, who in Rinde go by the name of guards, came running up.'

'And,' Geralt nodded, 'that's when I made a hit at the authorities?'

'Not at all. You made a hit at them much earlier. Both the pawnbroker and Laurelnose are on the town council. Both had called for Yennefer to be thrown out of town. Not only did they vote for it at the council but they badmouthed her in taverns and spread vulgar gossip.'

'I guessed that. Carry on. You stopped when the guards appeared. They threw me in here?'

'They wanted to. Oh, Geralt, what a sight it was. What you did to them, it's hard to describe. They had swords, whips, clubs, hatchets, and you only had an ash cane with a pommel, which you'd snatched from some dandy. And when they were all lying on the ground, you walked on. Most of us knew where you were going.'

'I'd be happy to know too.'

'You were going to the temple. Because the priest Krepp, who's also a member of the council, dedicated a lot of time to Yennefer in his sermons. You promised him a lesson in respect for the fair sex. When you spoke of him you omitted his title and threw in other descriptions, to the delight of the children trailing after you.'

'Aha,' muttered Geralt. 'So blasphemy came into it, too. What else? Desecration of the temple?'

'No. You didn't manage to get in there. An entire unit of municipal guards, armed – it seemed to me – with absolutely everything they could lay their hands on in the armoury apart from a catapult, was waiting in front of the temple. It looked as if they were going to slaughter you, but you didn't reach them. You

suddenly grasped your head with both hands and fainted.'

'You don't have to finish. So, Chireadan, how were you imprisoned ?'

'Several guards ran to attack you when you fell. I got into a dispute with them. I got a blow over the head with a mace and came to here, in this hole. No doubt they'll accuse me of taking part in an anti-human conspiracy.'

'Since we're talking about accusations,' the witcher ground his teeth again, 'what's in store for us, do you think?'

'If Neville, the mayor, gets back from the capital on time,' muttered Chireadan, 'who knows . . . he's a friend. But if he doesn't, then sentence will be passed by the councillors, including Laurelnose and the pawnbroker, of course. And that means—'

The elf made a brief gesture across his neck. Despite the darkness the gesture left little doubt as to Chireadan's meaning. The witcher didn't reply. The thieves mumbled to each other and the tiny old man, locked up for his innocence, seemed to be asleep.

'Great,' said Geralt finally, and cursed vilely. 'Not only will I hang, but I'll do so with the knowledge that I'm the cause of your death, Chireadan. And Dandilion's, too, no doubt. No, don't interrupt. I know it's Yennefer's prank, but I'm the guilty one. It's my foolishness. She deceived me, took the piss out of me, as the dwarves say.'

'Hmm . . .' muttered the elf. 'Nothing to add, nothing to take away. I warned you against her. Dammit, I warned you, and I turned out to be just as big an – pardon the word – idiot. You're worried that I'm here because of you, but it's quite the opposite. You're locked up because of me. I could have stopped you in the street, overpowered you, not allowed—But I didn't. Because I was afraid that when the spell she'd cast on you had dispelled, you'd go back and . . . harm her. Forgive me.'

'I forgive you, because you've no idea how strong that spell was. My dear elf, I can break an ordinary spell within a few minutes and I don't faint while doing it. You wouldn't have managed to break Yennefer's spell and you would have had difficulty overpowering me. Remember the guards.'

'I wasn't thinking about you. I repeat: I was thinking about her.'

'Chireadan?'

'Yes?'

‘Do you . . . Do you—’

‘I don’t like grand words,’ interrupted the elf, smiling sadly. ‘I’m greatly, shall we say, fascinated by her. No doubt you’re surprised that anyone could be fascinated by her?’

Geralt closed his eyes to recall an image which, without using grand words, fascinated him inexplicably.

‘No, Chireadan,’ he said. ‘I’m not surprised.’

Heavy steps sounded in the corridor, and a clang of metal. The dungeon was filled with the shadows of four guards. A key grated. The innocent old man leapt away from the bars like a lynx and hid among the criminals.

‘So soon?’ The elf, surprised, half-whispered. ‘I thought it would take longer to build the scaffold . . .’

One of the guards, a tall, strapping fellow, bald as a knee, his mug covered with bristles like a boar, pointed at the witcher.

‘That one,’ he said briefly.

Two others grabbed Geralt, hauled him up and pressed him against the wall. The thieves squeezed into their corner; the long-nosed grandad buried himself in the straw. Chireadan wanted to jump up, but he fell to the dirt floor, retreating from the short sword pointed at his chest.

The bald guard stood in front of the witcher, pulled his sleeves up and rubbed his fist.

‘Councillor Laurelnose,’ he said, ‘told me to ask if you’re enjoying our little dungeon. Perhaps there’s something you need? Perhaps the chill is getting to you? Eh?’

Geralt did not answer. Nor could he kick the bald man, as the guards who restrained him were standing on his feet in their heavy boots.

The bald man took a short swing and punched the witcher in the stomach. It didn’t help to tense his muscles in defence. Geralt, catching his breath with an effort, looked at the buckle of his own belt for a while, then the guards hauled him up again.

‘Is there nothing you need?’ the guard continued, stinking of onions and rotting teeth. ‘The councillor will be pleased that you have no complaints.’

Another blow, in the same place. The witcher choked and would have puked, but he had nothing to throw up.

The bald guard turned sideways. He was changing hands.

Wham! Geralt looked at the buckle of his belt again. Although it seemed strange, there was no hole above it through which the wall could be seen.

‘Well ?’ The guard backed away a little, no doubt planning to take a wider swing. ‘Don’t you have any wishes? Mr Laurelnose asked whether you have any. But why aren’t you saying anything? Tongue-tied? I’ll get it straight for you!’

Wham!

Geralt didn’t faint this time either. And he had to faint because he cared for his internal organs. In order to faint, he had to force the guard to—

The guard spat, bared his teeth and rubbed his fist again.

‘Well? No wishes at all?’

‘Just one . . .’ moaned the witcher, raising his head with difficulty. ‘That you burst, you son-of-a-whore.’

The bald guard ground his teeth, stepped back and took a swing – this time, according to Geralt’s plan, aiming for his head. But the blow never came. The guard suddenly gobbled like a turkey, grew red, grabbed his stomach with both hands, howled, roared with pain . . .

And burst.

VII

‘And what am I to do with you?’

A blindingly bright ribbon of lightning cut the darkened sky outside the window, followed by a sharp, drawn-out crash of thunder. The downpour was getting harder as the storm cloud passed over Rinde.

Geralt and Chireadan, seated on a bench under a huge tapestry depicting the Prophet Lebiodus pasturing his sheep, remained silent, modestly hanging their heads. Mayor Neville was pacing the chamber, snorting and panting with anger.

‘You bloody, shitty sorcerers!’ he yelled suddenly, standing still. ‘Are you persecuting my town, or what? Aren’t there any other towns in the world?’

The elf and witcher remained silent.

‘To do something like—’ the mayor choked. ‘To turn the warder . . . Like a tomato! To pulp! To red pulp! It’s inhuman!’

‘Inhuman and godless,’ repeated the priest, also present. ‘So inhuman that even a fool could guess who’s behind it. Yes, mayor. We both know Chireadan and the man here, who calls himself a witcher, wouldn’t have enough Force to do this. It is all the work of Yennefer, that witch cursed by the gods!’ There was a clap of thunder outside, as if confirming the priest’s words. ‘It’s her and no one else,’ continued Krepp. ‘There’s no question about it. Who, if not Yennefer, would want revenge upon Laurelnose?’

‘Hehehe,’ chuckled the mayor suddenly. ‘That’s the thing I’m least angry about. Laurelnose has been scheming against me; he’s been after my office. And now the people aren’t going to respect him. When they remember how he got it in the arse—’

‘That’s all it needs, Mr Neville, you to applaud the crime,’ Krepp frowned. ‘Let me remind you that had I not thrown an exorcism at the witcher, he would have raised his hand to strike me and the temple’s majesty—’

‘And that’s because you spoke vilely about her in your sermons, Krepp. Even Berrant complained about you. But what’s true is true. Do you hear that, you scoundrels?’ The mayor turned to Geralt and Chireadan again. ‘Nothing justifies what you’ve done! I don’t intend to tolerate such things here! That’s enough, now get on with it, tell me everything, tell me what you have for your defence, because if

you don't, I swear by all the relics that I'll lead you such a dance as you won't forget to your dying day! Tell me everything, right now, as you would in a confessional!'

Chireadan sighed deeply and looked meaningfully and pleadingly at the witcher.

Geralt also sighed, then cleared his throat. And he recounted everything. Well, almost everything.

'So that's it,' said the priest after a moment's silence. 'A fine kettle of fish. A genie released from captivity. And an enchantress who has her sights on the genie. Not a bad arrangement. This could end badly, very badly.'

'What's a genie?' asked Neville. 'And what does this Yennefer want?'

'Enchanters,' explained Krepp, 'draw their power from the forces of nature, or to put it more accurately, from the so-called Four Elements or Principles, commonly called the natural forces. Air, Water, Fire and Earth. Each of these elements has its own Dimension which is called a Plane in the jargon used by enchanters. There's a Water Plane, Fire Plane and so on. These Dimensions, which are beyond our reach, are inhabited by what are called genies—'

'That's what they're called in legends,' interrupted the witcher. 'Because as far as I know—'

'Don't interrupt,' Krepp cut him short. 'The fact that you don't know much was evident in your tale, witcher. So be quiet and listen to what those wiser than you have to say. Going back to the genies, there are four sorts, just as there are four Planes. Djinns are air creatures; marides are associated with the principle of water; afreet are Fire genies and d'ao, the genies of Earth—'

'You've run away with yourself, Krepp,' Neville butted in. 'This isn't a temple school, don't lecture us. Briefly, what does Yennefer want with this genie?'

'A genie like this, mayor, is a living reservoir of magical energy. A sorcerer who has a genie at their beck and call can direct that energy in the form of spells. They don't have to draw the Force from Nature, the genie does it for them. The power of such an enchanter is enormous, close to omnipotence—'

'Somehow I've never heard of a wizard who can do everything,' contradicted Neville. 'On the contrary, the power of most of them is

clearly exaggerated. They can't do this, they can't—'

'The enchanter Stammelford,' interrupted the priest, once more taking on the tone and poise of an academic lecturer, 'once moved a mountain because it obstructed the view from his tower. Nobody has managed to do the like, before or since. Because Stammelford, so they say, had the services of a d'ao, an Earth genie. There are records of deeds accomplished by other magicians on a similar scale. Enormous waves and catastrophic rains are certainly the work of marides. Fiery columns, fires and explosions the work of afreets—'

'Whirlwinds, hurricanes, flights above the earth,' muttered Geralt, 'Geoffrey Monck.'

'Exactly. I see you do know something after all.' Krepp glanced at him more kindly. 'Word has it old Monck had a way of forcing a djinn to serve him. There were rumours that he had more than one. He was said to keep them in bottles and make use of them when need arose. Three wishes from each genie, then it's free and escapes into its own dimension.'

'The one at the river didn't fulfil anything,' said Geralt emphatically. 'He immediately threw himself at Dandilion's throat.'

'Genies,' Krepp turned up his nose, 'are spiteful and deceitful beings. They don't like being packed into bottles and ordered to move mountains. They do everything they possibly can to make it impossible for you to express your wishes and then they fulfil them in a way which is hard to control and foresee, sometimes literally, so you have to be careful what you say. To subjugate a genie you need a will of iron, nerves of steel, a strong Force and considerable abilities. From what you say, it looks like your abilities, witcher, were too modest.'

'Too modest to subjugate the cad,' agreed Geralt. 'But I did chase him away; he bolted so fast the air howled. And that's also something. Yennefer, it's true, ridiculed my exorcism—'

'What was the exorcism? Repeat it.'

Geralt repeated it, word for word.

'What?!' The priest first turned pale, then red and finally blue. 'How dare you! Are you making fun of me?'

'Forgive me,' stuttered Geralt. 'To be honest, I don't know . . . what the words mean.'

'So don't repeat what you don't know! I've no idea where you

could have heard such filth!'

'Enough of that.' The mayor waved it all aside. 'We're wasting time. Right. We now know what the sorceress wants the genie for. But you said, Krepp, that it's bad. What's bad? Let her catch him and go to hell, what do I care? I think—'

No one ever found out what Neville was thinking, even if it wasn't a boast. A luminous rectangle appeared on the wall next to the tapestry of Prophet Lebiodus, something flashed and Dandilion landed in the middle of the town hall.

'Innocent!' yelled the poet in a clear, melodious tenor, sitting on the floor and looking around, his eyes vague. 'Innocent! The witcher is innocent! I wish you to believe it!'

'Dandilion!' Geralt shouted, holding Krepp back, who was clearly getting ready to perform an exorcism or a curse. 'Where have you . . . here . . . Dandilion!'

'Geralt!' The bard jumped up.

'Dandilion!'

'Who's this?' Neville growled. 'Dammit, if you don't put an end to your spells, there's no guarantee what I'll do. I've said that spells are forbidden in Rinde! First you have to put in a written application, then pay a tax and stamp duty . . . Eh? Isn't it that singer, the witch's hostage?'

'Dandilion,' repeated Geralt, holding the poet by the shoulders. 'How did you get here?'

'I don't know,' admitted the bard with a foolish, worried expression. 'To be honest, I'm rather unaware of what happened to me. I don't remember much and may the plague take me if I know what of that is real and what's a nightmare. But I do remember quite a pretty, black-haired female with fiery eyes—'

'What are you telling me about black-haired women for?' Neville interrupted angrily. 'Get to the point, squire, to the point. You yelled that the witcher is innocent. How am I to understand that? That Laurelnose thrashed his own arse with his hands? Because if the witcher's innocent, it couldn't have been otherwise. Unless it was a mass hallucination.'

'I don't know anything about any arses or hallucinations,' said Dandilion proudly. 'Or anything about laurel noses. I repeat, that the last thing I remember was an elegant woman dressed in tastefully co-ordinated black and white. She threw me into a shiny

hole, a magic portal for sure. But first she gave me a clear and precise errand. As soon as I'd arrived I was immediately to say, I quote: "My wish is for you to believe the witcher is not guilty for what occurred. That, and no other, is my wish." Word for word. Indeed, I tried to ask what all this was, what it was all about, and why. The black-haired woman didn't let me get a word in edge-ways. She scolded me most inelegantly, grasped me by the neck and threw me into the portal. That's all. And now . . .' Dandilion pulled himself up, brushed his doublet, adjusted his collar and fancy – if dirty – ruffles. '. . . perhaps, gentlemen, you'd like to tell me the name of the best tavern in town and where it can be found.'

'There are no bad taverns in my town,' said Neville slowly. 'But before you see them for yourself, you'll inspect the best dungeon in this town very thoroughly. You and your companions. Let me remind you that you're still not free, you scoundrels! Look at them! One tells incredible stories while the other leaps out of the wall and shouts about innocence, I wish, he yells, you to believe me. He has the audacity to wish—'

'My gods!' the priest suddenly grasped his bald crown. 'Now I understand! The wish! The last wish!'

'What's happened to you, Krepp?' the mayor frowned. 'Are you ill ?'

'The last wish!' repeated the priest. 'She made the bard express the last, the third wish. And Yennefer set a magical trap and, no doubt, captured the genie before he managed to escape into his own dimension! Mr Neville, we must—'

It thundered outside. So strongly that the walls shook.

'Dammit,' muttered the mayor, going up to the window. 'That was close. As long as it doesn't hit a house. All I need now is a fire —Oh gods! Just look! Just look at this! Krepp! What is it?'

All of them, to a man, rushed to the window.

'Mother of mine!' yelled Dandilion, grabbing his throat. 'It's him! It's that son-of-a-bitch who strangled me!'

'The djinn!' shouted Krepp. 'The Air genie!'

'Above Errdil's tavern!' shouted Chireadan, 'above his roof!'

'She's caught him!' The priest leant out so far he almost fell. 'Can you see the magical light? The sorceress has caught the genie!'

Geralt watched in silence.

Once, years ago, when a little snot-faced brat following his studies in Kaer Morhen, the Witchers' Settlement, he and a friend, Eskel, had captured a huge forest bumble-bee and tied it to a jug with a thread. They were in fits of laughter watching the antics of the tied bumble-bee, until Vesemir, their tutor, caught them at it and tanned their hides with a leather strap.

The djinn, circling above the roof of Errdil's tavern, behaved exactly like that bumble-bee. He flew up and fell, he sprang up and dived, he buzzed furiously in a circle. Because the djinn, exactly like the bumble-bee in Kaer Morhen, was tied down. Twisted threads of blindingly bright light of various colours were tightly wrapped around him and ended at the roof. But the djinn had more options than the bumble-bee, which couldn't knock down surrounding roofs, rip thatches to shreds, destroy chimneys, and shatter towers and garrets. The djinn could. And did.

'It's destroying the town,' wailed Neville. 'That monster's destroying my town!'

'Hehehe,' laughed the priest. 'She's found her match, it seems! It's an exceptionally strong djinn! I really don't know who's caught whom, the witch him or he the witch! Ha, it'll end with the djinn grinding her to dust. Very good! Justice will be done!'

'I shit on justice!' yelled the mayor, not caring if there were any voters under the window. 'Look what's happening there, Krepp! Panic, ruin! You didn't tell me that, you bald idiot! You played the wise guy, gabbled on, but not a word about what's most important! Why didn't you tell me that that demon . . . Witcher! Do something! Do you hear, innocent sorcerer ? Do something about that demon! I forgive you all your offences, but—'

'There's nothing can be done here, Mr Neville,' snorted Krepp. 'You didn't listen to what I was saying, that's all. You never listen to me. This, I repeat, is an exceptionally strong djinn. If it wasn't for that, the sorceress would have hold of him already. Her spell is soon going to weaken, and then the djinn is going to crush her and escape. And we'll have some peace.'

'And in the meantime, the town will go to ruins?'

'We've got to wait,' repeated the priest, 'but not idly. Give out the orders, mayor. Tell the people to evacuate the surrounding houses and get ready to extinguish fires. What's happening there now is nothing compared to the hell that's going to break loose when the genie has finished with the witch.'

Geralt raised his head, caught Chireadan's eye and looked away.

'Mr Krepp,' he suddenly decided, 'I need your help. It's about the portal through which Dandilion appeared here. The portal still links the town hall to—'

'There's not even a trace of the portal anymore,' the priest said coldly, pointing to the wall. 'Can't you see?'

'A portal leaves a trace, even when invisible. A spell can stabilise such a trace. I'll follow it.'

'You must be mad. Even if a passage like that doesn't tear you to pieces, what do you expect to gain by it? Do you want to find yourself in the middle of a cyclone?'

'I asked if you can cast a spell which could stabilise the trace.'

'Spell ?' the priest proudly raised his head. 'I'm not a godless sorcerer! I don't cast spells! My power comes from faith and prayer !'

'Can you or can't you?'

'I can.'

'Then get on with it, because time's pressing on.'

'Geralt,' said Dandilion, 'you've gone stark raving mad! Keep away from that bloody strangler!'

'Silence, please,' said Krepp, 'and gravity. I'm praying.'

'To hell with your prayers!' Neville hollered. 'I'm off to gather the people. We've got to do something and not stand here gabbling! Gods, what a day! What a bloody day!'

The witcher felt Chireadan touch his shoulder. He turned. The elf looked him in the eyes, then lowered his own.

'You're going there because you have to, aren't you?'

Geralt hesitated. He thought he smelled the scent of lilac and gooseberries.

'I think so,' he said reluctantly. 'I do have to. I'm sorry, Chireadan —'

'Don't apologise. I know what you feel.'

'I doubt it. Because I don't know myself.'

The elf smiled. The smile had little to do with joy. 'That's just it, Geralt. Precisely it.'

Krepp pulled himself upright and took a deep breath. ‘Ready,’ he said, pointing with pride at the barely visible outline on the wall. ‘But the portal is unsteady and won’t stay there for long. And there’s no way to be sure it won’t break. Before you step through, sir, examine your conscience. I can give you a blessing, but in order to forgive you your sins—’

‘—there’s no time,’ Geralt finished the sentence for him. ‘I know, Mr Krepp. There’s never enough time for it. Leave the chamber, all of you. If the portal explodes it’ll burst your eardrums. ’

‘I’ll stay,’ said Krepp, when the door had closed behind Dandilion and the elf. He waved his hands in the air, creating a pulsating aura around himself. ‘I’ll spread some protection, just in case. And if the portal does burst . . . I’ll try and pull you out, witcher. What are eardrums to me? They grow back.’

Geralt looked at him more kindly.

The priest smiled. ‘You’re a brave man,’ he said. ‘You want to save her, don’t you? But bravery isn’t going to be of much use to you. Djinns are vengeful beings. The sorceress is lost. And if you go there, you’ll be lost, too. Examine your conscience.’

‘I have.’ Geralt stood in front of the faintly glowing portal. ‘Mr Krepp, sir?’

‘Yes.’

‘That exorcism which made you so angry . . . What do the words mean?’

‘Indeed, what a moment for quips and jokes—’

‘Please, Mr Krepp, sir.’

‘Oh, well,’ said the priest, hiding behind the mayor’s heavy oak table. ‘It’s your last wish, so I’ll tell you. It means . . . Hmm . . . Hmm . . . essentially . . . *get out of here and go fuck yourself!*’

Geralt entered the nothingness, where cold stifled the laughter which was shaking him.

VIII

The portal, roaring and whirling like a hurricane, spat him out with a force that bruised his lungs. The witcher collapsed on the floor, panting and catching his breath with difficulty.

The floor shook. At first he thought he was trembling after his journey through the splitting hell of the portal, but he rapidly realised his mistake. The whole house was vibrating, trembling and creaking.

He looked around. He was not in the small room where he had last seen Yennefer and Dandilion but in the large communal hall of Errdil's renovated tavern.

He saw her. She was kneeling between tables, bent over the magical sphere. The sphere was aflame with a strong, milky light, so bright, enough to shine red through her fingers. The light from the sphere illuminated a scene, flickering and swaying, but clear. Geralt saw the small room with a star and pentagram traced on the floor, blazing with white heat. He saw many-coloured, creaking, fiery lines shooting from the pentagram and disappearing up over the roof towards the furious roar of the captured djinn.

Yennefer saw him, jumped up and raised her hand.

'No!' he shouted, 'don't do this! I want to help you!'

'Help?' She snorted. 'You?'

'Me.'

'In spite of what I did to you?'

'In spite of it.'

'Interesting. But not important. I don't need your help. Get out of here.'

'No.'

'Get out of here!' she yelled, grimacing ominously. 'It's getting dangerous! The whole thing's getting out of control, do you understand? I can't master him. I don't get it, but the scoundrel isn't weakening at all! I caught him once he'd fulfilled the troubadour's third wish and I should have him in the sphere by now. But he's not getting any weaker! Dammit, it looks as if he's getting stronger! But I'm still going to get the better of him, I'll break—'

'You won't break him, Yennefer. He'll kill you.'

‘It’s not so easy to kill me—’

She broke off. The whole roof of the tavern suddenly flared up. The vision projected by the sphere dissolved in the brightness. A huge fiery rectangle appeared on the ceiling. The sorceress cursed as she lifted her hands, and sparks gushed from her fingers.

‘Run, Geralt!’

‘What’s happening, Yennefer?’

‘He’s located me . . .’ She groaned, flushing red with effort. ‘He wants to get at me. He’s creating his own portal to get in. He can’t break loose but he’ll get in by the portal. I can’t—I can’t stop him!’

‘Yennefer—’

‘Don’t distract me! I’ve got to concentrate . . . Geralt, you’ve got to get out of here. I’ll open my portal, a way for you to escape. Be careful, it’ll be a random portal, I haven’t got time or strength for any other . . . I don’t know where you’ll end up . . . but you’ll be safe . . . Get ready—’

A huge portal on the ceiling suddenly flared blindingly, expanded and grew deformed. Out of the nothingness appeared the shapeless mouth already known to the witcher, snapping its drooping lips and howling loudly enough to pierce his ears. Yennefer jumped, waved her arms and shouted an incantation. A net of light shot from her palm and fell on the djinn. It gave a roar and sprouted long paws which shot towards the sorceress’s throat like attacking cobras. Yennefer didn’t back away.

Geralt threw himself towards her, pushed her aside and sheltered her. The djinn, tangled in the magical light, sprang from the portal like a cork from a bottle and threw himself at them, opening his jaws. The witcher clenched his teeth and hit him with the Sign without any apparent effect. But the genie didn’t attack. He hung in the air just below the ceiling, swelled to an impressive size, goggled at Geralt with his pale eyes and roared. There was something in that roar, something like a command, an order. He didn’t understand what it was.

‘This way!’ shouted Yennefer, indicating the portal which she had conjured up on the wall by the stairs. In comparison to the one created by the genie, the sorceress’s portal looked feeble, extremely inferior. ‘This way, Geralt! Run for it!’

‘Only with you!’

Yennefer, sweeping the air with her hands, was shouting

incantations and the many-coloured fetters showered sparks and creaked. The djinn whirled like the bumble-bee, pulling the bonds tight, then loosening them. Slowly but surely he was drawing closer to the sorceress. Yennefer did not back away.

The witcher leapt to her, deftly tripped her up, grabbed her by the waist with one hand and dug the other into her hair at the nape. Yennefer cursed nastily and thumped him in the neck with her elbow. He didn't let go of her. The penetrating smell of ozone, created by the curses, didn't kill the smell of lilac and gooseberries. Geralt stilled the sorceress's kicking legs and jumped, raising her straight up to the opalescently flickering nothingness of the lesser portal.

The portal which led into the unknown.

They flew out in a tight embrace, fell onto a marble floor and slid across it, knocking over an enormous candlestick and a table from which crystal goblets, platters of fruit and a huge bowl of crushed ice, seaweed and oysters showered down with a crash. Screams and squeals came from around the room.

They were lying in the very centre of a ballroom, bright with candelabra. Richly-clad gentlemen and ladies, sparkling with jewels, had stopped dancing and were watching them in stunned silence. The musicians in the gallery finished their piece in a cacophony which grated on the ears.

'You moron!' Yennefer yelled, trying to scratch out his eyes. 'You bloody idiot! You stopped me! I nearly had him!'

'You had shit-all!' he shouted back, furious. 'I saved your life, you stupid witch!'

She hissed like a furious cat, her palms showered sparks.

Geralt, turning his face away, caught her by both wrists and they rolled among the oysters, seaweed and crushed ice.

'Do you have an invitation?' A portly man with the golden chain of a chamberlain on his chest was looking at them with a haughty expression.

'Screw yourself!' screamed Yennefer, still trying to scratch Geralt's eyes out.

'It's a scandal,' the chamberlain said emphatically. 'Verily, you're exaggerating with this teleportation. I'm going to complain to the Council of Wizards. I'll demand—'

No one ever heard what the chamberlain would demand.

Yennefer wrenched herself free, slapped the witcher in the ear with her open palm, kicked him forcefully in the shin and jumped into the fading portal in the wall.

Geralt threw himself after her, catching her hair and belt with a practised move.

Yennefer, also having gained practise, landed him a blow with her elbow.

The sudden move split her dress at the armpit, revealing a shapely breast. An oyster flew from her torn dress.

They both fell into the nothingness of the portal. Geralt could still hear the chamberlain's voice.

'Music! Play on! Nothing has happened. Please take no notice of that pitiful incident!'

The witcher was convinced that with every successive journey through the portal, the risk of misfortune was multiplying and he wasn't mistaken. They hit the target, Errdil's tavern, but they materialised just under the ceiling. They fell, shattering the stair balustrade and, with a deafening crash, landed on the table. The table had the right not to withstand the blow, and it didn't.

Yennefer found herself under the table. He was sure she had lost consciousness. He was mistaken.

She punched him in the eye and fired a volley of insults straight at him which would do credit to a dwarven undertaker – and they were renowned for their foul language. The curses were accompanied by furious, chaotic blows dealt blindly, randomly.

Geralt grabbed her by the hands and, to avoid being hit by her forehead, thrust his face into the sorceress's cleavage which smelled of lilac, gooseberries and oysters.

'Let me go!' she screamed, kicking like a pony. 'You idiot! Let go! The fetters are going to break any moment now. I've got to strengthen them or the djinn will escape!'

He didn't answer, although he wanted to. He grasped her even more tightly, trying to pin her down to the floor. Yennefer swore horribly, struggled, and with all her strength, kicked him in the crotch with her knee. Before he could catch his breath she broke free and screamed an incantation. He felt a terrible force drag him from the ground and hurl him across the hall until, with a violence that near-stunned him, he slammed against a carved two-doored chest of drawers and shattered it completely.

IX

‘What’s happening there?!’ Dandilion, clinging to the wall, strained his neck, trying to see through the downpour. ‘Tell me what’s happening there, dammit!’

‘They’re fighting!’ yelled an urchin, springing away from the tavern window as if he’d burnt himself. His tattered friends also escaped, slapping the mud with their bare heels. ‘The sorcerer and the witch are fighting!’

‘Fighting?’ Neville was surprised. ‘They’re fighting, and that shitty demon is ruining my town! Look, he’s knocked another chimney down. And damaged the brick-kiln! Hey, you get over there, quick! Gods, we’re lucky it’s raining or there’d be a fire like nobody’s business!’

‘This won’t last much longer,’ Krepp said gloomily. ‘The magical light is weakening, the bonds will break at any moment. Mr Neville! Order the people to move back! All hell’s going to break loose over there at any minute! There’ll be only splinters left of that house! Mr Errdil, what are you laughing at? It’s your house. What makes you so amused?’

‘I had that wreck insured for a massive sum!’

‘Does the policy cover magical and supernatural events?’

‘Of course.’

‘That’s wise, Mr Elf. Very wise. Congratulations. Hey, you people, get to some shelter! Don’t get any closer, if you value your lives!’

A deafening crash came from within Errdil’s house, and lightning flashed. The small crowd retreated, hiding behind the pillars.

‘Why did Geralt go there?’ groaned Dandilion. ‘What the hell for? Why did he insist on saving that witch? Why, dammit? Chireadan, do you understand?’

The elf smiled sadly. ‘Yes, I do, Dandilion,’ he said. ‘I do.’

X

Geralt leapt away from another blazing orange shaft which shot from the sorceress's fingers. She was clearly tired, the shafts were weak and slow, and he avoided them with no great difficulty.

'Yennefer!' he shouted. 'Calm down! Will you listen!? You won't be able—'

He didn't finish. Thin red bolts of lightning spurted from the sorceress's hands, reaching him in many places and wrapping him up thoroughly. His clothes hissed and started to smoulder.

'I won't be able to?' she said through her teeth, standing over him. 'You'll soon see what I'm capable of. It will suffice for you to lie there for a while and not get in my way.'

'Get this off me!' he roared, struggling in the blazing spider's web. 'I'm burning, dammit!'

'Lie there and don't move,' she advised, panting heavily. 'It only burns when you move . . . I can't spare you any more time, witcher. We had a romp, but enough's enough. I've got to take care of the djinn; he's ready to run away—'

'Run away?' Geralt screamed. 'It's you who should run away! That djinn . . . Yennefer, listen to me carefully. I've got to tell you the truth.'

XI

The djinn gave a tug at the fetters, traced a circle, tightened the lines holding it, and swept the little tower off Beau Berrant's house.

'What a roar he's got!' Dandilion frowned, instinctively clasping his throat. 'What a terrible roar! It looks as if he's bloody furious!'

'That's because he is,' said Krepp. Chireadan glanced at him.

'What?'

'He's furious,' repeated Krepp. 'And I'm not surprised. I'd be furious too if I had to fulfil, to the letter, the first wish accidentally expressed by the witcher—'

'How's that?' shouted Dandilion. 'Geralt? Wish?'

'He's the one who held the seal which imprisoned the djinn. The djinn's fulfilling his wishes. That's why the witch can't master it. But the witcher mustn't tell her, even if he's caught on to it by now. He shouldn't tell her.'

'Dammit,' muttered Chireadan. 'I'm beginning to understand. The warder in the dungeon burst . . .'

'That was the witcher's second wish. He's still got one left. The last one. But, gods help us, he shouldn't reveal that to Yennefer!'

XII

She stood motionless, leaning over him, paying no attention to the djinn struggling at its bonds above the tavern roof. The building shook, lime and splinters poured from the ceiling, furniture crept along the floor, shuddering spasmodically.

‘So that’s how it is,’ she hissed. ‘Congratulations. You deceived me. Not Dandilion, but you. That’s why the djinn’s fighting so hard! But I haven’t lost yet, Geralt. You underestimate me, and you underestimate my power. I’ve still got the djinn and you in my hand. You’ve still got one last wish, haven’t you? So make it. You’ll free the djinn and then I’ll bottle it.’

‘You haven’t got enough strength left, Yennefer.’

‘You underestimate my strength. The wish, Geralt!’

‘No, Yennefer. I can’t . . . The djinn might fulfil it, but it won’t spare you. It’ll kill you when it’s free. It’ll take its revenge on you . . . You won’t manage to catch it and you won’t manage to defend yourself against it. You’re weakened, you can barely stand. You’ll die, Yennefer.’

‘That’s my risk!’ she shouted, enraged. ‘What’s it to you what happens to me? Think rather what the djinn can give you! You’ve still got one wish! You can ask what you like! Make use of it! Use it, witcher! You can have anything! Anything!’

XIII

‘Are they both going to die?’ wailed Dandilion. ‘How come? Krepp, why? After all, the witcher—Why, by all perfidious and unexpected plagues, isn’t he escaping? Why? What’s keeping him? Why doesn’t he leave that bloody witch to her fate and run away? It’s senseless!’

‘Absolutely senseless,’ repeated Chireadan bitterly. ‘Absolutely.’

‘It’s suicide. And plain idiocy!’

‘It’s his job, after all,’ interrupted Neville. ‘The witcher’s saving my town. May the gods be my witness – if he defeats the witch and chases the demon away, I’ll reward him handsomely . . .’

Dandilion snatched the hat decorated with a heron’s feather from his head, spat into it, threw it in the mud and trampled on it, spitting out words in various languages as he did.

‘But he’s . . .’ he groaned suddenly, ‘still got one wish in reserve! He could save both her and himself! Mr Krepp!’

‘It’s not that simple,’ the priest pondered. ‘But if . . . If he expressed the right wish . . . If he somehow tied his fate to the fate . . . No, I don’t think it would occur to him. And it’s probably better that it doesn’t.’

XIV

‘The wish, Geralt! Hurry up! What do you desire? Immortality? Riches? Fame? Power? Might? Privileges? Hurry, we haven’t any time!’ He was silent. ‘Humanity,’ she said suddenly, smiling nastily. ‘I’ve guessed, haven’t I? That’s what you want, that’s what you dream of! Of release, of the freedom to be who you want, not who you have to be. The djinn will fulfil that wish, Geralt. Just say it.’

He stayed silent.

She stood over him in the flickering radiance of the wizard’s sphere, in the glow of magic, amidst the flashes of rays restraining the djinn, streaming hair and eyes blazing violet, erect, slender, dark, terrible . . .

And beautiful.

All of a sudden she leant over and looked him in the eyes. He caught the scent of lilac and gooseberries.

‘You’re not saying anything,’ she hissed. ‘So what is it you desire, witcher? What is your most hidden dream? Is it that you don’t know or you can’t decide? Look for it within yourself, look deeply and carefully because, I swear by the Force, you won’t get another chance like this!’

But he suddenly knew the truth. He knew it. He knew what she used to be. What she remembered, what she couldn’t forget, what she lived with. Who she really was before she had become a sorceress.

Her cold, penetrating, angry and wise eyes were those of a hunchback.

He was horrified. No, not of the truth. He was horrified that she would read his thoughts, find out what he had guessed. That she would never forgive him for it. He deadened that thought within himself, killed it, threw it from his memory forever, without trace, feeling, as he did so, enormous relief. Feeling that—

The ceiling cracked open. The djinn, entangled in the net of the now fading rays, tumbled right on top of them, roaring, and in that roar were triumph and murder lust. Yennefer leapt to meet him. Light beamed from her hands. Very feeble light.

The djinn opened his mouth and stretched his paws towards her.

The witcher suddenly understood what it was he wanted.

And he made his wish.

XV

The house exploded. Bricks, beams and planks flew up in a cloud of smoke and sparks. The djinn spurted from the dust-storm, as huge as a barn. Roaring and choking with triumphant laughter the Air genie, free now, not tied to anyone's will, traced three circles above the town, tore the spire from the town hall, soared into the sky and vanished.

'It's escaped! It's escaped!' called Krepp. 'The witcher's had his way! The genie has flown away! It won't be a threat to anyone anymore!'

'Ah,' said Errdil with genuine rapture, 'what a wonderful ruin!'

'Dammit, dammit!' hollered Dandilion, huddled behind the wall. 'It's shattered the entire house! Nobody could survive that! Nobody, I tell you!'

'The witcher, Geralt of Rivia, has sacrificed himself for the town,' mayor Neville said ceremoniously. 'We won't forget him. We'll revere him. We'll think of a statue . . .'

Dandilion shook a piece of wicker matting bound with clay from his shoulder, brushed his jerkin free of lumps of rain-dampened plaster, looked at the mayor and, in a few well-chosen words, expressed his opinion about sacrifice, reverence, memory and all the statues in the world.

XVI

Geralt looked around. Water was slowly dripping from the hole in the ceiling. There were heaps of rubble and stacks of timber all around. By a strange coincidence, the place where they lay was completely clear. Not one plank or one brick had fallen on them. It was as if they were being protected by an invisible shield.

Yennefer, slightly flushed, knelt by him, resting her hands on her knees.

'Witcher.' She cleared her throat. 'Are you dead?'

'No.' Geralt wiped the dust from his face and hissed.

Slowly, Yennefer touched his wrist and delicately ran her fingers along his palm. 'I burnt you—'

'It's nothing. A few blisters—'

'I'm sorry. You know, the djinn's escaped. For good.'

'Do you regret it?'

'Not much.'

'Good. Help me up, please.'

'Wait,' she whispered. 'That wish of yours . . . I heard what you wished for. I was astounded, simply astounded. I'd have expected anything but to . . . What made you do it, Geralt? Why . . . Why me?'

'Don't you know?'

She leant over him, touched him. He felt her hair, smelling of lilac and gooseberries, brush his face and he suddenly knew that he'd never forget that scent, that soft touch, knew that he'd never be able to compare it to any other scent or touch. Yennefer kissed him and he understood that he'd never desire any lips other than hers, so soft and moist, sweet with lipstick. He knew that, from that moment, only she would exist, her neck, shoulders and breasts freed from her black dress, her delicate, cool skin, which couldn't be compared to any other he had ever touched. He gazed into her violet eyes, the most beautiful eyes in the world, eyes which he feared would become . . .

Everything. He knew.

'Your wish,' she whispered, her lips very near his ear. 'I don't know whether such a wish can ever be fulfilled. I don't know

whether there's such a Force in Nature that could fulfil such a wish. But if there is, then you've condemned yourself. Condemned yourself to me.'

He interrupted her with a kiss, an embrace, a touch, caresses and then with everything, his whole being, his every thought, his only thought, everything, everything, everything. They broke the silence with sighs and the rustle of clothing strewn on the floor. They broke the silence very gently, lazily, and they were considerate and very thorough. They were caring and tender and, although neither quite knew what caring and tenderness were, they succeeded because they very much wanted to. And they were in no hurry whatsoever. The whole world had ceased to exist for a brief moment, but to them, it seemed like a whole eternity.

And then the world started to exist again; but it existed very differently.

'Geralt?'

'Mmm?'

'What now?'

'I don't know.'

'Nor do I. Because, you see, I . . . I don't know whether it was worth condemning yourself to me. I don't know how—Wait, what are you doing . . .? I wanted to tell you—'

'Yennefer . . . Yen.'

'Yen,' she repeated, giving in to him completely. 'Nobody's ever called me that. Say it again.'

'Yen.'

'Geralt.'

XVII

It had stopped raining. A rainbow appeared over Rinde and cut the sky with a broken, coloured arc. It looked as if it grew straight from the tavern's ruined roof.

'By all the gods,' muttered Dandilion, 'what silence . . . They're dead, I tell you. Either they've killed each other or my djinn's finished them off.'

'We should go and see,' said Vratimir, wiping his brow with his crumpled hat. 'They might be wounded. Should I call a doctor ?'

'An undertaker, more like it,' said Krepp. 'I know that witch, and that witcher's got the devil in his eyes too. There's no two ways about it, we've got to start digging two pits in the cemetery. I'd advise sticking an aspen stake into that Yennefer before burying her.'

'What silence,' repeated Dandilion. 'Beams were flying all over the place a moment ago and now it's as quiet as a grave.'

They approached the tavern ruins very cautiously and slowly.

'Let the carpenter get the coffins ready,' said Krepp. 'Tell the carpenter—'

'Quiet,' interrupted Errdil. 'I heard something. What was it, Chireadan?'

The elf brushed the hair off his pointed ear and tilted his head.

'I'm not sure . . . Let's get closer.'

'Yennefer's alive,' said Dandilion suddenly, straining his musical ear. 'I heard her moan. There, she moaned again!'

'Uhuh,' confirmed Errdil. 'I heard it, too. She moaned. She must really be suffering. Chireadan, where are you going? Careful!'

The elf backed away from the shattered window through which he had carefully peeped.

'Let's get out of here,' he said quietly. 'Let's not disturb them.'

'They're both alive? Chireadan? What are they doing?'

'Let's get out of here,' repeated the elf. 'Let's leave them alone for a bit. Let them stay there, Yennefer, Geralt and his last wish. Let's wait in a tavern; they'll join us before long. Both of them.'

'What are they doing?' Dandilion was curious. 'Tell me, dammit!'

The elf smiled. Very, very sadly. ‘I don’t like grand words,’ he said. ‘And it’s impossible to give it a name without using grand words.’

THE VOICE OF REASON 7

Falwick, in full armour, without a helmet and with the crimson coat of the Order flung over his shoulder, stood in the glade. Next to him, with his arms across his chest, was a stocky, bearded dwarf in an overcoat lined with fox-fur over, a chain-mail shirt of iron rings. Tailles, wearing no armour but a short, quilted doublet, paced slowly, brandishing his unsheathed sword from time to time.

The witcher looked about, restraining his horse. All around glinted the cuirasses and flat helmets of soldiers armed with lances.

'Bloody hell,' muttered Geralt. 'I might have expected this.'

Dandilion turned his horse and quietly cursed at the sight of the lances cutting off their retreat.

'What's this about, Geralt?'

'Nothing. Keep your mouth shut and don't butt in. I'll try to lie my way out of it somehow.'

'What's it about, I ask you? More trouble?'

'Shut up.'

'It was a stupid idea after all, to ride into town,' groaned the troubadour, glancing towards the nearby towers of the temple visible above the forest. 'We should have stayed at Nenneke's and not stirred beyond the walls—'

'Shut up. It'll all become clear, you'll see.'

'Doesn't look like it.'

Dandilion was right. It didn't. Tailles, brandishing his naked sword, continued pacing without looking in their direction. The soldiers, leaning on their spears, were watching gloomily and indifferently, with the expression of professionals for whom killing does not provoke much interest.

They dismounted. Falwick and the dwarf slowly approached.

'You've insulted Tailles, a man of good birth, witcher,' said the count without preamble or the customary courtesies. 'And Tailles, as you no doubt remember, threw down the gauntlet. It was not fit to press you within the grounds of the temple, so we waited until you emerged from behind the priestess's skirt. Tailles is waiting. You must fight.'

‘Must?’

‘Must.’

‘But do you not think, Falwick,’ Geralt smiled disapprovingly, ‘that Tailles, a man of good birth, does me too much honour ? I never attained the honour of being knighted, and it’s best not to mention the circumstances of my birth. I fear I’m not sufficiently worthy of . . . How does one say it, Dandilion?’

‘Unfit to give satisfaction and joust in the lists,’ recited the poet, pouting. ‘The code of chivalry proclaims—’

‘The Chapter of the Order is governed by its own code,’ interrupted Falwick. ‘If it were you who challenged a Knight of the Order, he could either refuse or grant you satisfaction, according to his will. But this is the reverse: it is the knight who challenges you and by this he raises you to his own level – but, of course, only for the time it takes to avenge the insult. You can’t refuse. The refusal of accepting the dignity would render you unworthy.’

‘How logical,’ said Dandilion with an ape-like expression. ‘I see you’ve studied the philosophers, sir Knight.’

‘Don’t butt in.’ Geralt raised his head and looked into Falwick’s eyes. ‘Go on, sir. I’d like to know where this is leading. What would happen if I turned out to be . . . unworthy?’

‘What would happen?’ Falwick gave a malicious smile. ‘I’d order you hung from a branch, you rat-catcher.’

‘Hold on,’ the dwarf said hoarsely. ‘Take it easy, sir. And no invective, all right?’

‘Don’t you teach me manners, Cranmer,’ hissed the knight. ‘And remember, the prince has given you orders which you’re to execute to the letter.’

‘It’s you who shouldn’t be teaching me, Count.’ The dwarf rested his hand on the double-headed axe thrust into his belt. ‘I know how to carry out orders, and I can do without your advice. Allow me, Geralt sir. I’m Dennis Cranmer, captain of Prince Hereward’s guards.’

The witcher bowed stiffly, looking into the dwarf’s eyes, light grey and steel-like beneath the bushy flaxen eyebrows.

‘Stand your ground with Tailles, sir,’ Dennis Cranmer continued calmly. ‘It’ll be better that way. It’s not a fight to the death, only until one of you is rendered helpless. So fight in the field and let him render you helpless.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Sir Tailles is the prince’s favourite,’ said Falwick, smiling spitefully. ‘If you touch him with your sabre during the fight, you mutant, you will be punished. Captain Cranmer will arrest you and take you to face his Highness. To be punished. Those are his orders.’

The dwarf didn’t even glance at the knight; his cold, steel eyes did not leave Geralt.

The witcher smiled faintly but quite nastily. ‘If I understand correctly,’ he said, ‘I’m to fight the duel because, if I refuse, I’ll be hanged. If I fight I’m to allow my opponent to injure me because if I wound him I’ll be put to the rack. What charming alternatives. Maybe I should save you the bother? I’ll thump my head against the pine tree and render myself helpless. Will that grant you satisfaction?’

‘Don’t sneer,’ hissed Falwick. ‘Don’t make your situation any worse. You’ve insulted the Order, you vagabond, and you have to be punished for it, do you understand? And young Tailles needs the fame of defeating a witcher, so the Chapter wants to give it to him. Otherwise you’d be hanging already. You allow yourself to be defeated and you save your miserable life. We don’t care about your corpse, we want Tailles to nick your skin. And your mutant skin heals quickly. So, go ahead. Decide. You’ve got no choice.’

‘That’s what you think, is it, sir?’ Geralt smiled even more nastily and looked around at the soldiers appraisingly. ‘But I think I do.’

‘Yes, that’s true,’ admitted Dennis Cranmer. ‘You do. But then there’ll be bloodshed, great bloodshed. Like at Blaviken. Is that what you want? Do you want to burden your conscience with blood and death? Because the alternative you’re thinking of, Geralt, is blood and death.’

‘Your argument is charming, Captain, fascinating even,’ mocked Dandilion. ‘You’re trying to bait a man ambushed in the forest with humanitarianism, calling on his nobler feelings. You’re asking him, as I understand, to deign not to spill the blood of the brigands who attacked him. He’s to take pity on the thugs because the thugs are poor, have got wives, children and, who knows, maybe even mothers. But don’t you think, Captain Cranmer, that your worrying is premature? Because I look at your lancers and see that their knees are shaking at the very thought of fighting with Geralt of Rivia, the witcher who dealt with a striga alone, with his bare hands. There won’t be any bloodshed here; nobody will be harmed here – aside from those who might break their legs running away.’

‘I,’ said the dwarf calmly and pugnaciously, ‘have nothing to reproach my knees with. I’ve never run away from anyone and I’m not about to change my ways. I’m not married, don’t know anything about any children and I’d prefer not to bring my mother, a woman with whom I’m not very well acquainted, into this. But I will carry out the orders I’ve been given. To the letter, as always. Without calling on any feelings, I ask Geralt of Rivia to make a decision. I will accept whatever he decides and will behave accordingly.’

They looked each other in the eyes, the dwarf and the witcher.

‘Very well,’ Geralt said finally. ‘Let’s deal with it. It’s a pity to waste the day.’

‘You agree then.’ Falwick raised his head and his eyes glistened. ‘You’ll fight a duel with the high-born Tailles of Dorndal?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good. Prepare yourself.’

‘I’m ready.’ Geralt pulled on his gauntlets. ‘Let’s not waste time. There’ll be hell if Nenneke finds out about this. So let’s sort it out quickly. Dandilion, keep calm. It’s got nothing to do with you. Am I right, Cranmer, sir?’

‘Absolutely,’ the dwarf stated firmly and looked at Falwick. ‘Absolutely, sir. Whatever happens, it only concerns you.’

The witcher took the sword from his back.

‘No,’ said Falwick, drawing his. ‘You’re not going to fight with that razor of yours. Take my sword.’

Geralt shrugged. He took the count’s blade and swiped it to try it out.

‘Heavy,’ he said coldly. ‘We could just as easily use spades.’

‘Tailles has the same. Equal chances.’

‘You’re very funny, Falwick.’

The soldiers surrounded the glade, forming a loose circle. Tailles and the witcher stood facing each other.

‘Tailles? What do you say to an apology?’

The young knight screwed up his lips, folded his left arm behind his back and froze in a fencing position.

‘No?’ Geralt smiled. ‘You don’t want to listen to the voice of reason? Pity.’

Tailles squatted down, leapt and attacked without warning. The witcher didn't even make an effort to parry and avoided the flat point with a swift half-turn. The knight swiped broadly. The blade cut through the air once more. Geralt dodged beneath it in an agile pirouette, jumped softly aside and, with a short, light feint, threw Tailles off his rhythm. Tailles cursed, cut broadly from the right, lost his balance for a moment and tried to regain it while, instinctively, clumsily, holding his sword high to defend himself. The witcher struck with the speed and force of a lightning bolt, extending his arm to its full length and slashing straight ahead. The heavy sword thundered against Tailles' blade, deflecting it so hard it hit the knight in the face. Tailles howled, fell to his knees and touched the grass with his forehead.

Falwick ran up to him.

Geralt dug his sword into the ground and turned around.

'Hey, guards!' yelled Falwick, getting up. 'Take him!'

'Stand still! To your places!' growled Dennis Cranmer, touching his axe. The soldiers froze.

'No, Count,' the dwarf said slowly. 'I always execute orders to the letter. The witcher did not touch Tailles. The kid hit himself with his own iron. His hard luck.'

'His face is destroyed! He's disfigured for life!'

'Skin heals.' Dennis Cranmer fixed his steel eyes on the witcher and bared his teeth. 'And the scar? For a knight, a scar is a commendable reminder, a reason for fame and glory, which the Chapter so desired for him. A knight without a scar is a prick, not a knight. Ask him, Count, and you'll see that he's pleased.'

Tailles was writhing on the ground, spitting blood, whimpering and wailing; he didn't look pleased in the least.

'Cranmer!' roared Falwick, tearing his sword from the ground, 'you'll be sorry for this, I swear!'

The dwarf turned around, slowly pulled the axe from his belt, coughed and spat into his palm. 'Oh, Count, sir,' he rasped. 'Don't perjure yourself. I can't stand perjurers and Prince Hereward has given me the right to punish them. I'll turn a deaf ear to your stupid words. But don't repeat them, if you please.'

'Witcher,' Falwick, puffing with rage, turned to Geralt. 'Get yourself out of Ellander. Immediately. Without a moment's delay!'

'I rarely agree with him,' muttered Dennis, approaching the

witcher and returning his sword, ‘but in this case he’s right. I’d ride out pretty quick.’

‘We’ll do as you advise.’ Geralt slung the belt across his back. ‘But before that I have words for the count. Falwick!’

The Knight of the White Rose blinked nervously and wiped his palms on his coat.

‘Let’s just go back to your Chapter’s code for a minute,’ continued the witcher, trying not to smile. ‘One thing really interests me. If I, let us say, felt disgusted and insulted by your attitude in this whole affair, if I challenged you to the sword right now, what would you do? Would you consider me sufficiently worthy to cross blades with? Or would you refuse, even though you knew that by doing so I would take you to be unworthy even to be spat on, punched in the face and kicked in the arse under the eyes of the foot soldiers? Count Falwick, be so gracious as to satisfy my curiosity.’

Falwick grew pale, took a step back, looked around. The soldiers avoided his eyes. Dennis Cranmer grimaced, stuck his tongue out and sent a jet of saliva a fair distance.

‘Even though you’re not saying anything,’ continued Geralt, ‘I can hear the voice of reason in your silence, Falwick, sir. You’ve satisfied my curiosity, now I’ll satisfy yours. If the Order bothers Mother Nenneke or the priestesses in any way, or unduly intrudes upon Captain Cranmer, then may you know, Count, that I’ll find you and, not caring about any code, will bleed you like a pig.’

The knight grew even paler.

‘Don’t forget my promise, Count. Come on, Dandilion. It’s time for us to leave. Take care, Dennis.’

‘Good luck, Geralt.’ The dwarf gave a broad smile. ‘Take care. I’m very pleased to have met you, and hope we’ll meet again.’

‘The feeling’s mutual, Dennis.’

They rode away with ostensible slowness, not looking back. They began to canter only once they were hidden by the forest.

‘Geralt,’ the poet said suddenly, ‘surely we won’t head straight south? We’ll have to make a detour to avoid Ellander and Hereward’s lands, won’t we? Or do you intend to continue with this show?’

‘No, Dandilion, I don’t. We’ll go through the forests and then join the Traders’ Trail. Remember, not a word in Nenneke’s presence about this quarrel. Not a word.’

‘We are riding out without any delay, I hope?’

‘Immediately.’

II

Geralt leant over, checked the repaired hoop of his stirrup and fitted the stirrup leather, still stiff, smelling of new skins and hard to buckle. He adjusted the saddle-girth, the travel bags, the horse-blanket rolled up behind the saddle and the silver sword strapped to it. Nenneke was motionless next to him, her arms folded.

Dandilion approached, leading his bay gelding.

‘Thank you for the hospitality, Venerable One,’ he said seriously. ‘And don’t be angry with me anymore. I know that, deep down, you like me.’

‘Indeed,’ agreed Nenneke without smiling. ‘I do, you dolt, although I don’t know why myself. Take care.’

‘So long, Nenneke.’

‘So long, Geralt. Look after yourself.’

The witcher’s smile was surly.

‘I prefer to look after others. It turns out better in the long run.’

From the temple, from between columns entwined with ivy, Iola emerged in the company of two younger pupils. She was carrying the witcher’s small chest. She avoided his eyes awkwardly and her troubled smile combined with the blush on her freckled, chubby face made a charming picture. The pupils accompanying her didn’t hide their meaningful glances and barely stopped themselves from giggling.

‘For Great Melitele’s sake,’ sighed Nenneke, ‘an entire parting procession. Take the chest, Geralt. I’ve replenished your elixirs. You’ve got everything that was in short supply. And that medicine, you know the one. Take it regularly for two weeks. Don’t forget. It’s important.’

‘I won’t. Thanks, Iola.’

The girl lowered her head and handed him the chest. She so wanted to say something. She had no idea what ought to be said, what words ought to be used. She didn’t know what she’d say, even if she could. She didn’t know. And yet she so much wanted to.

Their hands touched.

Blood. Blood. Blood. Bones like broken white sticks. Tendons like whitish cords exploding from beneath cracking skin cut by

enormous paws bristling with thorns, and sharp teeth. The hideous sound of torn flesh, and shouting – shameless and horrifying in its shamelessness. The shamelessness of the end. Of death. Blood and shouting. Shouting. Blood. Shouting—

'Iola!'

Nenneke, with extraordinary speed considering her girth, rushed to the girl lying on the ground, shaken by convulsions, and held her down by her shoulders and hair. One of the pupils stood as if paralysed, the other, more clear-headed, knelt on Iola's legs. Iola arched her back, opened her mouth in a soundless, mute cry.

'Iola!' Nenneke shouted. 'Iola! Speak! Speak, child! Speak!'

The girl stiffened even more, clenched her jaws, and a thin trickle of blood ran down her cheek. Nenneke, growing red with the effort, shouted something which the witcher didn't understand, but his medallion tugged at his neck so hard that he was forced to bend under the pressure of its invisible weight.

Iola stilled.

Dandilion, pale as a sheet, sighed deeply. Nenneke raised herself to her knees and stood with an effort.

'Take her away,' she said to the pupils. There were more of them now; they'd gathered, grave and silent.

'Take her,' repeated the priestess, 'carefully. And don't leave her alone. I'll be there in a minute.'

She turned to Geralt. The witcher was standing motionless, fiddling with the reins in his sweaty hands.

'Geralt . . . Iola—'

'Don't say anything, Nenneke.'

'I saw it, too . . . for a moment. Geralt, don't go.'

'I've got to.'

'Did you see . . . did you see that?'

'Yes. And not for the first time.'

'And?'

'There's no point in looking over your shoulder.'

'Don't go, please.'

'I've got to. See to Iola. So long, Nenneke.'

The priestess slowly shook her head, sniffed and, in an abrupt move, wiped a tear away with her wrist.

‘Farewell,’ she whispered, not looking him in the eye.

Sword of Destiny

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THE BOUNDS OF REASON

I

‘He won’t get out of there, I’m telling you,’ the pockmarked man said, shaking his head with conviction. ‘It’s been an hour and a quarter since he went down. That’s the end of ’im.’

The townspeople, crammed among the ruins, stared in silence at the black hole gaping in the debris, at the rubble-strewn opening. A fat man in a yellow jerkin shifted from one foot to the other, cleared his throat and took off his crumpled biretta.

‘Let’s wait a little longer,’ he said, wiping the sweat from his thinning eyebrows.

‘For what?’ the spotty-faced man snarled. ‘Have you forgotten, Alderman, that a basilisk is lurking in that there dungeon? No one who goes in there comes out. Haven’t enough people perished? Why wait?’

‘But we struck a deal,’ the fat man muttered hesitantly. ‘This just isn’t right.’

‘We made a deal with a living man, Alderman,’ said the spotty-faced man’s companion, a giant in a leather butcher’s apron. ‘And now he’s dead, sure as eggs is eggs. It was plain from the start he was heading to his doom, just like the others. Why, he even went in without a looking glass, taking only a sword. And you can’t kill a basilisk without a looking glass, everyone knows that.’

‘You’ve saved yourself a shilling, Alderman,’ the spotty-faced man added. ‘For there’s no one to pay for the basilisk. So get off home nice and easy. And we’ll take the sorcerer’s horse and chattels. Shame to let goods go to waste.’

‘Aye,’ the butcher said. ‘A sturdy mare, and saddlebags nicely stuffed. Let’s take a peek at what’s inside.’

‘This isn’t right. What are you doing?’

‘Quiet, Alderman, and stay out of this, or you’re in for a hiding,’ the spotty-faced man warned.

‘Sturdy mare,’ the butcher repeated.

‘Leave that horse alone, comrade.’

The butcher turned slowly towards the newcomer, who had appeared from a recess in the wall, and the people gathered around the entrance to the dungeon.

The stranger had thick, curly, chestnut hair. He was wearing a dark brown tunic over a padded coat and high riding boots. And he was not carrying a weapon.

'Move away from the horse,' he repeated, smiling venomously. 'What is this? Another man's horse, saddlebags and property, and you can't take your watery little eyes off them, can't wait to get your scabby mitts on them? Is that fitting behaviour?'

The spotty-faced man, slowly sliding a hand under his coat, glanced at the butcher. The butcher nodded, and beckoned towards a part of the crowd, from which stepped two stocky men with close-cropped hair. They were holding clubs of the kind used to stun animals in a slaughterhouse.

'Who are you,' the spotty-faced man asked, still holding his hand inside his coat, 'to tell us what is right and what is not?'

'That is not your concern, comrade.'

'You carry no weapon.'

'"Tis true.' The stranger smiled even more venomously. 'I do not.'

'That's too bad.' The spotty-faced man removed his hand – and with it a long knife – from inside his coat. 'It is very unfortunate that you do not.'

The butcher also drew a knife, as long as a cutlass. The other two men stepped forward, raising their clubs.

'I have no need,' the stranger said, remaining where he stood. 'My weapons follow me.'

Two young women came out from behind the ruins, treading with soft, sure steps. The crowd immediately parted, then stepped back and thinned out.

The two women grinned, flashing their teeth and narrowing their eyes, from whose corners broad, tattooed stripes ran towards their ears. The muscles of their powerful thighs were visible beneath lynx skins wrapped around their hips, and on their sinuous arms, naked above their mail gloves. Sabre hilts stuck up behind their shoulders, which were also protected by chainmail.

Slowly, very slowly, the spotty-faced man bent his knees and dropped his knife on the ground.

A rattle of stones and a scraping sound echoed from the hole in the rubble, and then two hands, clinging to the jagged edge of the wall, emerged from the darkness. After the hands then appeared, in turn, a head of white hair streaked with brick dust, a pale face, and a sword hilt projecting above the shoulders. The crowd murmured.

The white-haired man reached down to haul a grotesque shape from the hole; a bizarre bulk smeared in blood-soaked dust. Holding the creature by its long, reptilian tail, he threw it without a word at the fat Alderman's feet. He sprang back, tripping against a collapsed fragment of wall, and looked at the curved, birdlike beak, webbed wings and the hooked talons on the scaly feet. At the swollen dewlap, once crimson, now a dirty russet. And at the glazed, sunken eyes.

'There's your basilisk,' the white-haired man said, brushing the dust from his trousers, 'as agreed. Now my two hundred lintars, if you please. Honest lintars, not too clipped. I'll check them, you can count on it.'

The Alderman drew out a pouch with trembling hands. The white-haired man looked around, and then fixed his gaze for a moment on the spotty-faced man and the knife lying by his foot. He looked at the man in the dark brown tunic and at the young women in the lynx skins.

'As usual,' he said, taking the pouch from the Alderman's trembling hands, 'I risk my neck for you for a paltry sum, and in the meantime you go after my things. You never change; a pox on the lot of you.'

'Haven't been touched,' the butcher muttered, moving back. The men with the clubs had melted into the crowd long before. 'Your things haven't been touched, sir.'

'That pleases me greatly,' the white-haired man smiled. At the sight of the smile burgeoning on his pale face, like a wound bursting, the small crowd began to quickly disperse. 'And for that reason, friend, you shall also remain untouched. Go in peace. But make haste.'

The spotty-faced man was also retreating. The spots on his white face were unpleasantly conspicuous.

'Hey, stop there,' the man in the dark brown tunic said to him. 'You've forgotten something.'

'What is that . . . sir?'

‘You drew a knife on me.’

The taller of the women suddenly swayed, legs planted widely apart, and twisted her hips. Her sabre, which no one saw her draw, hissed sharply through the air. The spotty-faced man’s head flew upwards in an arc and fell into the gaping opening to the dungeon. His body toppled stiffly and heavily, like a tree being felled, among the crushed bricks. The crowd let out a scream. The second woman, hand on her sword hilt, whirled around nimbly, protecting her partner’s back. Needlessly. The crowd, stumbling and falling over on the rubble, fled towards the town as fast as they could. The Alderman loped at the front with impressive strides, outdistancing the huge butcher by only a few yards.

‘An excellent stroke,’ the white-haired man commented coldly, shielding his eyes from the sun with a black-gloved hand. ‘An excellent stroke from a Zerrikanian sabre. I bow before the skill and beauty of the free warriors. I’m Geralt of Rivia.’

‘And I,’ the stranger in the dark brown tunic pointed at the faded coat of arms on the front of his garment, depicting three black birds sitting in a row in the centre of a uniformly gold field, ‘am Borch, also known as Three Jackdaws. And these are my girls, Téa and Véa. That’s what I call them, because you’ll twist your tongue on their right names. They are both, as you correctly surmised, Zerrikanian.’

‘Thanks to them, it appears, I still have my horse and belongings. I thank you, warriors. My thanks to you too, sir.’

‘Three Jackdaws. And you can drop the “sir”. Does anything detain you in this little town, Geralt of Rivia?’

‘Quite the opposite.’

‘Excellent. I have a proposal. Not far from here, at the crossroads on the road to the river port, is an inn. It’s called the Pensive Dragon. The vittles there have no equal in these parts. I’m heading there with food and lodging in mind. It would be my honour should you choose to keep me company.’

‘Borch.’ The white-haired man turned around from his horse and looked into the stranger’s bright eyes. ‘I wouldn’t want anything left unclear between us. I’m a witcher.’

‘I guessed as much. But you said it as you might have said “I’m a leper”.’

‘There are those,’ Geralt said slowly, ‘who prefer the company of

lepers to that of a witcher.'

'There are also those,' Three Jackdaws laughed, 'who prefer sheep to girls. Ah, well, one can only sympathise with the former and the latter. I repeat my proposal.'

Geralt took off his glove and shook the hand being proffered.

'I accept, glad to have made your acquaintance.'

'Then let us go, for I hunger.'

II

The innkeeper wiped the rough table top with a cloth, bowed and smiled. Two of his front teeth were missing.

‘Right, then . . . ’ Three Jackdaws looked up for a while at the blackened ceiling and the spiders dancing about beneath it.

‘First . . . First, beer. To save your legs, an entire keg. And to go with the beer . . . What do you propose with the beer, comrade?’

‘Cheese?’ risked the innkeeper.

‘No,’ Borch grimaced. ‘We’ll have cheese for dessert. We want something sour and spicy with the beer.’

‘At your service,’ the innkeeper smiled even more broadly. His two front teeth were not the only ones he lacked. ‘Elvers with garlic in olive oil and green pepper pods in vinegar or marinated . . . ’

‘Very well. We’ll take both. And then that soup I once ate here, with diverse molluscs, little fish and other tasty morsels floating in it.’

‘Log drivers’ soup?’

‘The very same. And then roast lamb with onions. And then three-score crayfish. Throw as much dill into the pot as you can. After that, sheep’s cheese and lettuce. And then we’ll see.’

‘At your service. Is that for everyone? I mean, four times?’

The taller Zerrikanian shook her head, patting herself knowingly on her waist, which was now hugged by a tight, linen blouse.

‘I forgot.’ Three Jackdaws winked at Geralt. ‘The girls are watching their figures. Lamb just for the two of us, innkeeper. Serve the beer right now, with those elvers. No, wait a while, so they don’t go cold. We didn’t come here to stuff ourselves, but simply to spend some time in conversation.’

‘Very good.’ The innkeeper bowed once more.

‘Prudence is a matter of import in your profession. Give me your hand, comrade.’

Gold coins jingled. The innkeeper opened his gap-toothed mouth to the limit.

‘That is not an advance,’ Three Jackdaws announced, ‘it is a

bonus. And now hurry off to the kitchen, good fellow.'

It was warm in the snug. Geralt unbuckled his belt, took off his tunic and rolled up his shirtsleeves.

'I see,' he said, 'that you aren't troubled by a shortage of funds. Do you live on the privileges of a knightly estate?'

'Partially,' Three Jackdaws smiled, without offering further details.

They dealt quickly with the elvers and a quarter of the keg. Neither of the two Zerrikanians stinted on the beer, and soon were both in visible good humour. They were whispering something to each other. Véa, the taller one, suddenly burst out in throaty laughter.

'Are the warriors versed in the Common Speech?' Geralt asked quietly, sneaking a sideways glance at them.

'Poorly. And they are not garrulous. For which they deserve credit. How do you find the soup, Geralt?'

'Mmm.'

'Let us drink.'

'Mmm.'

'Geralt,' Three Jackdaws began, putting aside his spoon and hiccoughing in a dignified manner, 'I wish to return, for a moment, to the conversation we had on the road. I understand that you, a witcher, wander from one end of the world to the other, and should you come across a monster along the way, you kill it. And you earn money doing that. Does that describe the witcher's trade?'

'More or less.'

'And does it ever happen that someone specifically summons you somewhere? On a special commission, let's say. Then what? You go and carry it out?'

'That depends on who asks me and why.'

'And for how much?'

'That too,' the Witcher shrugged. 'Prices are going up, and one has to live, as a sorceress acquaintance of mine used to say.'

'Quite a selective approach; very practical, I'd say. But at the root of it lies some idea, Geralt. The conflict between the forces of Order and the forces of Chaos, as a sorcerer acquaintance of mine used to say. I imagine that you carry out your mission, defending people

from Evil, always and everywhere. Without distinction. You stand on a clearly defined side of the palisade.'

'The forces of Order, the forces of Chaos. Awfully high-flown words, Borch. You desperately want to position me on one side of the palisade in a conflict, which is generally thought to be perennial, began long before us and will endure long after we've gone. On which side does the farrier, shoeing horses, stand? Or our innkeeper, hurrying here with a cauldron of lamb? What, in your opinion, defines the border between Chaos and Order?'

'A very simple thing,' said Three Jackdaws, and looked him straight in the eye. 'That which represents Chaos is menace, is the aggressive side. While Order is the side being threatened, in need of protection. In need of a defender. But let us drink. And make a start on the lamb.'

'Rightly said.'

The Zerrikanians, watching their figures, were taking a break from eating, time they spent drinking more quickly. Véa, leaning over on her companion's shoulder, whispered something again, brushing the table top with her plait. Téa, the shorter of the two, laughed loudly, cheerfully narrowing her tattooed eyelids.

'Yes,' Borch said, picking a bone clean. 'Let us continue our talk, if you will. I understand you aren't keen on being placed on either side. You do your job.'

'That's correct.'

'But you cannot escape the conflict between Chaos and Order. Although it was your comparison, you are not a farrier. I've seen you work. You go down into a dungeon among some ruins and come out with a slaughtered basilisk. There is, comrade, a difference between shoeing horses and killing basilisks. You said that if the payment is fair, you'll hurry to the end of the world and dispatch the monster you're asked to. Let's say a fierce dragon is wreaking havoc on a—'

'Bad example,' Geralt interrupted. 'You see, right away you've mixed up Chaos and Order. Because I do not kill dragons; and they, without doubt, represent Chaos.'

'How so?' Three Jackdaws licked his fingers. 'Well, I never! After all, among all monsters, dragons are probably the most bestial, the cruellest and fiercest. The most revolting of reptiles. They attack people, breathe fire and carry off, you know, virgins. There's no shortage of tales like that. It can't be that you, a witcher, don't have

a few dragons on your trophy list.'

'I don't hunt dragons,' Geralt said dryly. 'I hunt forktails, for sure. And dracolizards. And flying drakes. But not true dragons; the green, the black or the red. Take note, please.'

'You astonish me,' Three Jackdaws said. 'Very well, I've taken note. In any case, that's enough about dragons for the moment, I see something red on the horizon and it is surely our crayfish. Let us drink!'

Their teeth crunched through the red shells, and they sucked out the white flesh. The salt water, stinging painfully, trickled down over their wrists. Borch poured the beer, by now scraping the ladle across the bottom of the keg. The Zerrikanians were even more cheerful, the two of them looking around the inn and smiling ominously. The Witcher was convinced they were searching out an opportunity for a brawl. Three Jackdaws must also have noticed, because he suddenly shook a crayfish he was holding by the tail at them. The women giggled and Téa pouted her lips for a kiss and winked. Combined with her tattooed face, this made for a gruesome sight.

'They are as savage as wildcats,' Three Jackdaws murmured to Geralt. 'They need watching. With them, comrade, suddenly – before you know it – the floor's covered in guts. But they're worth every penny. If you knew what they're capable of . . . '

'I know,' Geralt nodded. 'You couldn't find a better escort. Zerrikanians are born warriors, trained to fight from childhood.'

'I didn't mean that.' Borch spat a crayfish claw onto the table. 'I meant what they're like in bed.'

Geralt glanced anxiously at the women. They both smiled. Véa reached for the dish with a swift, almost imperceptible movement. Looking at the Witcher through narrowed eyes, she bit open a shell with a crack. Her lips glistened with the salt water. Three Jackdaws belched loudly.

'And so, Geralt,' he said. 'You don't hunt dragons; neither green nor any other colour. I've made a note of it. And why, may I ask, only those three colours?'

'Four, to be precise.'

'You mentioned three.'

'Dragons interest you, Borch. For any particular reason?'

'No. Pure curiosity.'

‘Aha. Well, about those colours: it’s customary to define true dragons like that, although they are not precise terms. Green dragons, the most common, are actually greyish, like ordinary dracolizards. Red dragons are in fact reddish or brick-red. It’s customary to call the large dark brown ones “black”. White dragons are the rarest. I’ve never seen one. They occur in the distant North. Reputedly.’

‘Interesting. And do you know what other dragons I’ve also heard about?’

‘I do,’ Geralt sipped his beer. ‘The same ones I’ve heard about. Golden dragons. There are no such creatures.’

‘On what grounds do you claim that? Because you’ve never seen one? Apparently, you haven’t seen a white one either.’

‘That’s not the point. Beyond the seas, in Ofir and Zangvebar, there are white horses with black stripes. I haven’t seen them, but I know they exist. But golden dragons are mythical creatures. Fabled. Like the phoenix, let’s say. There are no phoenixes or golden dragons.’

Véa, leaning on her elbows, looked at him curiously.

‘You must know what you’re talking about, you’re a witcher,’ Borch ladled beer from the keg, ‘but I think that every myth, every fable, must have some roots. Something lies among those roots.’

‘It does,’ Geralt confirmed. ‘Most often a dream, a wish, a desire, a yearning. Faith that there are no limits to possibility. And occasionally chance.’

‘Precisely, chance. Perhaps there once was a golden dragon, an accidental, unique mutation?’

‘If there were, it met the fate of all mutants.’ The Witcher turned his head away. ‘It differed too much to endure.’

‘Ha,’ Three Jackdaws said, ‘now you are denying the laws of nature, Geralt. My sorcerer acquaintance was wont to say that every being has its own continuation in nature and survives in some way or another. The end of one is the beginning of another, there are no limits to possibility; or at least nature doesn’t know any.’

‘Your sorcerer acquaintance was a great optimist. But he failed to take one thing into consideration: a mistake committed by nature. Or by those who trifle with it. Golden dragons and other similar mutants, were they to exist, couldn’t survive. For a very natural limit of possibilities prevents it.’

‘What limit is that?’

‘Mutants,’ the muscles in Geralt’s jaw twitched violently, ‘mutants are sterile, Borch. Only in fables survives what cannot survive in nature. Only myths and fables do not know the limits of possibility.’

Three Jackdaws said nothing. Geralt looked at the Zerrikanians, at their faces, suddenly grown serious. Véa unexpectedly leant over towards him and put a hard, muscular arm around his neck. He felt her lips, wet from beer, on his cheek.

‘They like you,’ Three Jackdaws said slowly. ‘Well, I’ll be damned, they like you.’

‘What’s strange about that?’ the Witcher smiled sadly.

‘Nothing. But we must drink to it. Innkeeper. Another keg!’

‘Take it easy. A pitcher at most.’

‘Two pitchers!’ Three Jackdaws yelled. ‘Téa, I have to go out for a while.’

The Zerrikanian stood up, took her sabre from the bench and swept the room with a wistful gaze. Although previously, as the Witcher had observed, several pairs of eyes had lit up greedily at the sight of Borch’s bulging purse, no one seemed in a hurry to go after him as he staggered slightly towards the door to the courtyard. Téa shrugged, following her employer.

‘What is your real name?’ Geralt asked the one who had remained at the table. Véa flashed her white teeth. Her blouse was very loosely laced, almost to the limits of possibility. The Witcher had no doubt it was intentionally provocative.

‘Alvéaenerle.’

‘Pretty.’ The Witcher was sure the Zerrikanian would purse her lips and wink at him. He was not mistaken.

‘Véa?’

‘Mm?’

‘Why do you ride with Borch? You, free warriors? Would you mind telling me?’

‘Mm.’

‘Mm, what?’

‘He is . . . ’ the Zerrikanian, frowning, searched for the words. ‘He is . . . the most . . . beautiful.’

The Witcher nodded. Not for the first time, the criteria by which women judged the attractiveness of men remained a mystery to him.

Three Jackdaws lurched back into the snug fastening his trousers, and issued loud instructions to the innkeeper. Téa, walking two steps behind him, feigning boredom, looked around the inn, and the merchants and log drivers carefully avoided her gaze. Véa was sucking the contents from another crayfish, and continually throwing the Witcher meaningful glances.

'I've ordered us an eel each, baked this time,' Three Jackdaws sat down heavily, his unfastened belt clinking. 'I struggled with those crayfish and seem to have worked up an appetite. And I've organised a bed for you, Geralt. There's no sense in you roaming around tonight. We can still amuse ourselves. Here's to you, girls!'

'*Vessekheal*,' Véa said, saluting him with her beaker. Téa winked and stretched; and her bosom, contrary to Geralt's expectations, did not split the front of her blouse.

'Let's make merry!' Three Jackdaws leant across the table and slapped Téa on the backside. 'Let's make merry, Witcher. Hey, landlord! Over here!'

The innkeeper scuttled briskly over, wiping his hands on his apron.

'Could you lay your hands on a tub? The kind you launder clothes in, sturdy and large?'

'How large, sir?'

'For four people.'

'For . . . four . . . ' the innkeeper opened his mouth.

'For four,' Three Jackdaws confirmed, drawing a full purse from his pocket.

'I could.' The innkeeper licked his lips.

'Splendid,' Borch laughed. 'Have it carried upstairs to my room and filled with hot water. With all speed, comrade. And have beer brought there too. Three pitchers.'

The Zerrikanians giggled and winked at the same time.

'Which one do you prefer?' Three Jackdaws asked. 'Eh? Geralt?'

The Witcher scratched the back of his head.

'I know it's difficult to choose,' said Three Jackdaws,

understandingly. ‘I occasionally have difficulty myself. Never mind, we’ll give it some thought in the tub. Hey, girls. Help me up the stairs!’

III

There was a barrier on the bridge. The way was barred by a long, solid beam set on wooden trestles. In front and behind it stood halberdiers in studded leather coats and mail hoods. A purple banner bearing the emblem of a silver gryphon fluttered lazily above the barrier.

'What the devil?' Three Jackdaws said in surprise, approaching at a walk. 'Is there no way through?'

'Got a safe-conduct?' the nearest halberdier asked, without taking the stick he was chewing, either from hunger or to kill time, from his mouth.

'Safe-conduct? What is it, the plague? Or war, perhaps? On whose orders do you obstruct the way?'

'Those of King Niedamir, Lord of Caingorn,' the guardsman replied, shifting the stick to the other side of his mouth and pointing at the banner. 'Without a safe-conduct you can't go up.'

'Some sort of idiocy,' Geralt said in a tired voice. 'This isn't Caingorn, but Barefield's territory. Barefield, not Caingorn, levies tolls from the bridges on the Braa. What has Niedamir to do with it?'

'Don't ask me,' the guard said, spitting out his stick. 'Not my business. I'm here to check safe-conducts. If you want, talk to our decurion.'

'And where might he be?'

'He's basking in the sun over there, behind the toll collector's lodgings,' the halberdier said, looking not at Geralt but at the naked thighs of the Zerrikanians, who were stretching languidly in their saddles.

Behind the toll collector's cottage sat a guard on a pile of dry logs, drawing a woman in the sand with the end of his halberd. It was actually a certain part of a woman, seen from an unusual perspective. Beside him, a slim man with a fanciful plum bonnet pulled down over his eyes, adorned with a silver buckle and a long, twitching heron's feather, was reclining, gently plucking the strings of a lute.

Geralt knew that bonnet and that feather, which were famed from

the Buina to the Yaruga, known in manor houses, fortresses, inns, taverns and whorehouses. Particularly whorehouses.

'Dandelion!'

'Geralt the Witcher!' A pair of cheerful cornflower-blue eyes shone from under the bonnet, now shoved back on his head. 'Well, I never! You're here too? You don't have a safe-conduct by any chance?'

'What's everyone's problem with this safe-conduct?' The Witcher dismounted. 'What's happening here, Dandelion? We wanted to cross the Braa, myself and this knight, Borch Three Jackdaws, and our escort. And we cannot, it appears.'

'I can't either,' Dandelion stood up, took off his bonnet and bowed to the Zerrikanians with exaggerated courtesy. 'They don't want to let me cross either. This decurion here won't let *me*, Dandelion, the most celebrated minstrel and poet within a thousand miles, through, although he's also an artist, as you can see.'

'I won't let anyone cross without a safe-conduct,' the decurion said resolutely, at which he completed his drawing with a final detail, prodding the end of his halberd shaft in the sand.

'No matter,' the Witcher said. 'We'll ride along the left bank. The road to Hengfors is longer that way, but needs must.'

'To Hengfors?' the bard said, surprised. 'Aren't you following Niedamir, Geralt? And the dragon?'

'What dragon?' Three Jackdaws asked with interest.

'You don't know? You really don't know? Oh, I shall have to tell you everything, gentlemen. I'm waiting here, in any case; perhaps someone who knows me will come with a safe-conduct and let me join them. Please be seated.'

'Just a moment,' Three Jackdaws said. 'The sun is almost a quarter to the noontide and I have an awful thirst. We cannot talk on an empty stomach. Téa, Véa, head back to the town at a trot and buy a keg.'

'I like the cut of your jib, sire . . . '

'Borch, also known as Three Jackdaws.'

'Dandelion, also known as the Unparalleled. By certain girls.'

'Talk, Dandelion,' the Witcher said impatiently. 'We aren't going to loiter around here till evening.'

The bard seized the fingerboard of his lute and plucked the strings vigorously.

‘How would you prefer it, in verse or in normal speech?’

‘Normal speech.’

‘As you please,’ Dandelion said, not putting his lute down. ‘Listen then, noble gentlemen, to what occurred a week ago near the free town of Barefield. ‘Twas thus, that at the crack of dawn, when the rising sun had barely tinged pink the shrouds of mist hanging pendent above the meadows—’

‘It was supposed to be normal speech,’ Geralt reminded him.

‘Isn’t it? Very well, very well. I understand. Concise, without metaphors. A dragon alighted on the pastures outside Barefield.’

‘Oh, come on,’ the Witcher said. ‘It doesn’t seem very likely to me. No one has seen a dragon in these parts for years. Wasn’t it just a common or garden dracolizard? Dracolizard specimens can occasionally be as large as—’

‘Don’t insult me, Witcher. I know what I’m talking about. I saw it. As luck would have it I was at the market in Barefield and saw it all with my own eyes. The ballad’s composed, but you didn’t want—’

‘Go on. Was it big?’

‘The length of three horses. No taller than a horse at the withers, but much fatter. Sand grey.’

‘In other words, green.’

‘Yes. It swooped down unexpectedly, flew right into a flock of sheep, scattered the shepherds, did for about a dozen beasts, devoured four of them and flew away.’

‘Flew away . . . ’ Geralt shook his head. ‘And that was all?’

‘No. Because it came again the next day, this time nearer to the town. It swooped down on a knot of women washing their linen on the banks of the Braa. And how they bolted, old friend! I’ve never laughed so much. Then the dragon circled Barefield a couple of times and flew towards the pastures, where it fell on the sheep again. Only then did the chaos and confusion begin, because few had believed the herdsmen before. The mayor called out the town constabulary and the guilds, but before they could form up, the plebs took matters into their own hands and did for it.’

‘How?’

‘In a forceful peasant manner. The local master cobbler, a certain Sheepbagger, came up with a way of dealing with the brute. They killed a sheep, stuffed it full of hellebore, deadly nightshade, poison parsley, brimstone and cobbler’s tar. Just to be sure, the local apothecary poured in two quarts of his concoction for carbuncles, and the priest from the temple of Kreve said prayers over the carcass. Then they stood the poisoned sheep among the flock, held up by a stake. If truth be told, no one believed the dragon would be lured by that shit, which stank to high heaven, but reality surpassed our expectations. Ignoring the living and bleating baa-lambs, the reptile swallowed the bait and the stake.’

‘And what then? Go on, Dandelion.’

‘What do you think I’m doing? I am telling you. Listen to what happened next. In less time than a skilled man needs to unlace a woman’s corset, the dragon suddenly began to roar and vent smoke from its front and rear ends. It turned somersaults, tried to take off, and then collapsed and lay still. Two volunteers set off to check whether the poisoned reptile was still breathing. It was the local gravedigger and the town halfwit, the fruit of the union between the retarded daughter of a woodcutter and a squad of hired pikemen who marched through Barefield at the time of Warlord Nelumbo’s rebellion.’

‘Now you’re lying, Dandelion.’

‘Not lying, just embellishing, and there’s a difference.’

‘Not much of one. Speak on, we’re wasting time.’

‘Well then, as I was saying, the gravedigger and the doughty idiot set off as scouts. Afterwards, we built them a small, but pleasing, burial mound.’

‘Aha,’ Borch said, ‘that means the dragon was still alive.’

‘And how,’ Dandelion said cheerfully. ‘It was alive. But it was so weak it didn’t devour either the gravedigger or the halfwit, it just lapped up their blood. And then, to general consternation, it flew away, taking flight with some difficulty. Every furlong it fell with a clatter and then rose again. It walked occasionally, dragging its back legs. Some courageous individuals followed it, keeping it in view. And do you know what?’

‘Speak, Dandelion.’

‘The dragon disappeared among the ravines of the Kestrel Mountains, near the source of the Braa, and hid in the caves there.’

‘Now everything’s clear,’ Geralt said. ‘The dragon has probably lived in those caves for centuries, in a state of torpor. I’ve heard of cases like that. And his treasure hoard must be there too. Now I know why they’re blocking the bridge. Someone wants to get his greedy hands on the treasure. And that someone is Niedamir of Caingorn.’

‘Exactly,’ the troubadour confirmed. ‘The whole of Barefield is fair seething for that reason, because they claim that the dragon and its hoard belongs to them. But they hesitate to cross Niedamir. Niedamir’s a young whelp, who hasn’t started shaving, but he’s already proved it doesn’t pay to fall foul of him. And he wants that dragon, like the very devil, which is why he’s reacted so fast.’

‘Wants the treasure, you mean.’

‘Actually, more the dragon than the treasure. For you see, Niedamir has his eye on the kingdom of Malleore. A princess, of a – so to speak – beddable age was left there after the sudden and odd death of the prince. The noblemen of Malleore look on Niedamir and the other suitors with reluctance, for they know that the new ruler will keep them on a short leash – unlike the callow princess. So they dug up some dusty old prophecy saying that the mitre and the lass’s hand belong to the man who vanquishes the dragon. Because no one had seen a dragon there for ages, they thought they were safe. Niedamir, of course, laughed at the legend, took Malleore by force, and that was that, but when the news of the Barefield dragon got out, he realised he could hoist the Malleore nobility by their own petard. If he showed up there clutching the dragon’s head, the people would greet him like a monarch sent by the gods, and the noblemen wouldn’t dare breathe a word. Does it surprise you, then, that he rushed after the dragon like a scalded cat? Particularly since it’s dead on its feet? For him it’s a real godsend, a stroke of luck, by thunder.’

‘And he’s shut the competition out.’

‘So it would appear. And the people of Barefield. Except that he sent riders with safe-conducts throughout the countryside. They’re for the ones who are supposed to actually kill the dragon, because Niedamir himself is in no hurry to walk into a cave wielding a sword. In a flash he drafted in the most renowned dragon slayers. You probably know most of them, Geralt.’

‘Possibly. Who has turned up?’

‘Eyck of Denesle, to begin with.’

‘Damn . . . ’ the Witcher whistled softly. ‘The pious and virtuous Eyck, a knight without flaw or blemish, in person.’

‘Do you know him, Geralt?’ Borch asked. ‘Is he really the scourge of dragons?’

‘Not just dragons. Eyck is a match for any monster. He’s even killed manticores and gryphons. He’s dispatched a few dragons, so I’ve heard. He’s good. But he spoils my business, the swine, because he doesn’t take any money for it. Who else, Dandelion?’

‘The Crinfrid Reavers.’

‘Well, that’s the dragon done for. Even if it has recovered. That trio are a good team. They fight pretty dirty, but they’re effective. They’ve wiped out all the dracolizards and forktails in Redania, not to mention three red and one black dragon which they also dispatched, and that’s no mean feat. Is that everybody?’

‘No. Six dwarves under the command of Yarpen Zigrin have joined in.’

‘I don’t know him.’

‘But you *have* heard of the dragon Ocvist from Quartz Mountain?’

‘Yes. And I saw some gemstones from its hoard. There were sapphires of remarkable colour and diamonds as large as cherries.’

‘Well, know you that because Yarpen Zigrin and his dwarves did for Ocvist. A ballad was composed about it, but it was lousy because it wasn’t one of mine. You’ve missed nothing if you haven’t heard it.’

‘Is that everybody?’

‘Yes. Not counting you. You claim not to know about the dragon. Who knows, perhaps that’s true? But now you do. Well?’

‘Nothing. That dragon doesn’t interest me.’

‘Hah! Very crafty, Geralt. Because you don’t have a safe-conduct anyway.’

‘The dragon doesn’t interest me, I told you. But what about you, Dandelion? What draws you here?’

‘The usual,’ the troubadour shrugged. ‘I need to be near the action and the excitement. Everyone will be talking about the fight with the dragon. Of course, I could compose a ballad based on reports, but it’ll sound different sung by someone who saw the fight with his own eyes.’

‘Fight?’ Three Jackdaws laughed. ‘More like some kind of pig-sticking or a carcass being quartered. I’m listening and I’m astounded. Celebrated warriors rushing here as fast as they can to finish off a half-dead dragon, poisoned by a peasant. It makes me want to laugh and vomit.’

‘You’re wrong,’ Geralt said. ‘If the dragon hasn’t expired from the poison, its constitution has probably already fought it off and it’s back at full strength. It actually doesn’t make much difference. The Crinfrid Reavers will kill it anyway, but it’ll put up a fight, if you want to know.’

‘So you’re betting on the Reavers, Geralt?’

‘Naturally.’

‘Don’t be so sure.’ The artistic guard, who had been silent up to then, spoke up. ‘A dragon is a magical creature and you can’t kill it any other way than with spells. If anybody can deal with it then it’s that sorceress who rode through yesterday.’

‘Who was that?’ Geralt cocked his head.

‘A sorceress,’ the guard repeated, ‘I told you.’

‘Did she give her name?’

‘She did, but I’ve forgotten it. She had a safe-conduct. She was young, comely, in her own way, but those eyes . . . You know how it is, sire. You come over all cold when they look at you.’

‘Know anything about this, Dandelion? Who could it be?’

‘No,’ the bard grimaced. ‘Young, comely and “those eyes”. Some help that is. They’re all like that. Not one of them that I know – and I know plenty – looks older than twenty-five, thirty; though some of them, I’ve heard, can recall the times when the forest soughed as far as where Novigrad stands today. Anyway, what are elixirs and mandrake for? And they also sprinkle mandrake in their eyes to make them shine. As women will.’

‘Was her hair red?’ the Witcher asked.

‘No, sire,’ the decurion said. ‘Coal-black.’

‘And her horse, what colour was it? Chestnut with a white star?’

‘No. Black, like her hair. Well, gentlemen, I’m telling you, she’ll kill the dragon. A dragon’s a job for a sorcerer. Human strength isn’t enough against it.’

‘I wonder what the cobbler Sheepbagger would have to say about

that,' Dandelion laughed. 'If he'd had something stronger to hand than hellebore and deadly nightshade the dragon's skin would be drying on the Barefield stockade, the ballad would be ready, and I wouldn't be fading in this sun . . . '

'Why exactly didn't Niedamir take you with him?' Geralt asked, looking askance at the poet. 'You were in Barefield when he set off, after all. Could it be that the king doesn't like artists? How come you're fading here, instead of strumming an air by the royal stirrups?'

'The cause was a certain young widow,' Dandelion said dejectedly. 'The hell with it. I tarried, and the next day Niedamir and the others were already over the river. They even took that Sheepbagger with them and some scouts from the Barefield constabulary; they just forgot about me. I've explained it to the decurion, but he keeps repeating—'

'If there's a safe-conduct, I let you through,' the halberdier said dispassionately, relieving himself on the wall of the toll collector's cottage. 'If there isn't, I don't let you through. I've got me orders—'

'Oh,' Three Jackdaws interrupted him, 'the girls are returning with the beer.'

'And they aren't alone,' Dandelion added, standing up. 'Look at that horse. Big as a dragon.'

The Zerrikanians galloped up from the birch wood, flanking a rider sitting on a large, restless warhorse.

The Witcher also stood up.

The rider was wearing a long, purple, velvet kaftan with silver braid and a short coat trimmed with sable fur. Sitting erect in the saddle, he looked imperiously down at them. Geralt knew that kind of look. And was not fond of it.

'Greetings, gentlemen. I am Dorregaray,' the rider introduced himself, dismounting slowly and with dignity. 'Master Dorregaray. Sorcerer.'

'Master Geralt. Witcher.'

'Master Dandelion. Poet.'

'Borch, also known as Three Jackdaws. And my girls, who are removing the bung from that keg, you have already met, Master Dorregaray.'

'That is so, indeed,' the sorcerer said without a smile. 'We

exchanged bows, I and the beautiful warriors from Zerrikania.'

'Well then, cheers,' Dandelion distributed the leather cups brought by Véa. 'Drink with us, Master Sorcerer. My Lord Borch, shall I also serve the decurion?'

'Of course. Join us, soldier.'

'I presume,' the sorcerer said, after taking a small, distinguished sip, 'that the same purpose has brought you gentlemen to the barrier on the bridge, as it has me?'

'If you have the dragon in mind, Master Dorregaray,' Dandelion said, 'that is so, indeed. I want to be there and compose a ballad. Unfortunately, that decurion there, clearly a fellow without refinement, doesn't want to let me through. He demands a safe-conduct.'

'I beg your pardon,' the halberdier said, draining his cup and smacking his lips. 'I've been ordered on pain of death not to let anyone through without a safe-conduct. And I'm told the whole of Barefield has already gathered with wagons, and plans to head up after the dragon. I have my orders—'

'Your orders, soldier,' Dorregaray frowned, 'apply to the rabble, who might hinder; trollops, who might spread debauchery and foul sicknesses; thieves, scum and rabble. But not to me.'

'I won't let anyone through without a safe-conduct,' the decurion glowered, 'I swear—'

'Don't swear,' Three Jackdaws interrupted him. 'Better to have another drink. Téa, pour this stout-hearted soldier a beer. And let us be seated, gentlemen. Drinking standing up, in a rush and without due reverence, does not become the nobility.'

They sat down on logs around the keg. The halberdier, newly raised to nobility, blushed with pleasure.

'Drink, brave centurion,' Three Jackdaws urged.

'But I am a decurion, not a centurion,' the halberdier said, blushing even more intensely.

'But you will be a centurion, for certain,' Borch grinned. 'You're an astute fellow, you'll be promoted in no time.'

Dorregaray, declining a refill, turned towards Geralt.

'People are still talking about the basilisk in town, Witcher, sir, and you now have your eye on the dragon, I see,' he said softly. 'I wonder whether you're so short of money, or whether you murder

endangered creatures for the simple pleasure of it.'

'Curious interest,' Geralt answered, 'coming from someone who is rushing not to be late for the butchering of a dragon, in order to knock out its teeth, so crucial, after all, in the making of magical cures and elixirs. Is it true, sorcerer, sir, that the best ones are those removed from a living dragon?'

'Are you certain that is why I am going there?'

'I am. But someone has already beaten you to it, Dorregaray. A female companion of yours has already gone through with a safe-conduct, which you don't have. She is black-haired, if that's of any interest to you.'

'On a black horse?'

'Apparently.'

'Yennefer,' Dorregaray said, glumly. Unnoticed by anybody, the Witcher twitched.

A silence fell, broken only by the belching of the future centurion.

'Nobody . . . without a safe-conduct . . . '

'Will two hundred lintars suffice?' Geralt calmly took from his pocket the purse received from the fat Alderman.

'Ah, Geralt,' Three Jackdaws smiled mysteriously, 'so you—'

'My apologies, Borch. I'm sorry, but I won't ride with you to Hengfors. Another time perhaps. Perhaps we'll meet again.'

'I have no interest in going to Hengfors,' Three Jackdaws said slowly. 'Not at all, Geralt.'

'Put away that purse, sire,' the future centurion said menacingly, 'that's sheer bribery. I won't even let you through for three hundred.'

'And for five hundred?' Borch took out his pouch. 'Put away that purse, Geralt. I'll pay the toll. This has begun to amuse me. Five hundred, soldier, sir. One hundred a piece, counting my girls as one gorgeous item. What?'

'Oh dear, oh dear,' the future centurion said, distressed, stowing Borch's pouch away under his jacket. 'What will I tell the king?'

'Tell him,' Dorregaray said, straightening up and removing an ornate ivory wand from his belt, 'that you were overcome by fear when you saw it.'

'Saw what, sire?'

The sorcerer flourished his wand and shouted an incantation. A pine tree on the riverbank burst into flames. In one moment the entire tree was engulfed from top to bottom in a blaze of fire.

‘To horse!’ cried Dandelion, springing up and slinging his lute across his back. ‘To horse, gentlemen! And ladies!’

‘Raise the barrier!’ the rich decurion with a good chance of becoming a centurion shouted to the halberdiers.

On the bridge, beyond the barrier, Véa reined in her horse. It skittered, hooves thudding on the planking. The woman, tossing her plaits, screamed piercingly.

‘That’s right, Véa!’ Three Jackdaws shouted back. ‘Onwards, my lords. To horse! We’ll ride in the Zerrikanian fashion, with a thundering and a yelling!’

IV

‘Well, just look,’ said the oldest of the Reavers, Boholt, massive and burly, like the trunk of an old oak tree. ‘So Niedamir didn’t chase you away, my good sirs, though I was certain he would. But it’s not for us paupers to question royal commands. Join us by the campfire. Make yourselves a pallet, boys. And between you and me, Witcher, what did you talk to the king about?’

‘About nothing,’ Geralt said, making himself comfortable by leaning back against his saddle, which he had dragged over beside the fire. ‘He didn’t even come out of his tent to talk to us. He just sent that flunky of his, what’s his name . . . ’

‘Gyllenstiern,’ said Yarpen Zigrin, a stocky, bearded dwarf, who was rolling a huge resinous tree stump he had dragged from the undergrowth into the fire. ‘Pompous upstart. Fat hog. When we joined the hunt he came over, nose stuck up towards the heavens, pooh-pooh, “remember, you dwarves”, he says, “who’s in command, who you have to obey, King Niedamir gives the orders here and his word is law” and so on. I stood and listened and I thought to myself, I’ll have my lads knock him to the ground and I’ll piss all over his cape. But I dropped the idea, you know, because word would get around again that dwarves are nasty, that they’re aggressive, that they’re whoresons and it’s impossible to live with them in . . . what the hell was it? . . . harmonium, or whatever it is. And right away there’d be another pogrom somewhere, in some little town or other. So I just listened politely and nodded.’

‘It looks like that’s all Lord Gyllenstiern knows,’ Geralt said, ‘because he said the same to us and all we did was nod too.’

‘And I reckon,’ the second Reaver said, spreading a blanket over a pile of brushwood, ‘it was a bad thing Niedamir didn’t chase you away. Doesn’t bear thinking how many people are after this dragon. Swarms of them. It’s not a hunting expedition no more, it’s a funeral procession. I need elbow room when I’m fighting.’

‘Come off it, Gar,’ Boholt said, ‘the more the merrier. What, never hunted a dragon before? There’s always a swarm of people behind a dragon, a noisy rabble, a veritable bordello on wheels. But when the reptile shows up, guess who’s left standing in the field. Us, that’s who.’

Boholt was silent for a moment, took a long draw from a large,

wicker-bound demijohn, blew his nose loudly and coughed.

‘Another thing,’ he continued. ‘In practice it’s often only after the dragon’s been killed that the merrymaking and bloodletting begins and the heads start rolling. It’s only when the treasure’s being shared out that the hunters go for each others’ throats. Right, Geralt? Oi? Am I right? Witcher, I’m talking to you.’

‘I’m aware of cases like that,’ Geralt concurred dryly.

‘Aware, you say. No doubt from hearsay, because I can’t say I’ve ever heard of you stalking a dragon. Never in all my born days have I heard of a witcher hunting dragons. Which makes it all the stranger you’re here.’

‘True,’ drawled Kennet, also known as Beanpole, the youngest Reaver. ‘That’s strange. And we—’

‘Wait, Beanpole, I’m talking,’ Boholt cut in, ‘and besides, I don’t plan to talk for too long. Anyway, the Witcher knows what I’m on about. I know him and he knows me, and up to now we haven’t got in each other’s way and we probably never will. See, lads, if I wanted to disrupt the Witcher’s work or snatch the loot from under his nose, the Witcher would waste no time slashing me with that witcher razor of his, and he’d be within his rights. Agreed?’

No one seconded or challenged this. There was nothing to suggest that Boholt cared either way.

‘Aye,’ he continued, ‘the more the merrier, as I said. And the Witcher may prove useful to the company. It’s wild and deserted round here, and should a frightener, or ilyocoris, or a striga, jump out at us, there might be trouble. But if Geralt’s standing by there won’t be any trouble, because that’s his speciality. But dragons aren’t his speciality. Right?’

Once more no one seconded or challenged this.

‘Lord Three Jackdaws is with Geralt,’ continued Boholt, handing the demijohn to Yarpen, ‘and that’s enough of a guarantee for me. So who’s bothering you, Gar, Beanpole? Can’t be Dandelion, can it?’

‘Dandelion,’ Yarpen Zigrin said, passing the demijohn to the bard, ‘always tags along whenever something interesting’s happening and everybody knows he doesn’t interfere, doesn’t help and won’t slow the march down. Bit like a burr on a dog’s tail. Right, boys?’

The ‘boys’ – stocky, bearded dwarves – cackled, shaking their beards. Dandelion pushed his bonnet back and drank from the demijohn.

‘Oooh, bloody hell,’ he groaned, gasping for air. ‘It takes your voice away. What was it distilled from, scorpions?’

‘There’s one thing irking me, Geralt,’ Beanpole said, taking the demijohn from the minstrel, ‘and that’s you bringing that sorcerer along. We can hardly move for sorcerers.’

‘That’s true,’ the dwarf butted in. ‘Beanpole’s right. We need that Dorregaray like a pig needs a saddle. For some time now we’ve had our very own witch, the noble Yennefer. Ugh.’ He spat her name.

‘Yes indeed,’ Boholt said, scratching himself on his bull neck, from which a moment earlier he had unfastened a leather collar, bristling with steel studs. ‘There are too many sorcerers here, gentlemen. Two too many, to be precise. And they’re a sight too thick with our Niedamir. Just look, we’re under the stars around a fire, and they, gentlemen, are in the warm, plotting in the royal tent, the cunning foxes. Niedamir, the witch, the wizard and Gyllenstiern. And Yennefer’s the worst. And do you want to know what they’re plotting? How to cheat us, that’s what.’

‘And stuffing themselves with venison,’ Beanpole interjected gloomily. ‘And what did we eat? Marmot! And what’s a marmot, I ask you? A rat, nothing else. So what have we eaten? Rat!’

‘Never mind,’ Gar said, ‘We’ll soon be sampling dragon’s tail. There’s nothing like dragon’s tail, roasted over charcoal.’

‘Yennefer,’ Boholt went on, ‘is a foul, nasty, mouthy bint. Not like your lasses, Lord Borch. They are quiet and agreeable, just look, they’ve sat down by the horses, they’re sharpening their sabres. I walked past, said something witty, they smiled and showed their little teeth. Yes, I’m glad they’re here, not like Yennefer, all she does is scheme and scheme. And I tell you, we have to watch out, because we’ll end up with shit all from our agreement.’

‘What agreement, Boholt?’

‘Well, Yarpen, do we tell the Witcher?’

‘Ain’t got nothing against it,’ the dwarf answered.

‘There’s no more booze,’ Beanpole interjected, turning the demijohn upside down.

‘Get some then. You’re the youngest, m’lord. The agreement was our idea, Geralt, because we aren’t hirelings or paid servants, and we won’t be having Niedamir send us after that dragon and then toss a few pieces of gold in our direction. The truth is we’ll cope with that dragon without Niedamir, but Niedamir won’t cope

without us. So it's clear from that who's worth more and whose share should be bigger. And we put the case fairly – whoever takes on the dragon in mortal combat and bests it takes half of the treasure hoard. Niedamir, by virtue of his birthright and title, takes a quarter, in any event. And the rest, provided they help, will share the remaining quarter between themselves, equally. What do you think about that?'

'And what does Niedamir think about it?'

'He said neither yes nor no. But he'd better not put up a fight, the whippersnapper. I told you, he won't take on the dragon himself, he has to count on experts, which means us, the Reavers, and Yarpen and his lads. We, and no one else, will meet the dragon at a sword's length. The rest, including the sorcerers, if they give honest assistance, will share a quarter of the treasure among themselves.'

'Who do you include in the rest, apart from the sorcerers?' Dandelion asked with interest.

'Certainly not buskers and poetasters,' Yarpen Zigrin cackled. 'We include those who put in some work with a battle-axe, not a lute.'

'Aha,' Three Jackdaws said, looking up at the starry sky. 'And how will the cobbler Sheepbagger and his rabble be contributing?'

Yarpen Zigrin spat into the campfire, muttering something in dwarven.

'The constabulary from Barefield know these bloody mountains and will act as guides,' Boholt said softly, 'hence it will be fair to allow them a share of the spoils. It's a slightly different matter with the cobbler. You see, it will go ill if the peasantry become convinced that when a dragon shows up in the land, instead of sending for professionals, they can casually poison it and go back to humping wenches in the long grass. If such a practice became widespread, we'd probably have to start begging. Yes?'

'That's right,' Yarpen added. 'For which reason, I tell you, something bad ought to befall that cobbler, before the bastard passes into legend.'

'If it's meant to befall him, it'll befall him,' Gar said with conviction. 'Leave it to me.'

'And Dandelion,' the dwarf took up, 'will blacken his name in a ballad, make him look a fool. So that he'll suffer shame and dishonour, for generations to come.'

'You've forgotten about one thing,' Geralt said. 'There's one

person here who could throw a spoke in the wheel. Who won't assent to any divisions or agreements. I mean Eyck of Denesle. Have you talked to him?'

'What about?' Boholt said, grinding his teeth, using a stout stick to move the logs around in the campfire. 'You won't get anywhere with Eyck, Geralt. He knows nothing about business.'

'As we rode up to your camp,' Three Jackdaws said, 'we met him. He was kneeling on the rocks, in full armour, staring at the sky.'

'He's always doing that,' Beanpole said. 'He's meditating, or saying his prayers. He says he must, because he has orders from the gods to protect people from evil.'

'Back home in Crinfrid,' Boholt muttered, 'we keep people like that on a chain in the cowshed, and give them a piece of coal so they can draw outlandish pictures on the walls. But that's enough gossip about my neighbours, we're talking business.'

A petite, young woman with black hair held tightly by a gold hairnet, wrapped in a woollen cloak, noiselessly entered the circle of light.

'What reeks so much round here?' Yarpen Zigrin asked, pretending not to see her. 'Not brimstone, is it?'

'No,' Boholt, glancing to the side and sniffing pointedly, 'it's musk or some other scent.'

'No, it has to be . . . ' the dwarf grimaced. 'Oh! Why it's the noble Madam Yennefer! Welcome, welcome.'

The sorceress's eyes slowly swept over the company, her shining eyes coming to rest for a while on the Witcher. Geralt smiled faintly.

'May I join you?'

'But of course, good lady,' Boholt said and hiccoughed. 'Sit down here, on the saddle. Move your arse, Kennet, and give the noble sorceress the saddle.'

'From what I hear, you're talking business, gentlemen.' Yennefer sat down, stretching out her shapely, black-stockinged legs in front of her. 'Without me?'

'We didn't dare,' Yarpen Zigrin said, 'trouble such an important personage.'

'It would be better, Yarpen' – Yennefer narrowed her eyes, turning her head towards the dwarf – 'if you kept quiet. From the

very first day you've been treating me as if I were nothing but air, so please continue, don't let me bother you. Because it doesn't bother me either.'

'Really, m'lady,' Yarpen's smile revealed uneven teeth. 'May I be infested by ticks, if I haven't been treating you better than the air. I've been known, for example, to spoil the air, which there's no way I'd dare to do in your presence.'

The bearded 'boys' roared with thunderous laughter, but fell silent immediately at the sight of the blue glow which suddenly enveloped the sorceress.

'One more word and you'll end as spoiled air, Yarpen,' Yennefer said in a voice with a metallic edge, 'and a black stain on the grass.'

'Indeed,' Boholt cleared his throat, relieving the silence that had fallen. 'Quiet, Zigrin. Let's hear what Madam Yennefer has to say to us. She just complained that we're talking about business without her. From which I conclude she has some kind of offer for us. Let's hear, my lords, what kind of offer it is. As long as she doesn't suggest killing the dragon by herself, using spells.'

'And what if I do?' Yennefer raised her head. 'Don't think it's possible, Boholt?'

'It might be possible. But it's not profitable, because you'd be certain to demand half the dragon's hoard.'

'At least half,' the sorceress said coldly.

'Well, you see for yourself there's no profit in it for us. We, my lady, are poor warriors, and if the loot passes us by, hunger will come beckoning. We live on sorrel and pigweed . . . '

'Only once in a blue moon do we manage to catch a marmot,' Yarpen Zigrin interrupted in a sombre voice.

' . . . we drink spring water,' Boholt took a swig from the demijohn and shuddered slightly. 'There's no choice for us, Madam Yennefer. It's either loot, or freeze to death in the winter huddled against a fence. For inns cost money.'

'Beer does too,' Gar added.

'And dirty strumpets,' Beanpole said, daydreaming.

'Which is why,' Boholt said, looking up at the sky, 'we will kill the dragon, by ourselves, without spells and without your help.'

'Are you certain about that? Just remember there are limits to what is possible, Boholt.'

‘Perhaps there are, but I’ve never come across them. No, m’lady. I repeat, we’ll kill the dragon ourselves, without any spells.’

‘Particularly,’ Yarpen Zigrin added, ‘since spells surely have their own limits, which, unlike our own, we don’t know.’

‘Did you come up with that yourself?’ Yennefer asked slowly. ‘Or did someone put you up to it? Does the presence of the Witcher in this select company give you the right to such brazenness?’

‘No,’ Boholt replied, looking at Geralt, who seemed to be dozing, stretched out lazily on a blanket with his saddle beneath his head, ‘the Witcher has nothing to do with it. Listen, noble Yennefer. We put forward a proposition to the king, but he hasn’t honoured us with an answer. We’re patient, we’ll wait till the morning. Should the king agree to a settlement, we ride on together. If not, we go back.’

‘Us too,’ the dwarf snarled.

‘There won’t be any bargaining,’ Boholt continued. ‘Take it or leave it. Repeat our words to Niedamir, Madam Yennefer. And I’ll tell you; a deal’s also good for you and for Dorregaray, if you come to an agreement with him. We don’t need the dragon’s carcass, mark you, we’ll take but the tail. And the rest is yours, you can have whatever you want. We won’t stint you with the teeth or the brain; we’ll keep nothing that you need for sorcery.’

‘Of course,’ Yarpen Zigrin added, chuckling, ‘the carrion will be for you, sorcerers, no one will take it from you. Unless some other vultures do.’

Yennefer stood up, throwing her cloak over her shoulder.

‘Niedamir won’t wait until morning,’ she said sharply. ‘He has agreed to your conditions already. Against mine and Dorregaray’s advice, mark you.’

‘Niedamir,’ Boholt slowly drawled, ‘is displaying astonishing wisdom for one so young. To me, Madam Yennefer, wisdom includes the ability to turn a deaf ear to foolish or insincere advice.’

Yarpen Zigrin snorted into his beard.

‘You’ll be singing a different tune,’ the sorceress put her hands on her hips, ‘when the dragon lacerates and perforates you and shatters your shinbones. You’ll be licking my shoes and begging for help. As usual. How well, oh, how very well do I know your sort. I know you so well it makes me sick.’

She turned away and disappeared into the gloom, without saying

goodbye.

‘In my day,’ Yarpen Zigrin said, ‘sorceresses stayed in their towers, read learned books and stirred cauldrons. They didn’t get under warriors’ feet, didn’t interfere in our business. And didn’t wiggle their bottoms in front of a fellow.’

‘Frankly speaking, she can wiggle all she likes,’ Dandelion said, tuning his lute. ‘Right, Geralt? Geralt? Hey, where’s the Witcher?’

‘What do we care?’ Boholt muttered, throwing another log on the fire. ‘He went somewhere. Perhaps he had to relieve himself, my lord. It’s his business.’

‘That’s right,’ the bard agreed and strummed the strings. ‘Shall I sing you something?’

‘Sing, dammit,’ Yarpen Zigrin said and spat. ‘But don’t be thinking, Dandelion, that I’ll give you as much as a shilling for your bleating. It’s not the royal court, son.’

‘I can see that,’ the troubadour nodded.

V

‘Yennefer.’

She turned around, as though surprised, though the Witcher was in doubt she had heard his steps well before. She placed a small wooden pail on the floor, straightened up and brushed aside some hair which had freed itself from her golden hairnet and fell in curls onto her shoulders.

‘Geralt.’

She was wearing just two colours, as usual: black and white. Black hair, long, black eyelashes forcing one to guess the colour of the eyes concealed beneath them. A black skirt and a short, black tunic with a white fur collar. A white blouse of the sheerest linen. On her neck a black velvet ribbon adorned with an obsidian star bestrewn with tiny diamonds.

‘You haven’t changed at all.’

‘Neither have you,’ she sneered. ‘And in both cases it is equally normal. Or, if you prefer, equally abnormal. In any case, the mention of it, though it may not be a bad way to begin the conversation, is meaningless. Am I right?’

‘You are,’ he nodded, looking to one side, towards Niedamir’s tent and the fires of the royal bowmen obscured by the dark shapes of wagons. From the more distant campfire floated Dandelion’s sonorous voice singing *The Stars above the Path*, one of his most popular romantic ballads.

‘Well, now that we have the preliminaries out of the way,’ the sorceress said, ‘I wonder what’s coming next’.

‘You see, Yennefer—’

‘I see,’ she interrupted sharply, ‘But I don’t understand. Why did you come here, Geralt? Surely not because of the dragon? I presume nothing has changed in that regard?’

‘No. Nothing’s changed.’

‘Why, then, I pray, have you joined the party?’

‘If I said that it was because of you, would you believe me?’

She looked at him in silence, and there was something in her flashing eyes which Geralt did not like.

‘I believe you, why not?’ she finally said. ‘Men like to meet their former lovers, like to relive memories. They like to imagine that erstwhile erotic ecstasies give them some kind of perpetual ownership of their partner. It enhances their self-importance. You are no exception. In spite of everything.’

‘Nevertheless,’ he smiled, ‘you’re right, Yennefer. The sight of you makes me feel wonderful. In other words, I’m glad to see you.’

‘And is that all? Well, let’s say I’m also glad. Having said that, I wish you goodnight. I am retiring for the night, as you can see. Before that I intend to bathe and I usually get undressed to perform that activity. Withdraw, then, in order graciously to assure me a minimum of discretion.’

‘Yen,’ he held his hands out to her.

‘Don’t call me that!’ she hissed furiously, springing back, blue and red sparks streaming from her extended fingers. ‘And if you touch me I’ll scorch your eyes out, you bastard.’

The Witcher moved back. The sorceress, somewhat calmer, brushed her hair aside once again and stood before him with her fists resting on her hips.

‘What did you think, Geralt? That we’d have a nice, cheerful gossip, that we’d reminisce about the old days? That perhaps at the end of our chat we’d get onto a wagon and make love on the sheepskins, just like that, for old times’ sake? Did you?’

Geralt, not certain if the sorceress was magically reading his mind or had only guessed right, kept silent, smiling wryly.

‘Those four years left their mark, Geralt. I’m over it now, which is the only reason why I didn’t spit in your eyes during today’s encounter. But don’t let my civility deceive you.’

‘Yennefer . . . ’

‘Be quiet! I gave you more than I’ve ever given any other man, you scoundrel. I don’t know, myself, why I gave it to you. And you . . . Oh, no, my dear. I’m not a slut or an elf-woman met by chance in the forest, who can be discarded in the morning, walked out on without being woken, with a posy of violets left on the table. Who can be made a mockery of. Beware! Utter a single word and you will regret it!’

Geralt did not utter a single word, correctly sensing the anger seething in Yennefer.

The sorceress once again brushed aside some unruly locks and

looked him in the eyes, from close up.

‘We’ve met, that’s too bad,’ she said softly. ‘But we shall not make a spectacle of ourselves for everybody. We shall save face. We’ll pretend to be good friends. But don’t be mistaken, Geralt. There is nothing between us now. Nothing, understood? And be glad of it, because it means I have now abandoned the plans which, until recently I still harboured regarding you. But that in no way means I’ve forgiven you. I shall never forgive you, Witcher. Never.’

She turned around suddenly, seized the pail, spraying water around, and disappeared behind a wagon.

Geralt chased away a mosquito whining above his ear and slowly walked back towards the campfire, where Dandelion’s performance was being rewarded with half-hearted applause. He looked up at the dark blue sky above the black, serrated saw blade of the mountain peaks. He felt like bursting out laughing. He did not know why.

VI

‘Careful up there! Take heed!’ Boholt called, turning around on the coachman’s seat to look back towards the column. ‘Closer to the rocks! Take heed!’

The wagons trundled along, bouncing on stones. The wagoners swore, lashing the horses with their reins and leaning out. They glanced anxiously to see if the wheels were sufficiently far from the edge of the ravine, along which ran a narrow, uneven road. Below, at the bottom of the chasm, the waters of the River Braa foamed white among the boulders.

Geralt reined back his horse, pressing himself against the rock wall, which was covered with sparse brown moss and white lichen. He let the Reavers’ wagon overtake him. Beanpole galloped up from the head of the column where he had been leading the cavalcade with the Barefield scouts.

‘Right!’ he shouted, ‘With a will! It widens out up ahead!’

King Niedamir and Gyllenstiern, both on horseback, accompanied by several mounted bowmen, came alongside Geralt. Behind them rattled the wagons of the royal caravan. Even further back trundled the dwarves’ wagon, driven by Yarpen Zigrin, who was yelling relentlessly.

Niedamir, a very thin, freckled youngster in a white sheepskin jacket, passed the Witcher, casting him a haughty, though distinctly bored, look. Gyllenstiern straightened up and reined in his horse.

‘Over here, Witcher, sir,’ he said overbearingly.

‘Yes?’ Geralt jabbed his mare with his heels, and rode slowly over to the chancellor, behind the caravan. He was astonished that, in spite of having such an impressive paunch, Gyllenstiern preferred horseback to a comfortable ride in a wagon.

‘Yesterday,’ Gyllenstiern said, gently tugging his gold-studded reins, and throwing a turquoise cape off his shoulder, ‘yesterday you said the dragon does not interest you. What does interest you then, Witcher, sir? Why do you ride with us?’

‘It’s a free country, chancellor.’

‘For the moment. But in this cortege, my dear Geralt, everyone should know his place. And the role he is to fulfil, according to the

will of King Niedamir. Do you comprehend that?'

'What are you driving at, my dear Gyllenstiern?'

'I shall tell you. I've heard that it has recently become tiresome to negotiate with you witchers. The thing is that, whenever a witcher is shown a monster to be killed, the witcher, rather than take his sword and slaughter it, begins to ponder whether it is right, whether it is transgressing the limits of what is possible, whether it is not contrary to the code and whether the monster really *is* a monster, as though it wasn't clear at first glance. It seems to me that you are simply doing too well. In my day, witchers didn't have two pennies to rub together, just two stinking boots. They didn't question, they slaughtered what they were ordered to, whether it was a werewolf, a dragon or a tax collector. All that counted was a clean cut. So, Geralt?'

'Do you have a job for me, Gyllenstiern?' the Witcher asked coldly. 'If so, tell me what. I'll think it over. But if you don't, there's no sense wasting our breath, is there?'

'Job?' the chancellor sighed. 'No, I don't. This all concerns a dragon, and that clearly transgresses your limits, Witcher. So I prefer the Reavers. I merely wanted to alert you. Warn you. King Niedamir and I may tolerate the whims of witchers and their classification of monsters into good and bad, but we do not wish to hear about them, much less see them effected in our presence. Don't meddle in royal matters, Witcher. And don't consort with Dorregaray.'

'I am not accustomed to consorting with sorcerers. Why such an inference?'

'Dorregaray,' Gyllenstiern said, 'surpasses even witchers with his whims. He does not stop at categorising monsters into good and bad. He considers them all good.'

'That's overstating the case somewhat.'

'Clearly. But he defends his views with astonishing obstinacy. I truly would not be surprised if something befell him. And the fact he joined us keeping such curious company—'

'I am not Dorregaray's companion. And neither is he mine.'

'Don't interrupt. The company is strange. A witcher crawling with scruples like a fox's pelt with fleas. A sorcerer spouting druidic humbug about equilibrium in nature. The silent knight Borch Three Jackdaws and his escort from Zerrikania, where – as is generally

known – sacrifices are made before the image of a dragon. And suddenly they all join in the hunt. Strange, isn't it?'

'If you insist, then yes it is.'

'Know then,' the chancellor said, 'that the most mysterious problems find – as experience proves – the simplest solutions. Don't compel me, Witcher, to use them.'

'I don't understand.'

'Oh, but you do. Thank you for the conversation, Geralt.'

Geralt stopped. Gyllenstiern urged his horse on and joined the king, catching up with the caravan. Eyck of Denesle rode alongside wearing a quilted kaftan of light-coloured leather marked with the impressions of a breastplate, pulling a packhorse laden with a suit of armour, a uniformly silver shield and a powerful lance. Geralt greeted him by raising his hand, but the knight errant turned his head to the side, tightening his thin lips, and spurred his horse on.

'He isn't keen on you,' Dorregaray said, riding over. 'Eh, Geralt?'

'Clearly.'

'Competition, isn't it? The two of you have similar occupations. Except that Eyck is an idealist, and you are a professional. A minor difference, particularly for the ones you kill.'

'Don't compare me to Eyck, Dorregaray. The devil knows who you wrong with that comparison, him or me, but don't compare us.'

'As you wish. To me, frankly speaking, you are equally loathsome.'

'Thank you.'

'Don't mention it,' the sorcerer patted the neck of his horse, which had been scared by all the yelling from Yarpen and his dwarves. 'To me, Witcher, calling killing a vocation is loathsome, low and nonsensical. Our world is in equilibrium. The annihilation, the killing, of any creatures that inhabit this world upsets that equilibrium. And a lack of equilibrium brings closer extinction; extinction and the end of the world as we know it.'

'A druidic theory,' Geralt pronounced. 'I know it. An old hierophant expounded it to me once, back in Rivia. Two days after our conversation he was torn apart by wererats. It was impossible to prove any upset in equilibrium.'

'The world, I repeat,' Dorregaray glanced at him indifferently, 'is in equilibrium. Natural equilibrium. Every species has its own

natural enemies, every one is the natural enemy of other species. That also includes humans. The extermination of the natural enemies of humans, which you dedicate yourself to, and which one can begin to observe, threatens the degeneration of the race.'

'Do you know what, sorcerer?' Geralt said, annoyed. 'One day, take yourself to a mother whose child has been devoured by a basilisk, and tell her she ought to be glad, because thanks to that the human race has escaped degeneration. See what she says to you.'

'A good argument, Witcher,' Yennefer said, riding up to them on her large, black horse. 'And you, Dorregaray, be careful what you say.'

'I'm not accustomed to concealing my views.'

Yennefer rode between them. The Witcher noticed that the golden hairnet had been replaced by a rolled up white kerchief.

'Start concealing them as quickly as possible, Dorregaray,' she said, 'especially before Niedamir and the Reavers, who already suspect you plan to interfere in the killing of the dragon. As long as you only talk, they treat you like a harmless maniac. If, however, you try to start anything they'll break your neck before you manage to let out a sigh.'

The sorcerer smiled contemptuously and condescendingly.

'And besides,' Yennefer continued, 'by expressing those views you damage the solemnity of our profession and vocation.'

'How so?'

'You can apply your theory to all sorts of creatures and vermin, Dorregaray. But not to dragons. For dragons are the natural, greatest enemies of man. And I do not refer to the degeneration of the human race, but to its survival. In order to survive, one has to crush one's enemies, enemies which might prevent that survival.'

'Dragons aren't man's enemies,' Geralt broke in. The sorceress looked at him and smiled. But only with her lips.

'In that matter,' she said, 'leave the judging to us *humans*. Your role, Witcher, is not to judge. It's to get a job done.'

'Like a programmed, servile golem?'

'That was your comparison, not mine,' Yennefer replied coldly. 'But, well, it's apt.'

'Yennefer,' Dorregaray said, 'for a woman of your education and

age you are coming out with some astonishing tripe. Why is it that dragons have been promoted in your eyes to become the foremost enemies of man? Why not other – a hundredfold more dangerous – creatures, those that have a hundredfold more victims on their consciences than dragons? Why not hirikkas, forktails, manticores, amphisbaenas or gryphons? Why not wolves?'

'I'll tell you why not. The advantage of men over other races and species, the fight for their due place in nature, for living space, can only be won when nomadism, wandering from place to place in search of sustenance in accordance with nature's calendar, is finally eliminated. Otherwise the proper rhythm of reproduction will not be achieved, since human children are dependent for too long. Only a woman safe and secure behind town walls or in a stronghold can bear children according to the proper rhythm, which means once a year. Fecundity, Dorregaray, is growth, is the condition for survival and domination. And now we come to dragons. Only a dragon, and no other monster, can threaten a town or stronghold. Were dragons not to be wiped out, people would – for their own safety – disperse, instead of cleaving together, because dragon's fire in a densely populated settlement is a nightmare, means hundreds of victims, and terrible destruction. That is why dragons must be utterly wiped out, Dorregaray.'

Dorregaray looked at her with a strange smile on his face.

'Do you know what, Yennefer, I wouldn't like to see the day your idea of the dominance of man comes about, when people like you will occupy their due place in nature. Fortunately, it will never come to that. You would rather poison or slaughter each other, expire from typhoid fever and typhus, because it is filth and lice – and not dragons – which threaten your splendid cities, where women are delivered of children once a year, but where only one new-born baby in ten lives longer than ten days. Yes, Yennefer, fecundity, fecundity and once again fecundity. So take up bearing children, my dear; it's the most natural pursuit for you. It will occupy the time you are currently fruitlessly wasting on dreaming up nonsense. Farewell.'

Urging on his horse, the sorcerer galloped off towards the head of the column. Geralt, having glanced at Yennefer's pale, furiously twisted face, began to feel sorry for him in advance. He knew what this was about. Yennefer, like most sorceresses, was barren. But unlike most sorceresses she bemoaned the fact and reacted with genuine rage at the mention of it. Dorregaray certainly knew that. But he probably did not know how vengeful she was.

‘He’s in trouble,’ she hissed. ‘Oh, yes. Beware, Geralt. Don’t think that when the time comes and you don’t show good sense, I’ll protect you.’

‘Never fear,’ he smiled. ‘We – and I mean witchers and servile golems – always act sensibly. Since the limits within which we operate are clearly and explicitly demarcated.’

‘Well, I never,’ Yennefer said, looking at him, still pale. ‘You’re taking umbrage like a tart whose lack of chastity has been pointed out to her. You’re a witcher, you can’t change that. Your vocation . . . ’

‘That’s enough about vocations, Yen, because it’s beginning to make me queasy.’

‘I told you not to call me that. And I’m not especially bothered about your queasiness. Nor any other reactions in your limited witcher’s range of reactions.’

‘Nevertheless, you’ll see some of them if you don’t stop plying me with tales about lofty missions and the fight between good and evil. And about dragons; the dreadful enemies of the human tribe. I know better.’

‘Oh, yes?’ The sorceress narrowed her eyes. ‘And what do you know, Witcher?’

‘Only,’ Geralt said, ignoring the sudden warning vibration of the medallion around his neck, ‘that if dragons didn’t have treasure hoards, not a soul would be interested in them; and certainly not sorcerers. Isn’t it interesting that whenever a dragon is being hunted, some sorcerer closely linked to the Goldsmiths’ Guild is always hanging around. Just like you. And later, although a deal of gemstones ought to end up on the market, it never happens and their price doesn’t go down. So don’t talk to me about vocation and the fight for the survival of the race. I know you too well, have known you too long.’

‘Too long,’ she repeated, sneering malevolently. ‘Unfortunately. But don’t think you know me well, you whore’s son. Dammit, how stupid I’ve been . . . Oh, go to hell! I can’t stand the sight of you!’

She screamed, yanked her horse’s reins and galloped fiercely ahead. The Witcher reined back his mount, and let through the wagon of dwarves, yelling, cursing and whistling through bone pipes. Among them, sprawled on some sacks of oats, lay Dandelion, plucking his lute.

‘Hey!’ roared Yarpen Zigrin, who was sitting on the box, pointing at Yennefer. ‘There’s something black on the trail! I wonder what it is? It looks like a nag!’

‘Without doubt!’ Dandelion shouted, shoving his plum bonnet back, ‘It’s a nag! Riding a gelding! Astounding!’

The beards of Yarpen’s boys shook in general laughter. Yennefer pretended not to hear.

Geralt reined back his horse again and let Niedamir’s mounted bowmen through. Borch was riding slowly some distance beyond them, and the Zerrikanians brought up the rear just behind him. Geralt waited for them to catch up and led his mare alongside Borch’s horse. They rode on in silence.

‘Witcher,’ Three Jackdaws suddenly said, ‘I want to ask you a question.’

‘Ask it.’

‘Why don’t you turn back?’

The Witcher looked at him in silence for a moment.

‘Do you really want to know?’

‘Yes, I do,’ Three Jackdaws said, turning his face towards Geralt.

‘I’m riding with them because I’m a servile golem. Because I’m a wisp of oakum blown by the wind along the highway. Tell me, where should I go? And for what? At least here some people have gathered with whom I have something to talk about. People who don’t break off their conversations when I approach. People who, though they may not like me, say it to my face, and don’t throw stones from behind a fence. I’m riding with them for the same reason I rode with you to the log drivers’ inn. Because it’s all the same to me. I don’t have a goal to head towards. I don’t have a destination at the end of the road.’

Three Jackdaws cleared his throat.

‘There’s a destination at the end of every road. Everybody has one. Even you, although you like to think you’re somehow different.’

‘Now I’ll ask you a question.’

‘Ask it.’

‘Do you have a destination at the end of the road?’

‘I do.’

‘Lucky for you.’

‘It is not a matter of luck, Geralt. It is a matter of what you believe in and what you serve. No one ought to know that better than . . . than a witcher.’

‘I keep hearing about goals today,’ Geralt sighed. ‘Niedamir’s aim is to seize Malleore. Eyck of Denesle’s calling is to protect people from dragons. Dorregaray feels obligated to something quite the opposite. Yennefer, by virtue of certain changes which her body was subjected to, cannot fulfil her wishes and is terribly undecided. Dammit, only the Reavers and the dwarves don’t feel a calling, and simply want to line their pockets. Perhaps that’s why I’m so drawn to them?’

‘You aren’t drawn to them, Geralt of Rivia. I’m neither blind nor deaf. It wasn’t at the sound of their name you pulled out that pouch. But I surmise . . . ’

‘There’s no need to surmise,’ the Witcher said, without anger.

‘I apologise.’

‘There’s no need to apologise.’

They reined back their horses just in time, in order not to ride into the column of bowmen from Caingorn which had suddenly been called to a halt.

‘What has happened?’ Geralt stood up in his stirrups. ‘Why have we stopped?’

‘I don’t know.’ Borch turned his head away. Véa, her face strangely contorted, uttered a few quick words.

‘I’ll ride up to the front,’ the Witcher said, ‘to see what’s going on.’

‘Stay here.’

‘Why?’

Three Jackdaws was silent for a moment, eyes fixed on the ground.

‘Why?’ Geralt repeated.

‘Go,’ Borch said. ‘Perhaps it’ll be better that way.’

‘What’ll be better?’

‘Go.’

The bridge connecting the two edges of the chasm looked sound.

It was built from thick, pine timbers and supported on a quadrangular pier, against which the current crashed and roared in long strands of foam.

'Hey, Beanpole!' yelled Boholt, who was driving the wagon. 'Why've you stopped?'

'I don't know if the bridge will hold.'

'Why are we taking this road?' Gyllenstiern asked, riding over. 'It's not to my liking to take the wagons across the bridge. Hey, cobbler! Why are you leading us this way, and not by the trail? The trail continues on towards the west, doesn't it?'

The heroic poisoner of Barefield approached, removing his sheepskin cap. He looked ridiculous, dressed up in an old-fashioned half-armour probably hammered out during the reign of King Sambuk, pulled down tightly over a shepherd's smock.

'The road's shorter this way, Your Majesty,' he said, not to the chancellor, but directly to Niedamir, whose face still expressed thoroughly excruciated boredom.

'How is that?' Gyllenstiern asked, frowning. Niedamir did not even grace the cobbler with a more attentive glance.

'Them's,' Sheepbagger said, indicating the three notched peaks towering over the surrounding area, 'is Chiava, Great Kestrel and Harbinger's Fang. The trail leads toward the ruins of the old stronghold, and skirts around Chiava from the north, beyond the river's source. But we can shorten the way by takin' the bridge. We'll pass through the gorge and onto the plain 'tween the mountains. And if we don't find no sign of the dragon there, we'll continue on eastwards, we'll search the ravines. And even further eastward there are flat pastures, where there's a straight road to Caingorn, towards your lands, sire.'

'And where, Sheepbagger, did you acquire such knowledge about these mountains?' Boholt asked. 'At your cobbler's last?'

'No, sir. I herded sheep here as a young 'un.'

'And that bridge won't give way?' Boholt stood up on the box, and looked downwards at the foaming river. 'That must be a drop of forty fathoms.'

'It'll 'old, sir.'

'What's a bridge doing in this wilderness anyhow?'

'That there bridge,' Sheepbagger said, 'was built by trolls in the

olden days, and whoever came this way had to pay them a pretty penny. But since folk seldom came this way the trolls were reduced to beggary. But the bridge remains.'

'I repeat,' Gyllenstiern said irately. 'We have wagons with tackle and provender, and we may become bogged down in the wilderness. Is it not better to take the trail?'

'We could take the trail,' the cobbler shrugged, 'but it's longer that way. And the king said 'e'd give 'is earteeth to get to that dragon soon.'

'Eyeteeth,' the chancellor corrected him.

'Have it your way, eyeteeth,' Sheepbagger agreed. 'But it's still quicker by the bridge.'

'Right, let's go, Sheepbagger,' Boholt decided. 'Forge ahead, you and your men. We have a custom of letting the most valiant through first.'

'No more than one wagon at a time,' Gyllenstiern warned.

'Right,' Boholt lashed his horses and the wagon rumbled onto the bridge's timbers. 'Follow us, Beanpole! Make sure the wheels are rolling smoothly!'

Geralt reined back his horse, his way barred by Niedamir's bowmen in their purple and gold tunics, crowded on the stone bridgehead.

The Witcher's mare snorted.

The earth shuddered. The mountains trembled, the jagged edge of the rock wall beside them became blurred against the sky, and the wall itself suddenly spoke with a dull, but audible rumbling.

'Look out!' Boholt yelled, now on the other side of the bridge. 'Look out, there!'

The first, small stones pattered and rattled down the spasmodically shuddering rock wall. Geralt watched as part of the road they had followed, very rapidly widening into a yawning, black crack, broke off and plunged into the chasm with a thunderous clatter.

'To horse!' Gyllenstiern yelled. 'Your Majesty! To the other side!'

Niedamir, head buried in his horse's mane, charged onto the bridge, and Gyllenstiern and several bowmen leapt after him. Behind them, the royal wagon with its flapping gryphon banner rumbled onto the creaking timbers.

‘It’s a landslide! Get out of the way!’ Yarpen Zigrin bellowed from behind, lashing his horses’ rumps, overtaking Niedamir’s second wagon and jostling the bowmen. ‘Out of the way, Witcher! Out of the way!’

Eyck of Denesle, stiff and erect, galloped beside the dwarves’ wagon. Were it not for his deathly pale face and mouth contorted in a quivering grimace, one might have thought the knight errant had not noticed the stones and boulders falling onto the trail. Further back, someone in the group of bowmen screamed wildly and horses whinnied.

Geralt tugged at the reins and spurred his horse, as right in front of him the earth boiled from the boulders cascading down. The dwarves’ wagon rattled over the stones. Just before the bridge it jumped up and landed with a crack on its side, onto a broken axle. A wheel bounced off the railing and plunged downwards into the spume.

The Witcher’s mare, lacerated by sharp shards of stone, reared up. Geralt tried to dismount, but caught his boot buckle in the stirrup and fell to the side, onto the trail. His mare neighed and dashed ahead, straight towards the bridge, dancing over the chasm. The dwarves ran across the bridge yelling and cursing.

‘Hurry, Geralt!’ Dandelion yelled, running behind him and looking back.

‘Jump on, Witcher!’ Dorregaray called, threshing about in the saddle, struggling to control his terrified horse.

Further back, behind them, the entire road was engulfed in a cloud of dust stirred up by falling rocks, shattering Niedamir’s wagons. The Witcher seized the straps of the sorcerer’s saddle bags. He heard a cry.

Yennefer had fallen with her horse, rolled to the side, away from the wildly kicking hooves, and flattened herself to the ground, shielding her head with her arms. The Witcher let go of the saddle, ran towards her, diving into the deluge of stones and leaping across the rift opening under his feet. Yennefer, yanked by the arm, got up onto her knees. Her eyes were wide open and the trickle of blood running down from her cut brow had already reached her ear.

‘Stand up, Yen!’

‘Geralt! Look out!’

An enormous, flat block of stone, scraping against the side of the

rock wall with a grinding, clattering sound, slid down and plummeted towards them. Geralt dropped, shielding the sorceress with his body. At the very same moment the block exploded, bursting into a billion fragments, which rained down on them, stinging like wasps.

'Quick!' Dorregaray cried. Brandishing his wand atop the skittering horse, he blasted more boulders which were tumbling down from the cliff into dust. 'Onto the bridge, Witcher!'

Yennefer waved a hand, bending her fingers and shrieking incomprehensibly. As the stones came into contact with the bluish hemisphere which had suddenly materialised above their heads they vaporised like drops of water falling on red-hot metal.

'Onto the bridge, Geralt!' the sorceress yelled. 'Stay close to me!'

They ran, following Dorregaray and several fleeing bowmen. The bridge rocked and creaked, the timbers bending in all directions as it flung them from railing to railing.

'Quick!'

The bridge suddenly slumped with a piercing, penetrating crack, and the half they had just crossed broke off, tumbling with a clatter into the gulf, taking the dwarves' wagon with it, which shattered against the rocky teeth to the sound of the horses' frantic whinnying. The part they were now standing on was still intact, but Geralt suddenly realised they were now running upwards across a rapidly tilting slope. Yennefer panted a curse.

'Get down, Yen! Hang on!'

The rest of the bridge grated, cracked and sagged into a ramp. They fell with it, digging their fingers into the cracks between the timbers. Yennefer could not hold on. She squealed like a little girl and dropped. Geralt, hanging on with one hand, drew a dagger, plunged the blade between the timbers and seized the haft in both hands. His elbow joints creaked as Yennefer tugged him down, suspended by the belt and scabbard slung across his back. The bridge made a cracking noise again and tilted even more, almost vertically.

'Yen,' the Witcher grunted. 'Do something . . . Cast a bloody spell!'

'How can I?' he heard a furious, muffled snarl. 'I'm hanging on!'

'Free one of your hands!'

'I can't . . . '

‘Hey!’ Dandelion yelled from above. ‘Can you hold on? Hey!’

Geralt did not deign to reply.

‘Throw down a rope!’ Dandelion bellowed. ‘Quickly, dammit!’

The Reavers, the dwarves and Gyllenstiern appeared beside the troubadour. Geralt heard Boholt’s quiet words.

‘Wait, busker. She’ll soon fall. Then we’ll pull the Witcher up.’

Yennefer hissed like a viper, writhing and suspended from Geralt’s back. His belt dug painfully into his chest.

‘Yen? Can you find a hold? Using your legs? Can you do anything with your legs?’

‘Yes,’ she groaned. ‘Swing them around.’

Geralt looked down at the river seething and swirling among the sharp rocks, against which some bridge timbers, a horse and a body in the bright colours of Caingorn were bumping. Beyond the rocks, in the emerald, transparent maelstrom, he saw the tapered bodies of large trout, languidly moving in the current.

‘Can you hold on, Yen?’

‘Just about . . . yes . . . ’

‘Heave yourself up. You have to get a foothold . . . ’

‘I . . . can’t . . . ’

‘Throw down a rope!’ Dandelion yelled. ‘Have you all gone mad? They’ll both fall!’

‘Perhaps that’s not so bad?’ Gyllenstiern wondered, out of sight.

The bridge creaked and sagged even more. Geralt’s fingers, gripping the hilt of his dagger, began to go numb.

‘Yen . . . ’

‘Shut up . . . and stop wriggling about . . . ’

‘Yen?’

‘Don’t call me that . . . ’

‘Can you hold on?’

‘No,’ she said coldly. She was no longer struggling, but simply hanging from his back; a lifeless, inert weight.

‘Yen?’

‘Shut up.’

‘Yen. Forgive me.’

‘No. Never.’

Something crept downwards over the timbers. Swiftly. Like a snake. A rope, emanating with a cold glow, twisting and curling, as though alive, searched for and found Geralt’s neck with its moving tip, slid under his armpits, and ravelled itself into a loose knot. The sorceress beneath him moaned, sucking in air. He was certain she would start sobbing. He was mistaken.

‘Careful!’ Dandelion shouted from above. ‘We’re pulling you up! Gar! Kennet! Pull them up! Heave!’

A tug, the painful, constricting tension of the taut rope. Yennefer sighed heavily. They quickly travelled upwards, bellies scraping against the coarse timbers.

At the top, Yennefer was the first to stand up.

VII

‘We saved but one wagon from the entire caravan, Your Majesty,’ Gyllenstiern said, ‘not counting the Reavers’ wagon. Seven bowmen remain from the troop. There’s no longer a road on the far side of the chasm, just scree and a smooth wall, as far as the breach permits one to look. We know not if anyone survived of those who remained when the bridge collapsed.’

Niedamir did not answer. Eyck of Denesle, standing erect, stood before the king, staring at him with shining, feverish eyes.

‘The ire of the gods is hounding us,’ he said, raising his arms. ‘We have sinned, King Niedamir. It was a sacred expedition, an expedition against evil. For the dragon is evil, yes, each dragon is evil incarnate. I do not pass by evil indifferently, I crush it beneath my foot . . . Annihilate it. Just as the gods and the Holy Book demand.’

‘What is he drivelling on about?’ Boholt asked, frowning.

‘I don’t know,’ Geralt said, adjusting his mare’s harness. ‘I didn’t understand a single word.’

‘Be quiet,’ Dandelion said, ‘I’m trying to remember it, perhaps I’ll be able to use it if I can get it to rhyme.’

‘The Holy Book says,’ Eyck said, now yelling loudly, ‘that the serpent, the foul dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, will come forth from the abyss! And on his back will sit a woman in purple and scarlet, and a golden goblet will be in her hand, and on her forehead will be written the sign of all and ultimate whoredom!’

‘I know her!’ Dandelion said, delighted. ‘It’s Cilia, the wife of the Alderman of Sommerhalder!’

‘Quieten down, poet, sir,’ Gyllenstiern said. ‘And you, O knight from Denesle, speak more plainly, if you would.’

‘One should act against evil, O King,’ Eyck called, ‘with a pure heart and conscience, with head raised! But who do we see here? Dwarves, who are pagans, are born in the darkness and bow down before dark forces! Blasphemous sorcerers, usurping divine laws, powers and privileges! A witcher, who is an odious aberration, an accursed, unnatural creature. Are you surprised that a punishment has befallen us? King Niedamir! We have reached the limits of possibility! Divine grace is being sorely tested. I call you, king, to

purge the filth from our ranks, before—'

'Not a word about me,' Dandelion interjected woefully. 'Not a mention of poets. And I try so hard.'

Geralt smiled at Yarpen Zigrin, who with slow movements was stroking the blade of his battle-axe, which was stuck into his belt. The dwarf, amused, grinned. Yennefer turned away ostentatiously, pretending that her skirt, torn up to her hip, distressed her more than Eyck's words.

'I think you were exaggerating a little, Sir Eyck,' Dorregaray said sharply, 'although no doubt for noble reasons. I regard the making known of your views about sorcerers, dwarves and witchers as quite unnecessary. Although, I think, we have all become accustomed to such opinions, it is neither polite, nor chivalrous, Sir Eyck. And it is utterly incomprehensible after you, and no one else, ran and used a magical, elven rope to save a witcher and a sorceress whose lives were in danger. I conclude from what you say that you should rather have been praying for them to fall.'

'Dammit,' Geralt whispered to Dandelion. 'Did he throw us that rope? Eyck? Not Dorregaray?'

'No,' the bard muttered. 'Eyck it was, indeed.'

Geralt shook his head in disbelief. Yennefer cursed under her breath and straightened up.

'Sir Eyck,' she said with a smile that anyone other than Geralt might have taken as pleasant and friendly. 'Why was that? I'm blasphemous, but you save my life?'

'You are a lady, Madam Yennefer,' the knight bowed stiffly. 'And your comely and honest face permits me to believe that you will one day renounce this accursed sorcery.'

Boholt snorted.

'I thank you, sir knight,' Yennefer said dryly, 'and the Witcher Geralt also thanks you. Thank him, Geralt.'

'I'd rather drop dead,' the Witcher sighed, disarmingly frank. 'What exactly should I thank him for? I'm an odious aberration, and my uncomely face does not augur any hope for an improvement. Sir Eyck hauled me out of the chasm by accident, simply because I was tightly clutching the comely damsel. Had I been hanging there alone, Eyck would not have lifted a finger. I'm not mistaken, am I, sir knight?'

'You are mistaken, Geralt, sir,' the knight errant replied calmly. 'I

never refuse anybody in need of help. Even a witcher.'

'Thank him, Geralt. And apologise,' the sorceress said sharply, 'otherwise you will be confirming that, at least with regard to you, Eyck was quite right. You are unable to coexist with people. Because you are different. Your participation in this expedition is a mistake. A nonsensical purpose brought you here. Thus it would be sensible to leave the party. I think you understand that now. And if not, it's time you did.'

'What purpose are you talking about, madam?' Gyllenstiern cut in. The sorceress looked at him, but did not answer. Dandelion and Yarpen Zigrin smiled meaningfully at each other, but so that the sorceress would not notice.

The Witcher looked into Yennefer's eyes. They were cold.

'I apologise and thank you, O knight of Denesle,' he bowed. 'I thank everybody here present. For the swift rescue offered at once. I heard, as I hung there, how you were all raring to help. I ask everybody here present for forgiveness. With the exception of the noble Yennefer, whom I thank, but ask for nothing. Farewell. The dregs leave the company of their own free will. Because these dregs have had enough of you. Goodbye, Dandelion.'

'Hey, Geralt,' Boholt called, 'don't pout like a maiden, don't make a mountain out of a molehill. To hell with—'

'Look out everyoooone!'

Sheepbagger and several members of the Barefield constabulary, who had been sent ahead to reconnoitre, were running back from the narrow opening to the gorge.

'What is it? Why's he bellowing like that?' Gar lifted his head up.

'Good people . . . Your . . . Excellencies . . . ' the cobbler panted.

'Get it out, man,' Gyllenstiern said, hooking his thumbs into his golden belt.

'A dragon! There's a dragon there!'

'Where?'

'Beyond the gorge . . . On level ground . . . Sire, he . . . '

'To horse!' Gyllenstiern ordered.

'Gar!' Boholt yelled, 'onto the wagon! Beanpole, get mounted and follow me!'

'Look lively, lads!' Yarpen Zigrin roared. 'Look lively, by

thunder!'

'Hey, wait for me!' Dandelion slung his lute over his shoulder. 'Geralt! Take me with you!'

'Jump on!'

The gorge ended in a mound of light-coloured rocks, which gradually thinned out, creating an irregular ring. Beyond them the ground descended gently into a grassy, undulating mountain pasture, enclosed on all sides by limestone walls, gaping with thousands of openings. Three narrow canyons, the mouths of dried-up streams, opened out onto the pasture.

Boholt, the first to gallop to the barrier of rocks, suddenly reined in his horse and stood up in his stirrups.

'Oh, hell,' he said. 'Oh, bloody hell. It . . . it can't be!'

'What?' Dorregaray asked, riding up. Beside him Yennefer, dismounting from the Reavers' wagon, pressed her chest against the rocky block, peeped out, moved back and rubbed her eyes.

'What? What is it?' Dandelion shouted, leaning out from behind Geralt's back. 'What is it, Boholt?'

'That dragon . . . is golden.'

No further than a hundred paces from the gorge's rocky entrance from which they had emerged, on the road to the northward-leading canyon, on a gently curving, low hill, sat the creature. It was sitting, arching its long, slender neck in a smooth curve, inclining its narrow head onto its domed chest, wrapping its tail around its extended front feet.

There was something inexpressibly graceful in the creature and the way it was sitting; something feline, something that contradicted its clearly reptilian origins. But it was also undeniably reptilian. For the creature was covered in distinctly outlined scales, which shone with a glaring blaze of bright, yellow gold. For the creature sitting on the hillock was golden; golden from the tips of its talons, dug into the ground, to the end of its long tail, which was moving very gently among the thistles growing on the hill. Looking at them with its large, golden eyes, the creature unfurled its broad, golden, bat-like wings and remained motionless, demanding to be admired.

'A golden dragon,' Dorregaray whispered. 'It's impossible . . . A living fable!'

'There's no such thing as a bloody golden dragon,' Gar

pronounced and spat. ‘I know what I’m talking about.’

‘Then what’s sitting on that hillock?’ Dandelion asked pointedly.

‘It’s some kind of trickery.’

‘An illusion.’

‘It is not an illusion,’ Yennefer said.

‘It’s a golden dragon,’ Gyllenstiern said. ‘An absolutely genuine, golden dragon.’

‘Golden dragons only exist in fables!’

‘Stop that, all of you,’ Boholt suddenly broke in. ‘There’s no point getting worked up. Any blockhead can see it’s a golden dragon. And what difference does it make, my lords, if it’s golden, lapis lazuli, shit-coloured or chequered? It’s not that big, we’ll sort it out in no time. Beanpole, Gar, clear the debris off the wagon and get the gear out. What’s the difference if it’s golden or not?’

‘There is a difference, Boholt,’ Beanpole said. ‘And a vital one. That isn’t the dragon we’re stalking. Not the one that was poisoned outside Barefield, which is now sitting in its cave on a pile of ore and jewels. That one’s just sitting on its arse. What bloody use is it to us?’

‘That dragon is golden, Kennet,’ Yarpen Zigrin snarled. ‘Have you ever seen anything like it? Don’t you understand? We’ll get more for its hide than we would for a normal treasure hoard.’

‘And without flooding the market with precious stones,’ Yennefer added, smiling unpleasantly. ‘Yarpen’s right. The agreement is still binding. Quite something to divide up, isn’t it?’

‘Hey, Boholt?’ Gar shouted from the wagon, where he was clattering amongst the tackle. ‘What shall we equip ourselves and the horses with? What could that golden reptile belch, hey? Fire? Acid? Steam?’

‘Haven’t got an effing clue,’ Boholt said, sounding worried. ‘Hey, sorcerers! Anything in the fables about golden dragons, about how to kill them?’

‘How do you kill them? The usual way!’ Sheepbagger suddenly shouted. ‘No point pondering, give us an animal. We’ll stuff it full of something poisonous and feed it to the reptile, and good riddance.’

Dorregaray looked askance at the cobbler, Boholt spat, and Dandelion turned his head away with a grimace of disgust. Yarpen Zigrin smiled repulsively, hands on hips.

‘Wha’ you looking at?’ Sheepbagger asked. ‘Let’s get to work, we have to decide what to stuff the carcass with so the reptile quickly perishes. It ’as to be something which is extremely toxic, poisonous or rotten.’

‘Aha,’ the dwarf spoke, still smiling. ‘Well, what’s poisonous, foul and stinks? Do you know what, Sheepbagger? Looks like it’s you.’

‘What?’

‘You bloody heard. Get lost, bodger, out of my sight.’

‘Lord Dorregaray,’ Boholt said, walking over to the sorcerer. ‘Make yourself useful. Call to mind some fables and tales. What do you know about golden dragons?’

The sorcerer smiled, straightening up self-importantly.

‘What do I know about golden dragons, you ask? Not much, but enough.’

‘We’re listening.’

‘Then listen and listen attentively. Over there, before us, sits a golden dragon. A living legend, possibly the last and only creature of its kind to have survived your murderous frenzy. One doesn’t kill legends. I, Dorregaray, will not allow you to touch that dragon. Is that understood? You can get packed, fasten your saddlebags and go home.’

Geralt was convinced an uproar would ensue. He was mistaken.

‘Noble sorcerer, sir,’ Gyllenstiern’s voice interrupted the silence. ‘Heed what and to whom you speak. King Niedamir may order you, Dorregaray, to fasten your saddlebags and go to hell. But not the other way around. Is that clear?’

‘No,’ the sorcerer said proudly, ‘it is not. For I am Master Dorregaray, and will not be ordered around by someone whose kingdom encompasses an area visible from the height of the palisade on a mangy, filthy, stinking stronghold. Do you know, Lord Gyllenstiern, that were I to speak a charm and wave my hand, you would change into a cowpat, and your underage king into something ineffably worse? Is *that* clear?’

Gyllenstiern did not manage to answer, for Boholt walked up to Dorregaray, caught him by the shoulder and pulled him around to face him. Gar and Beanpole, silent and grim, appeared from behind Boholt.

‘Just listen, magician, sir,’ the enormous Reaver said. ‘Before you

wave that hand, listen to me. I could spend a long time explaining what I would do with your prohibitions, your fables and your foolish chatter. But I have no wish to. Let this suffice as my answer.'

Boholt placed a finger against his nose and from a short distance ejected the contents onto the toes of the sorcerer's boots.

Dorregaray blanched, but did not move. He saw – as everyone did – the morning star mace on a cubit-long shaft hanging low at Gar's side. He knew – as everyone did – that the time he needed to cast a spell was incomparably longer than the time Gar needed to smash his head to pieces.

'Very well,' Boholt said. 'And now move nicely out of the way, your lordship. And should the desire to open your gob occur to you, quickly shove a bunch of grass into it. Because if I hear you whining again, I'll give you something to remember me by.'

Boholt turned away and rubbed his hands.

'Right, Gar, Beanpole, let's get to work, because that reptile won't hang around forever.'

'Doesn't seem to be planning on going anywhere,' Dandelion said, looking at the foreground. 'Look at it.'

The golden dragon on the hill yawned, lifted its head, waved its wings and lashed the ground with its tail.

'King Niedamir and you, knights!' it yelled with a roar like a brass trumpet. 'I am the dragon Villentretenmerth! As I see, the landslide which I – though I say it, as shouldn't – sent down on your heads did not completely stop you. You have come this far. As you know, there are only three ways out of this valley. East, towards Barefield, and west, towards Caingorn. And you may use those roads. You will not take the northern gorge, gentlemen, because I, Villentretenmerth, forbid you. However, if anyone does not wish to respect my injunction, I challenge him to fight an honourable, knightly duel. With conventional weapons, without spells, without breathing fire. A fight to the utter capitulation of one of the sides. I await an answer through your herald, as custom dictates!'

Everyone stood with their mouths open wide.

'It can talk!' Boholt panted. 'Remarkable!'

'Not only that, but very intelligently,' Yarpen Zigrin said. 'Anyone know what a confessional weapon is?'

'An ordinary, non-magical one,' Yennefer said frowning. 'But something else puzzles me. With a forked tongue it's not capable of

articulated speech. The rogue is using telepathy! Be careful, it works in both directions. It can read your thoughts.'

'Has it gone completely barmy, or what?' Kennet Beanpole said, annoyed. 'An honourable duel? With a stupid reptile? Not a chance! We'll attack him together! There's strength in numbers!'

'No.'

They looked around.

Eyck of Denesle, already mounted in full armour, with his lance set by his stirrup, looked much better than he had on foot. His feverish eyes blazed from beneath his raised visor and his face was pale.

'No, Kennet, sir,' the knight repeated. 'Unless it is over my dead body. I will not permit knightly honour to be insulted in my presence. Whomsoever dares to violate the principles of this honourable duel . . . '

Eyck was talking louder and louder. His exalted voice was cracking and he was trembling with excitement.

' . . . whomsoever affronts honour, also affronts me, and his or my blood will be shed on this tired earth. The beast calls for a duel? Very well! Let the herald trumpet my name! May divine judgement decide! On the dragon's side is the power of fang and talon and infernal fury, and on my side . . . '

'What a moron,' Yarpen Zigrin muttered.

' . . . on my side righteousness, faith, the tears of virgins, whom this reptile—'

'That's enough, Eyck, you make me want to puke!' Boholt yelled. 'Go on, to the lists! Don't talk, set about that dragon!'

'Hey, Boholt, wait,' one of the dwarves, tugging on his beard, suddenly said. 'Forgotten about the agreement? If Eyck lays low the serpent, he'll take half . . . '

'Eyck won't take anything,' Boholt grinned. 'I know him. He'll be happy if Dandelion writes a song about him.'

'Silence!' Gyllenstiern declared. 'Let it be. Against the dragon will ride out the virtuous knight errant, Eyck of Denesle, fighting in the colours of Caingorn as the lance and sword of King Niedamir. That is the kingly will!'

'There you have it,' Yarpen Zigrin gnashed his teeth. 'The lance and sword of Niedamir. The Caingorn kinglet has fixed us. What

now?'

'Nothing,' Boholt spat. 'I reckon you don't want to cross Eyck, Yarpen? He talks nonsense, but if he's already mounted his horse and roused himself, better get out of his way. Let him go, dammit, and sort the dragon out. And then we'll see.'

'Who shall be the herald?' Dandelion asked. 'The dragon wanted a herald. Maybe me?'

'No. We don't need a song, Dandelion,' Boholt frowned. 'Yarpen Zigrin can be the herald. He's got a voice like a bull.'

'Very well, no bother,' Yarpen said. 'Bring me a flag-bearer with a banner so that everything is as it should be.'

'Just talk politely, dwarf, sir. And courteously,' Gyllenstiern cautioned.

'Don't learn me how to talk,' the dwarf proudly stuck out his belly. 'I was sent on diplomatic missions when you lot were still knee-high to a grasshopper.'

The dragon continued to sit patiently on the hillock, waving its tail cheerfully. The dwarf clambered up onto the largest boulder, hawked and spat.

'Hey, you there!' he yelled, putting his hands on his hips. 'You fucking dragon, you! Listen to what the herald has to say! That means me! The first one to take you on honourably will be the meandering knight, Eyck of Denesle! And he will stick his lance in your paunch, according to the holy custom, to your confusion, and to the joy of poor virgins and King Niedamir! It will be a fair fight and honourable, breathing fire is not allowed, and you may only lambast the other confessionally, until the other gives up the ghost or expires! Which we sincerely wish on you! Understood, dragon?'

The dragon yawned, flapped its wings, and then, flattening itself to the ground, quickly descended from the hillock to level ground.

'I have understood, noble herald!' it yelled back. 'Then may the virtuous Eyck of Denesle enter the fray. I am ready!'

'What a pantomime,' Boholt spat, following Eyck with a grim expression, as he walked his horse over the barrier of boulders. 'A ruddy barrel of laughs . . . '

'Shut your yap, Boholt,' Dandelion shouted, rubbing his hands. 'Look, Eyck is preparing to charge! It'll be a bloody beautiful ballad!'

‘Hurrah! Long live Eyck!’ someone shouted from Niedamir’s troop of bowmen.

‘And I,’ Sheepbagger said gloomily, ‘would still have stuffed him full of brimstone, just to be certain.’

Eyck, already in the field, saluted the dragon with his upraised lance, slammed down his visor and struck his horse with his spurs.

‘Well, well,’ the dwarf said. ‘He may be stupid, but he knows how to charge. Look at him go!’

Eyck, lent forward, braced in the saddle, lowered his lance at full gallop. The dragon, contrary to Geralt’s expectations, did not leap aside, did not move in a semicircle, but, flattened to the ground, rushed straight at the attacking knight.

‘Hit him! Hit him, Eyck!’ Yarpen yelled.

Eyck, although in full gallop, did not strike headlong, straight ahead. At the last moment he nimbly changed direction, shifting the lance over his horse’s head. Flashing past the dragon, he thrust with all his might, standing up in the stirrups. Everybody shouted in unison. Geralt did not join in with the choir.

The dragon evaded the blow with a delicate, agile, graceful turn and, coiling like a living, golden ribbon, as quick as lightning, but softly, catlike, reached a foot beneath the horse’s belly. The horse squealed, jerking its croup high up, and the knight rocked in the saddle, but did not release his lance. Just as the horse was about to hit the ground snout first, the dragon swept Eyck from the saddle with a fierce swipe of his clawed foot. Everybody saw his breastplate spinning upwards and everybody heard the clanking and thudding with which the knight fell onto the ground.

The dragon, sitting on its haunches, pinned the horse with a foot, and lowered its toothy jaws. The horse squealed shrilly, struggled and then was quiet.

In the silence that fell everybody heard the deep voice of the dragon Villentretenmerth.

‘The doughty Eyck of Denesle may now be taken from the battlefield, for he is incapable of fighting any longer. Next, please.’

‘Oh, fuck,’ Yarpen Zigrin said in the silence that followed.

VIII

‘Both legs,’ Yennefer said wiping her hands on a linen cloth, ‘and probably something with his spine. The armour on his back is dented as though he’d been hit by a pile driver. He injured his legs with his own lance. He won’t be mounting a horse for some time. If he ever mounts one again.’

‘Professional hazard,’ Geralt muttered. The sorceress frowned.

‘Is that all you have to say?’

‘And what else would you like to hear, Yennefer?’

‘That dragon is unbelievably fast, Geralt. Too fast for a *man* to fight it.’

‘I understand. No, Yen. Not me.’

‘Principles,’ the sorceress smiled spitefully, ‘or ordinary, commonplace fear? The only human feeling that wasn’t eradicated in you?’

‘One and the other,’ the Witcher agreed dispassionately. ‘What difference does it make?’

‘Precisely,’ Yennefer came closer. ‘None. Principles may be broken, fear can be overcome. Kill that dragon, Geralt. For me.’

‘For you?’

‘For me. I want that dragon, Geralt. In one piece. I want to have him all for myself.’

‘So cast a spell and kill it.’

‘No. You kill it. And I’ll use my spells to hold back the Reavers and the others so they don’t interfere.’

‘You’ll kill them, Yennefer.’

‘Since when has that ever bothered you? You take care of the dragon, I’ll deal with the people.’

‘Yennefer,’ the Witcher said coldly, ‘I don’t understand. What do you want with that dragon? Does the yellowness of its scales dazzle you to that degree? You don’t suffer from poverty, after all. You have numerous sources of income; you’re famous. What are you about? Just don’t talk about a calling, I beg you.’

Yennefer was silent, then finally, twisting her lips, aimed a

powerful kick at a stone lying in the grass.

‘There’s someone who can help me, Geralt. Apparently, it’s . . . you know what I’m talking about . . . Apparently it isn’t irreversible. There’s a chance. I could still have . . . Do you understand?’

‘I do.’

‘It’s a complex operation, costly. But in exchange for a golden dragon . . . Geralt?’

The Witcher remained silent.

‘When we were hanging on the bridge,’ the sorceress said, ‘you asked me for something. I’ll meet your request. In spite of everything.’

The Witcher smiled sadly and touched the obsidian star on Yennefer’s neck with his index finger.

‘It’s too late, Yen. We aren’t hanging now. It’s stopped mattering to me. In spite of everything.’

He expected the worst: a cascade of fire, lightning, a smack in the face, abuse, curses. He was surprised just to see the suppressed trembling of her lips. Yennefer slowly turned away. Geralt regretted his words. He regretted the emotion which had engendered them. The limit of possibility overstepped, now snapped like a lute string. He looked at Dandelion and saw the troubadour quickly turn his head away and avoid his gaze.

‘Well, we’ve got the issue of knightly honour out of the way, my lords,’ Boholt called, now dressed in armour and standing before Niedamir, who was still sitting on a stone with an unvarying expression of boredom on his face. ‘Knightly honour is lying there, groaning softly. It was a lousy idea, Lord Gyllenstiern, to send out Eyck as your knight and vassal. I wouldn’t dream of pointing the finger, but I know whom Eyck can thank for his broken pins. Yes, I swear, we’ve killed two birds with one stone. One was a lunatic, insanely reviving the legends of how a bold knight defeats a dragon in a duel. And the other a swindler, who wanted to make money from it. Do you know who I’m talking about, Gyllenstiern, what? Good. And now our move. Now the dragon is ours. Now we, the Reavers, will sort out that dragon. But by ourselves.’

‘And the agreement, Boholt?’ the chancellor drawled. ‘What about the agreement?’

‘I don’t give a shit about the agreement.’

‘This is outrageous! This is lese-majesty!’ Gyllenstiern stamped his foot. ‘King Niedamir—’

‘What about the king?’ Boholt yelled, resting on an enormous, two-handed sword. ‘Perhaps the king will personally decide to take on the dragon by himself? Or perhaps you, his faithful chancellor, will squeeze your belly into a suit of armour and go into battle? Why not, please do, we’ll wait, my lord. You had your chance, Gyllenstiern. Had Eyck mortally lanced the dragon, you would have taken it in its entirety, nothing would have been left to us because we hadn’t helped, not one golden scale on its back. But it’s too late now. Open your eyes. There’s no one to fight under Caingorn’s colours. You won’t find another chump like Eyck.’

‘That’s not true!’ the cobbler Sheepbagger said, hurrying to the king, who was still busy watching a point on the horizon of interest only to him. ‘O King! Just wait a little, and our men from Barefield will be arriving, they’ll be ’ere any moment! To hell with the cocksure nobility, chase them away! You’ll see who is really brave, who is strong in deed, and not just in word!’

‘Shut your trap,’ Boholt said calmly, wiping a spot of rust from his breastplate. ‘Shut your trap, peasant, because if you don’t I’ll shut it so hard I’ll shove your teeth down your throat.’

Sheepbagger, seeing Kennet and Gar approaching, quickly backed away and hid among the Barefield constables.

‘King!’ Gyllenstiern called. ‘O King, what do you command?’

The expression of boredom suddenly vanished from Niedamir’s face. The underage monarch wrinkled his freckly nose and stood up.

‘What do I command?’ he said in a shrill voice. ‘You’ve finally asked, Gyllenstiern, rather than decide for me and speak for me and on my behalf? I’m very pleased. And may it thus remain, Gyllenstiern. From this moment you will be silent and listen to my orders. Here is the first of them. Muster the men and order Eyck of Denesle be placed on a wagon. We’re going back to Caingorn.’

‘But sire—’

‘Not a word, Gyllenstiern. Madam Yennefer, noble lords, I bid you farewell. I’ve lost some time on this expedition, but have gained much. I have learned a great deal. Thank you for your words, Madam Yennefer, Master Dorregaray, Sir Boholt. And thank you for your silence, Sir Geralt.’

‘O King,’ Gyllenstiern said. ‘What do you mean? The dragon is in

our grasp. It's there for the taking. King, your dream . . . '

'My dream,' Niedamir repeated pensively. 'I do not have it yet. And should I stay here . . . Then I might never have it.'

'But Malleore? And the hand of the princess?' The chancellor waved his arms, not giving up. 'And the throne? King, the people there will acknowledge you as . . . '

'I don't give a shit about the people there, as Sir Boholt would say,' Niedamir laughed. 'The throne of Malleore is mine anyway, because in Caingorn I have three hundred armoured troops and fifteen hundred foot soldiers against their thousand crappy spearmen. Do they acknowledge me? They will have to. I'll keep hanging, beheading and dismembering until they do. And their princess is a fat goose and to hell with her hand, I only need her womb. Let her bear me an heir, and then I'll poison her anyway. Using Master Sheepbagger's method. That's enough chatter, Gyllenstiern. Set about carrying out my orders.'

'Indeed,' Dandelion whispered to Geralt, 'he has learned a great deal.'

'A great deal,' Geralt confirmed, looking at the hillock where the golden dragon, with its triangular head lowered, was licking something grey-green sitting in the grass beside it with its forked, scarlet tongue. 'But I wouldn't like to be his subject, Dandelion.'

'And what do you think will happen now?'

The Witcher looked calmly at the tiny, grey-green creature, fluttering its bat-like wings beside the golden talons of the stooping dragon.

'And what's your opinion about all this, Dandelion? What do you think?'

'What does it matter what I think? I'm a poet, Geralt. Does my opinion matter at all?'

'Yes it does.'

'Well I'll tell you then. When I see a reptile, Geralt, a viper, let's say, or some other serpent, it gives me the creeps, the vileness disgusts and terrifies me. But that dragon . . . '

'Yeah?'

'It . . . it's pretty, Geralt.'

'Thank you, Dandelion.'

‘What for?’

Geralt turned his head away, and with a slow movement reached for the buckle of his belt, which crossed his chest diagonally, and shortened it by two holes. He lifted his right hand to check if his sword hilt was positioned correctly. Dandelion looked on with eyes wide open.

‘Geralt! Do you plan to . . . ?’

‘Yes,’ the Witcher said calmly, ‘there is a limit to what I can accept as possible. I’ve had enough of all this. Are you going with Niedamir or staying, Dandelion?’

The troubadour leaned over, placed his lute beneath a stone cautiously and with great care and then straightened up.

‘I’m staying. What did you say? The limits of possibility? I’m bagging that as the title of a ballad.’

‘It could be your last one, Dandelion.’

‘Geralt?’

‘Mm?’

‘Don’t kill it . . . Can you not?’

‘A sword is a sword, Dandelion. Once drawn . . . ’

‘Please try.’

‘I will.’

Dorregaray chuckled, turned towards Yennefer and the Reavers, and pointed at the receding royal caravan.

‘Over there,’ he said, ‘King Niedamir is leaving. He no longer gives orders through Gyllenstiern’s mouth. He is departing, having demonstrated good sense. I’m glad you’re here, Dandelion. I suggest you begin composing a ballad.’

‘What about?’

‘About,’ the sorcerer drew his wand from his coat, ‘Master Dorregaray, sorcerer, chasing back home the rabble who wanted to use vulgar methods to kill the last golden dragon left in the world. Don’t move, Boholt! Yarpen, hands off your battle-axe! Don’t move a muscle, Yennefer! Off you go, good-for-nothings, follow the king, like good little boys. Be off, mount your horses or wagons. I warn you that if anybody makes a false move all that will remain of him will be a burning smell and a bit of fused sand. I am serious.’

‘Dorregaray!’ Yennefer hissed.

‘My lord sorcerer,’ Boholt said conciliatorily. ‘Is this any way to act—’

‘Be quiet, Boholt. I told you not to touch that dragon. Fables are not to be killed. About-turn and scram.’

Yennefer’s hand suddenly shot forward, and the ground around Dorregaray exploded in blue flame, seething in a dust cloud of torn turf and grit.

The sorcerer staggered, encircled by fire. Gar leaped forward and struck him in the face with the heel of his hand. Dorregaray fell to the ground, a bolt of red lightning shooting from his wand and harmlessly zapping out among the rocks. Beanpole sprang at him from the other side, kicked the sorcerer to the ground, and took a backswing to repeat the blow. Geralt fell among them, pushed Beanpole away, drew his sword and thrust flat, aiming between the breastplate and the spaulder. He was thwarted by Boholt, who parried the blow with the broad blade of his two-handed sword. Dandelion tried to trip Gar, but ineffectively; Gar clung to the bard’s rainbow-hued jerkin and thumped him between the eyes with his fist. Yarpen Zigrin, leaping from behind, tripped Dandelion, hitting him behind his knees with the haft of a hatchet.

Geralt spun into a pirouette, evading Boholt’s sword, and jabbed at the onrushing Beanpole, tearing off his iron bracer. Beanpole leaped back, tripped and fell over. Boholt grunted and whirled his sword like a scythe. Geralt jumped over the whistling blade, slammed the hilt of his sword into Boholt’s breastplate, fended him off, and thrust, aiming for his cheek. Boholt, realising he could not parry with his heavy sword, threw himself backwards, falling on his back. The Witcher leaped at him and at that moment felt the earth fall away from under his rapidly numbing feet. He saw the horizon going from horizontal to vertical. Vainly trying to form a protective Sign with his fingers, he fell heavily onto the ground on his side, his sword slipping from his numb hand. There was a pounding and a buzzing in his ears.

‘Tie them up before the spell stops working,’ Yennefer said, somewhere above and very far away. ‘All three of them.’

Dorregaray and Geralt, befuddled and paralysed, allowed themselves to be bound and tethered to a wagon, silently and without resisting. Dandelion fought and cursed, so he received a punch in the face before he was tied to the wagon.

‘Why tie ’em up, traitors, sons of dogs?’ Sheepbagger said, walking over. ‘They should be clubbed to death at once and be done

with it.'

'You're a son yourself, and not a dog's,' Yarpen Zigrin said, 'Don't insult dogs here. Scram, you heel.'

'You're awfully brave,' Sheepbagger snapped. 'We'll see if you're brave enough when my comrades arrive from Barefield. They'll be here any moment. You'll . . . '

Yarpen, twisting with surprising agility considering his build, whacked Sheepbagger over the head with his hatchet. Gar, standing alongside, gave him a kick for good measure. Sheepbagger flew a few feet through the air and fell nose-first in the grass.

'You'll be sorry!' he yelled, crawling on all fours. 'I'll fix . . . '

'Lads!' Yarpen Zigrin roared. 'Kick the cobbler in the cobblers! Grab 'im, Gar!'

Sheepbagger did not wait. He sprang up and dashed towards the eastern canyon. The Barefield trackers followed him, cringing. The dwarves, cackling, sent a hail of stones after them.

'The air's freshened up already,' Yarpen laughed. 'Right, Boholt, let's get down to the dragon.'

'Hold on,' Yennefer raised a hand. 'The only thing you're getting down to is the bottom of the valley. Be gone, all of you.'

'Excuse me?' Boholt bent over, his eyes blazing ominously. 'What did you say, Most Honourable Madam Witch?'

'Follow that cobbler,' Yennefer repeated. 'All of you. I'll deal with the dragon myself. Using unconventional weapons. And you can thank me as you leave. Had it not been for me you would have tasted the Witcher's sword. Come now, quickly, Boholt, before I lose my temper. I warn you that I know a spell which can make you all geldings. I just have to raise my hand.'

'Is that so?' Boholt drawled. 'My patience has reached its limits. I won't be made a fool of. Beanpole, unhook the shaft from the cart. I feel I'll also be needing unconventional weapons. Someone is soon going to get a damn good thrashing, my lords. I won't point the finger, but a certain hideous witch is going to get a bloody sound hiding.'

'Just try, Boholt. You'll brighten up my day.'

'Why, Yennefer?' the dwarf asked reproachfully.

'Perhaps I simply don't like sharing, Yarpen?'

‘Well now,’ Yarpen Zigrin smiled. ‘That’s profoundly human. So human it’s almost dwarven. It’s nice to see familiar qualities in a sorceress. Because I don’t like sharing, either, Yennefer.’

He hunched into a short, very rapid backswing. A steel ball, appearing out of his pocket as if from nowhere, whirred through the air and smacked Yennefer right in the forehead. Before the sorceress had time to come to her senses, she was suspended in the air, being held up by Beanpole and Gar, and Yarpen was binding her ankles with twine. Yennefer screamed furiously, but one of Yarpen’s boys threw the wagon’s reins over her head from behind and pulled them tight, the leather strap digging into her open mouth, stifling her cries.

‘Well, Yennefer,’ Boholt said as he walked over, ‘how do you plan to turn me into a gelding now? When you can’t move a hand?’

He tore the collar of her coat and then ripped and wrenched open her blouse. Yennefer shrieked, choked by the reins.

‘I don’t have the time now,’ Boholt said, groping her shamelessly to the cackling of the dwarves, ‘but wait a little while, witch. Once we’ve sorted out the dragon, we’ll make merry. Tie her firmly to the wheel, boys. Both little hands to the rim, so she won’t be able to lift a finger. And no one’s to bloody touch her yet, my lords. We’ll sort the order out depending on who does a good job on the dragon.’

‘Beware, Boholt,’ Geralt, arms tied, said, softly, calmly and ominously. ‘I’ll follow you to the ends of the world.’

‘You surprise me,’ the Reaver replied, just as calmly. ‘In your place I’d keep mum. I know you, and I know I have to take your threat seriously. I won’t have a choice. You might not come out of this alive, Witcher. We’ll return to this matter. Gar, Beanpole, to horse.’

‘What bad luck,’ Dandelion snapped. ‘Why the hell did I get mixed up in this?’

Dorregaray, lowering his head, watched the thick drops of blood slowly dripping from his nose onto his belly.

‘Would you stop staring!’ the sorceress screamed at Geralt. She was writhing like a snake in her bonds, vainly trying to conceal her exposed charms. The Witcher obediently turned his head away. Dandelion did not.

‘You must have used an entire barrel of mandrake elixir on what I can see, Yennefer,’ the bard laughed. ‘Your skin’s like a sixteen-

year-old's, dammit.'

'Shut your trap, whore's son!' the sorceress bellowed.

'How old are you, actually, Yennefer?' Dandelion asked, not giving up. 'Two hundred? Well, a hundred and fifty, let's say. And you're behaving like . . . '

Yennefer twisted her neck and spat at him, but was wide of the mark.

'Yen,' the Witcher said reproachfully, wiping his spit-covered ear on his shoulder.

'I wish he would stop staring!'

'Not on your life,' Dandelion said, without taking his eyes off the bedraggled sorceress. 'I'm here because of her. They may slit our throats, but at least I'll die happy.'

'Shut up, Dandelion,' the Witcher said.

'I have no intention of so doing. In fact I plan to compose the Ballad of the Two Tits. Please don't interfere.'

'Dandelion,' Dorregaray sniffed through his bloody nose. 'Be serious.'

'I am being bloody serious.'

The dwarves heaved Boholt up into the saddle. He was heavy and squat from the armour and the leather pads he was wearing. Gar and Beanpole were already mounted, holding huge, two-handed swords across their saddles.

'Right,' Boholt rasped, 'let's have at him.'

'Oh, no,' said a deep voice, sounding like a brass trumpet. 'I have come to you!'

From beyond the ring of boulders emerged a long snout shimmering with gold, a slender neck armed with a row of triangular, serrated projections and, behind, taloned feet. The evil, reptilian eyes, with their vertical pupils, peered from beneath horned eyelids.

'I was tired of waiting in the open,' the dragon Villentretenmerth said, looking around, 'so I came myself. Fewer and fewer challengers, I see.'

Boholt held the reins in his teeth and a longsword two-handed.

'Thas nuff,' he said indistinctly, holding the strap in his teeth. 'Stah an fight, heptile!'

‘I am,’ the dragon said, arching its back and lifting its tail insultingly.

Boholt looked around. Gar and Beanpole slowly, almost ostentatiously, calmly, flanked the dragon. Yarpen Zigrin and his boys waited behind, holding battle-axes.

‘Aaaargh!’ Boholt roared, striking his horse hard with his heels and lifting his sword.

The dragon curled up, flattened itself to the ground and struck with its tail from above and behind, like a scorpion, hitting not Boholt, but Gar, who was attacking from the side. Gar fell over with his horse amid a clanking, screaming and neighing tumult. Boholt, charging at a gallop, struck with a terrible blow, but the dragon nimbly dodged the wide blade. The momentum of the gallop carried Boholt alongside the dragon’s body. The dragon twisted, standing on its hind legs, and clawed Beanpole, tearing open his horse’s belly and the rider’s thigh with a single slash. Boholt, leaning far out from the saddle, managed to steer his horse around, pulling the reins with his teeth, and attacked once more.

The dragon lashed its tail over the dwarves rushing towards it, knocking them all over, and then lunged at Boholt, en route – seemingly in passing – stamping vigorously on Beanpole, who was trying to get up. Boholt, jerking his head around, tried to steer his galloping horse, but the dragon was infinitely quicker and more agile. Cunningly stealing up on Boholt from the left in order to obstruct his swing, it struck with a taloned foot. The horse reared up and lurched over to one side. Boholt flew from the saddle, losing his sword and helmet, tumbling backwards onto the ground, banging his head against a rock.

‘Run for it, lads! Up the hill!’ Yarpen Zigrin bellowed, outshouting the screams of Gar, who was pinned down by his horse. Beards fluttering, the dwarves dashed towards the rocks at a speed that belied their short legs. The dragon did not give chase. It sat calmly and looked around. Gar was thrashing and screaming beneath the horse. Boholt lay motionless. Beanpole was crawling towards the rocks, sideways, like a huge, iron crab.

‘Staggering,’ Dorregaray whispered. ‘Staggering . . . ’

‘Hey!’ Dandelion struggled in his bonds, making the wagon shake. ‘What is it? Over there! Look!’

A great cloud of dust could be seen on the eastern side of the gorge, and shouting, rattling and the tramping of hooves quickly

reached them. The dragon extended its neck to look.

Three large wagons full of armed men rolled onto the plain. Splitting up, they began to surround the dragon.

'It's . . . Dammit, it's the constabulary and guilds from Barefield!' Dandelion called. 'They came around by the source of the Braa! Yes, it's them! Look, it's Sheepbagger, there, at the front!'

The dragon lowered its head and gently pushed a small, green-greyish, mewling creature towards the wagon. Then it struck the ground with its tail, roared loudly and shot like an arrow towards the encounter with the men of Barefield.

'What is it?' Yennefer asked, 'That little thing? Crawling around in the grass? Geralt?'

'It's what the dragon was protecting from us,' the Witcher said. 'That's what hatched some time ago in the cave, over there in the northern canyon. It's the dragonling from the egg of the dragon that Sheepbagger poisoned.'

The dragonling, stumbling and dragging its bulging belly across the ground, scurried unsteadily over to the wagon, squealed, stood on its hind legs, stretched out its little wings, and then without a second's thought clung to the sorceress's side. Yennefer, with an extremely queer look on her face, sighed loudly.

'It likes you,' Geralt murmured.

'He's young, but he ain't stupid,' Dandelion twisting in his fetters, grinned. 'Look where he's stuck his snout. I'd like to be in his shoes, dammit. Hey, little one, run away! That's Yennefer! Terror of dragons! And witchers. Well, at least one witcher—'

'Quiet, Dandelion,' Dorregaray shouted. 'Look over there, on the battlefield! They've got him, a pox on them!'

The Barefield wagons, rumbling like war chariots, raced towards the attacking dragon.

'Smack 'im!' Sheepbagger yelled, hanging on to the wagoner's back. 'Smack 'im, kinsmen, anywhere and anyhow! Don't hold back!'

The dragon nimbly eluded the first advancing wagon, flashing with scythe blades, forks and spears, but ended up between the next two, from which a huge double fishing net pulled by straps dropped onto it. The dragon, fully enmeshed, fell down, rolled over, curled up in a ball, and spread its legs. The net tore to shreds with a sharp rending noise. More nets were thrown onto it from the first wagon,

which had managed to turn around, this time utterly entangling the dragon. The two other wagons also turned back, dashed towards the dragon, rattling and bouncing over bumps.

‘You’re caught in the net, you carp!’ Sheepbagger bawled. ‘And we’ll soon scale you!’

The dragon roared and belched a cloud of steam into the sky. The Barefield constables rushed towards him, spilling out of the wagons. The dragon bellowed again, desperately, with a thundering roar.

From the northern canyon came a reply, a high-pitched, battle cry.

Out from the gorge, straining forward in a frenzied gallop, blonde plaits streaming, whistling piercingly, surrounded by the flickering flashes of sabres, charged . . .

‘The Zerrikanians!’ the Witcher shouted, helplessly tugging at the ropes.

‘Oh, shit!’ Dandelion chimed in. ‘Geralt! Do you understand?’

The Zerrikanians rode through the throng like hot knives through a barrel of butter, scattering their path with massacred corpses, and then leaped from their horses in full flight, to stand beside the dragon struggling in the net. The first of the onrushing constables immediately lost his head. The second aimed a blow with his pitchfork at Véa, but the Zerrikanian, holding her sabre in both hands, upside down, with the tip pointing towards the ground, slashed him open from crotch to sternum. The others beat a hurried retreat.

‘To the wagons!’ Sheepbagger yelled. ‘To the wagons, kinsmen! We’ll crush them under the wagons!’

‘Geralt!’ Yennefer suddenly shouted, pulling up her bound legs and pushing them with a sudden thrust under the wagon, beneath the arms of the Witcher, which were bound and twisted behind him. ‘The Igni Sign! Make it! Can you feel the rope? Cast the bloody thing!’

‘Without looking?’ Geralt groaned. ‘I’ll burn you, Yen!’

‘Make the Sign! I can take it!’

He obeyed, and felt a tingling in his fingers, which were forming the Igni Sign just above the sorceress’s bound ankles. Yennefer turned her head away, biting down on her coat collar and stifling a moan. The dragonling, squealing, beat its wings beside her.

‘Yen!’

‘Make it!’ she bellowed.

Her bonds gave way in an instant, as the disgusting, nauseating odour of charred skin became unbearable. Dorregaray uttered a strange noise and fainted, suspended by his fetters from the wagon wheel.

The sorceress, wincing with the pain, straightened up, lifting her now free leg. She screamed in a furious voice, full of pain and rage. The medallion on Geralt’s neck jerked as though it were alive. Yennefer straightened her thigh, waved her foot towards the charging wagons of the Barefield constabulary, and shouted out a spell. The air crackled and gave off the smell of ozone.

‘O, ye Gods,’ Dandelion wailed in admiration. ‘What a ballad this will be, Yennefer!’

The spell, cast by her shapely little foot, was not totally effective. The first wagon – and everything on it – took on the yellow colour of a kingcup, which the Barefield soldiers in the frenzy of battle did not even notice. It did better with the second wagon, whose entire crew were transformed into huge, rough-skinned frogs, which hopped around in all directions, croaking comically. The wagon, now bereft of a driver, tipped over and fell apart. The horses, neighing hysterically, fled into the distance, dragging the broken shaft behind them.

Yennefer bit her lip and waved her leg in the air again. The kingcup-yellow wagon suddenly dissolved into kingcup-yellow smoke to the sound of lively musical tones drifting down from above, and its entire crew flopped onto the grass, stupefied, forming a picturesque heap. The wheels of the third wagon went from round to square and the result was instant. The horses reared up, the wagon crashed over, and the Barefield constabulary were tipped out and thrown onto the ground. Yennefer, now driven by pure vindictiveness, flourished a leg ferociously and yelled out a spell, transforming the Barefielders randomly into turtles, geese, woodlice, flamingos and stripy piglets. The Zerrikanians expertly and methodically finished off the rest.

The dragon, having finally torn the nets to shreds, leaped up, flapped its wings, roared and hurtled, as straight as a ramrod, after the unharmed and fleeing Sheepbagger. Sheepbagger was dashing like a stag, but the dragon was faster. Geralt, seeing the gaping jaws and razor-sharp flashing teeth, turned his head away. He heard a gruesome scream and a revolting crunching sound. Dandelion gave

a stifled shout. Yennefer, her face as white as a sheet, bent over double, turned to one side and vomited under the wagon.

A silence fell, interrupted only by the occasional gaggling, croaking and squealing of the remains of the Barefield constabulary.

Véa, smiling unpleasantly, stood over Yennefer, legs wide apart. The Zerrikanian raised her sabre. Yennefer, pale, raised a leg.

'No,' said Borch, also known as Three Jackdaws, who was sitting on a stone. In his lap he was holding the dragonling, peaceful and content.

'We aren't going to kill Madam Yennefer,' the dragon Villentretenmerth repeated. 'It is over. What is more, we are grateful to Madam Yennefer for her invaluable assistance. Release them, Véa.'

'Do you understand, Geralt?' Dandelion whispered, chafing feeling into his numb arms. 'Do you understand? There's an ancient ballad about a golden dragon. A golden dragon can . . . '

'Can assume any form it wishes,' Geralt muttered, 'even that of a human. I've heard that too. But I didn't believe it.'

'Yarpen Zigrin, sir!' Villentretenmerth called to the dwarf, who was hanging onto a vertical rock twenty ells above the ground. 'What are you looking for there? Marmots? Not your favourite dish, if memory serves me. Climb down and busy yourself with the Reavers. They need help. There won't be any more killing. Of anybody.'

Dandelion, casting anxious glances at the Zerrikanians, who were vigilantly patrolling the battlefield, was still trying to revive the unconscious Dorregaray. Geralt was dressing Yennefer's scorched ankles and rubbing ointment into them. The sorceress was hissing with pain and mumbling spells.

Having completed his task, the Witcher stood up.

'Stay here,' he said. 'I have to talk to him.'

Yennefer stood up, wincing.

'I'm going with you, Geralt,' she said, linking her arm in his. 'May I? Please, Geralt.'

'With me, Yen? I thought . . . '

'Don't think,' she pressed herself against his arm.

'Yen?'

‘It’s alright, Geralt.’

He looked into her eyes, which were warm. As they used to be. He lowered his head and kissed her lips; hot, soft and willing. As they used to be.

They walked over. Yennefer, held up by Geralt, curtsied low, as though before a king, holding her dress in her fingertips.

‘Three Jack . . . Villentretenmerth . . . ’ the Witcher said.

‘My name, when freely translated into your language, means Three Black Birds,’ the dragon said. The dragonling, little claws digging into his forearm, arched its back to be stroked.

‘Chaos and Order,’ Villentretenmerth smiled. ‘Do you remember, Geralt? Chaos is aggression, Order is protection against it. It’s worth rushing to the ends of the world, to oppose aggression and evil, isn’t it, Witcher? Particularly, as you said, when the pay is fair. And this time it was. It was the treasure hoard of the she-dragon Myrgtabrakke, the one poisoned outside Barefield. She summoned me to help her, to stop the evil threatening her. Myrgtabrakke flew away soon after Eyck of Denesle was removed from the battlefield. She had sufficient time, while you were talking and quarrelling. But she left me her treasure as my payment.’

The dragonling squealed and flapped its little wings.

‘So you . . . ’

‘That is right,’ the dragon interrupted. ‘Well, it’s the times we live in. For some time, creatures, which you usually call monsters, have been feeling more and more under threat from people. They can no longer cope by themselves. They need a Defender. Some kind of . . . witcher.’

‘And the destination . . . The goal at the end of the road?’

‘This is it,’ Villentretenmerth lifted his forearm. The dragonling squealed in alarm. ‘I’ve just attained it. Owing to him I shall survive, Geralt of Rivia, I shall prove there are no limits of possibility. One day, you will also find such a purpose, Witcher. Even those who are different can survive. Farewell, Geralt. Farewell, Yennefer.’

The sorceress, grasping the Witcher’s arm more firmly, curtsied again.

Villentretenmerth stood up and looked at her, and his expression was very serious.

‘Forgive me my frankness and forthrightness, Yennefer. It is written all over your faces, I don’t even have to try to read your thoughts. You were made for each other, you and the Witcher. But nothing will come of it. Nothing. I’m sorry.’

‘I know,’ Yennefer blanched slightly. ‘I know, Villentretenmerth. But I would also like to believe there are no limits of possibility. Or at least I would like to believe that they are still very far away.’

Véa walked over, touched Geralt’s shoulder, and quickly uttered a few words. The dragon laughed.

‘Geralt, Véa says she will long remember the tub at the Pensive Dragon. She hopes we’ll meet again some day.’

‘What?’ Yennefer answered, narrowing her eyes.

‘Nothing,’ the Witcher said quickly, ‘Villentretenmerth . . . ’

‘Yes, Geralt of Rivia?’

‘You can assume any form. Any that you wish.’

‘Indeed.’

‘Why then, a man? Why Borch with three black birds on his coat of arms?’

The dragon smiled cheerfully.

‘I don’t know, Geralt, in what circumstances the distant ancestors of our races encountered one another for the first time. But the fact is that for dragons, there is nothing more repugnant than man. Man arouses instinctive, irrational disgust in a dragon. With me it’s different. To me you’re . . . likeable. Farewell.’

It was not a gradual, blurred transformation, or a hazy, pulsating trembling as with an illusion. It was as sudden as the blink of an eye. Where a second before had stood a curly-haired knight in a tunic decorated with three black birds, now sat a golden dragon, gracefully extending its long, slender neck. Inclining its head, the dragon spread its wings, dazzlingly gold in the sunshine. Yennefer sighed loudly.

Véa, already mounted beside Téa, waved.

‘Véa,’ the Witcher said, ‘you were right.’

‘Hm?’

‘He is the most beautiful.’

A SHARD OF ICE

I

The dead sheep, swollen and bloated, its stiff legs pointing towards the sky, moved. Geralt, crouching by the wall, slowly drew his sword, careful not to let the blade grate against the scabbard. Ten paces from him, a pile of refuse suddenly arched up and heaved. The Witcher straightened and jumped before the wave of stench emanating from the disturbed midden reached him.

A tentacle ending in a rounded, tapering protuberance, bristling with spikes, suddenly shot out from under the rubbish, hurtling out towards him at incredible speed. The Witcher landed surely on the remains of a broken piece of furniture tottering on a pile of rotten vegetables, swayed, regained his balance, and slashed the tentacle with a short blow of his sword, cutting off the tentacular club. He sprang back at once, but this time slipped from the boards and sank up to his thighs in the boggy midden.

The rubbish heap erupted, throwing up viscous, foul-smelling slime, fragments of pots, rotten rags and pale threads of sauerkraut, and from beneath it all burst an enormous, bulbous body, as deformed as a grotesque potato, lashing the air with three tentacles and the stump of a fourth.

Geralt, trapped and immobilised, struck with a broad twist of his hips, smoothly hacking off another tentacle. The remaining two, as thick as tree boughs, fell on him with force, plunging him more deeply into the waste. The body glided towards him, ploughing into the midden like a barrel being dragged along. He saw the hideous, bulbous shape snap open, gaping with a wide maw full of large, lumpish teeth.

He let the tentacles encircle his waist, pull him with a squelch from the stinking slime and drag him towards the body, now boring into the refuse heap with circular movements. The toothed maw snapped savagely and ferociously. Having been dragged close to the dreadful jaws, the Witcher struck with his sword, two-handed, the blade biting smoothly and easily. The obnoxious, sweetish odour took his breath away. The monster hissed and shuddered, and the tentacles released their grip, flapping convulsively in the air. Geralt, bogged down in the refuse, slashed again, backhanded, the blade repulsively crunching and grating on the bared teeth. The creature

gurgled and drooped, but immediately swelled, hissing, vomiting putrid slime over the Witcher. Keeping his balance with strenuous movements of his legs, still stuck in the muck, Geralt broke free and lunged forward, cleaving the refuse with his chest like a swimmer moving through water, and struck with all his strength from above, powerfully bearing down on the blade as it cut into the body, between the weakly glowing eyes. The monster groaned, flapped around, unfolding onto the pile of muck like a punctured bladder, emitting palpable, warm gusts of stench. The tentacles twitched and writhed among the rubbish.

The Witcher clambered out of the treacly slime and stood on slippery but hard ground. He felt something sticky and revolting which had got into his boot crawling over his calf. To the well, he thought, wash it off, wash off all the repulsiveness as soon as possible. Wash myself. The creature's tentacles flapped on the refuse one last time, sloppy and wet, and then stopped moving.

A star fell, a brief flash of lightning illuminating the black firmament, flecked with unmoving dots of light. The Witcher made no wish.

He was breathing heavily, wheezing, and feeling the effects of the elixirs he had drunk before the fight wearing off. The gigantic heap of rubbish and waste piled up against the town walls, descending steeply towards the glistening ribbon of the river, looked pretty and alluring in the starlight. The Witcher spat.

The monster was dead, now part of the midden where it had dwelled.

Another star fell.

'A garbage heap,' the Witcher said with effort. 'Muck, filth and shit.'

II

‘You reek, Geralt,’ Yennefer grimaced, not turning from the mirror, where she was cleaning off the colouring from her eyelids and eyelashes. ‘Take a bath.’

‘There’s no water,’ he said, looking into the tub.

‘We shall remedy that,’ the sorceress stood up and threw the window open. ‘Do you prefer sea water or fresh water?’

‘Sea water, for a change.’

Yennefer spread her arms vigorously and shouted a spell, making a brief, intricate movement with her hands. Suddenly a sharp, wet coldness blew in through the open window, the shutters juddered, and a green cloud gushed into the room with a hiss, billowing in an irregular sphere. The tub foamed with water, rippling turbulently, banging against the edges and splashing onto the floor. The sorceress sat down and resumed her previously interrupted activity.

‘How did it go?’ she asked. ‘What was it, on the midden?’

‘A zeugl, as I suspected,’ Geralt said, pulling off his boots, discarding his clothes and lowering a foot into the tub. ‘Bloody hell, Yen, that’s cold. Can’t you heat the water?’

‘No,’ the sorceress, moving her face towards the looking glass and instilling something into her eye using a thin glass rod. ‘That spell is bloody wearying and makes me feel sick. And the cold will do you good after the elixirs.’

Geralt did not argue. There was absolutely no point arguing with Yennefer.

‘Did the zeugl cause you any problems?’ The sorceress dipped the rod into a vial and dropped something into her other eye, twisting her lips comically.

‘Not particularly.’

From outside the open window there was a thud, the sharp crack of wood breaking and an inarticulate voice, tunelessly and incoherently repeating the chorus of a popular, obscene song.

‘A zeugl,’ said the sorceress as she reached for another vial from the impressive collection on the table, and removed the cork from it. The fragrance of lilac and gooseberries filled the room. ‘Well, well. Even in a town it’s easy for a witcher to find work, you don’t

have to roam through the wilds at all. You know, Istredd maintains it's becoming a general rule. The place of every creature from the forests and swamps that becomes extinct is occupied by something else, some new mutation, adapted to the artificial environment created by people.'

As usual, Geralt winced at the mention of Istredd. He was beginning to be sick of Yennefer's admiration for Istredd's brilliance. Even if Istredd was right.

'Istredd is right,' Yennefer continued, applying the lilac-and-gooseberry perfumed something to her cheeks and eyelids. 'Look for yourself; pseudorats in sewers and cellars, zeugls in rubbish dumps, neocorises in polluted moats and sewers, taggirs in millponds. It's virtually symbiosis, don't you think?'

And ghouls in cemeteries, devouring corpses the day after the funeral, he thought, rinsing off the soap. Total symbiosis.

'Yes,' the sorceress put aside the vials and jars, 'witchers can be kept busy in towns, too. I think one day you'll settle in a city for good, Geralt.'

I'd rather drop dead, he thought. But he did not say it aloud. Contradicting Yennefer, as he knew, inevitably led to a fight, and a fight with Yennefer was not the safest thing.

'Have you finished, Geralt?'

'Yes.'

'Get out of the tub.'

Without getting up, Yennefer carelessly waved a hand and uttered a spell. The water from the tub – including everything which had spilled onto the floor or was dripping from Geralt – gathered itself with a swoosh into a translucent sphere and whistled through the window. He heard a loud splash.

'A pox on you, whoresons!' an infuriated yell rang out from below. 'Have you nowhere to pour away your piss? I bloody hope you're eaten alive by lice, catch the ruddy pox and croak!'

The sorceress closed the window.

'Dammit, Yen,' the Witcher chuckled. 'You could have chucked the water somewhere else.'

'I could have,' she purred, 'but I didn't feel like it.'

She took the oil lamp from the table and walked over to him. The white nightdress clinging to her body as she moved made her

tremendously appealing. More so than if she were naked, he thought.

‘I want to look you over,’ she said, ‘the zeugl might have injured you.’

‘It didn’t. I would have felt it.’

‘After the elixirs? Don’t be ridiculous. After the elixirs you wouldn’t even have felt an open fracture, until the protruding bones started snagging on hedges. And there might have been anything on the zeugl, including tetanus and cadaveric poison. If anything happens there’s still time for counter-measures. Turn around.’

He felt the soft warmth of the lamp’s flame on his body and the occasional brushing of her hair.

‘Everything seems to be in order,’ she said. ‘Lie down before the elixirs knock you off your feet. Those mixtures are devilishly dangerous. They’ll destroy you in the end.’

‘I have to take them before I fight.’

Yennefer did not answer. She sat down at the looking glass once more and slowly combed her black, curly, shimmering locks. She always combed her hair before going to bed. Geralt found it peculiar, but he adored watching her doing it. He suspected Yennefer was aware of it.

He suddenly felt very cold, and the elixirs indeed jolted him, numbed the nape of his neck and swirled around the bottom of his stomach in vortices of nausea. He cursed under his breath and fell heavily onto the bed, without taking his eyes off Yennefer.

A movement in the corner of the chamber caught his attention. A smallish, pitch-black bird sat on a set of antlers nailed crookedly to the wall and festooned in cobwebs.

Glancing sideways, it looked at the Witcher with a yellow, fixed eye.

‘What’s that, Yen? How did it get here?’

‘What?’ Yennefer turned her head. ‘Oh, that. It’s a kestrel.’

‘A kestrel? Kestrels are rufous and speckled, and that one’s black.’

‘It’s an enchanted kestrel. I made it.’

‘What for?’

‘I need it,’ she cut him off. Geralt did not ask any more questions, knowing that Yennefer would not answer.

‘Are you seeing Istredd tomorrow?’

The sorceress moved the vials to the edge of the table, put her comb into a small box and closed the side panels of the looking glass.

‘Yes. First thing. Why?’

‘Nothing.’

She lay down beside him, without snuffing out the lamp. She never doused lights; she could not bear to fall asleep in the dark. Whether an oil lamp, a lantern, or a candle, it had to burn right down. Always. One more foible. Yennefer had a remarkable number of foibles.

‘Yen?’

‘Uh-huh?’

‘When are we leaving?’

‘Don’t be tedious,’ she tugged the eiderdown sharply. ‘We’ve only been here three days, and you’ve asked that question at least thirty times. I’ve told you, I have things to deal with.’

‘With Istredd?’

‘Yes,’

He sighed and embraced her, not concealing his intentions.

‘Hey,’ she whispered. ‘You’ve taken elixirs . . .’

‘What of it?’

‘Nothing,’ she giggled like a schoolgirl, cuddling up to him, arching her body and lifting herself to allow her nightdress to slip off. As usual, the delight in her nakedness coursed in a shudder down his back and tingled in his fingers as they touched her skin. His lips touched her breasts, rounded and delicate, with nipples so pale they were visible only by their contours. He entwined his fingers in her hair, her lilac-and-gooseberry perfumed hair.

She succumbed to his caresses, purring like a cat, rubbing her bent knee against his hip.

It rapidly turned out – as usual – that he had overestimated his stamina regarding the witcher elixirs, had forgotten about their disagreeable effects on his body. But perhaps it’s not the elixirs, he thought, perhaps it’s exhaustion brought on by fighting, risks, danger and death? Exhaustion, which has simply become routine? But my body, even though artificially enhanced, doesn’t succumb to

routine. It reacts naturally. Just not when it's supposed to. Dammit.

But Yennefer, as usual, was not discouraged by a mere trifle. He felt her touch him, heard her purr right by his ear. As usual, he involuntarily pondered over the colossal number of occasions she must have used that most practical of spells. And then he stopped pondering.

As usual it was anything but ordinary.

He looked at her mouth, at its corners, twitching in an unwitting smile. He knew that smile well, it always seemed to him more one of triumph than of happiness. He had never asked her about it. He knew she would not answer.

The black kestrel sitting on the antlers beat its wings and snapped its curved beak. Yennefer turned her head away and sighed. Very sadly.

'Yen?'

'It's nothing, Geralt,' she said, kissing him. 'It's nothing.'

The oil lamp glimmered and flickered. A mouse was scratching in the wall, and a deathwatch beetle in the dresser clicked softly, rhythmically and monotonously.

'Yen?'

'Mhm?'

'Let's get away. I feel bad here. This town has an awful effect on me.'

She turned over on her side, ran a hand across his cheek, brushing some strands of hair away. Her fingers travelled downwards, touching the coarse scars marking the side of his neck.

'Do you know what the name of this town means? Aedd Gynvael?'

'No. Is it in the elven speech?'

'Yes. It means a shard of ice.'

'Somehow, it doesn't suit this lousy dump.'

'Among the elves,' the sorceress whispered pensively, 'there is a legend about a Winter Queen who travels the land during snowstorms in a sleigh drawn by white horses. As she rides, she casts hard, sharp, tiny shards of ice around her, and woe betide anyone whose eye or heart is pierced by one of them. That person is then lost. No longer will anything gladden them; they find anything

that doesn't have the whiteness of snow ugly, obnoxious, repugnant. They will not find peace, will abandon everything, and will set off after the Queen, in pursuit of their dream and love. Naturally, they will never find it and will die of longing. Apparently here, in this town, something like that happened in times long gone. It's a beautiful legend, isn't it?'

'Elves can couch everything in pretty words,' he muttered drowsily, running his lips over her shoulder. 'It's not a legend at all, Yen. It's a pretty description of the hideous phenomenon that is the Wild Hunt, the curse of several regions. An inexplicable, collective madness, compelling people to join a spectral cavalcade rushing across the sky. I've seen it. Indeed, it often occurs during the winter. I was offered rather good money to put an end to that blight, but I didn't take it. There's no way of dealing with the Wild Hunt . . .'

'Witcher,' she whispered, kissing his cheek, 'there's no romance in you. And I . . . I like elven legends, they are so captivating. What a pity humans don't have any legends like that. Perhaps one day they will? Perhaps they'll create some? But what would human legends deal with? All around, wherever one looks, there's greyness and dullness. Even things which begin beautifully lead swiftly to boredom and dreariness, to that human ritual, that wearisome rhythm called life. Oh, Geralt, it's not easy being a sorceress, but comparing it to mundane, human existence . . . Geralt?' She laid her head on his chest, which was rising and falling with slow breathing.

'Sleep,' she whispered. 'Sleep, Witcher.'

III

The town was having a bad effect on him.

Since first thing that morning everything was spoiling his mood, making him dejected and angry. Everything. It annoyed him that he had overslept, so the morning had become to all intents and purposes the afternoon. He was irritated by the absence of Yennefer, who had left before he woke up.

She must have been in a hurry, because the paraphernalia she usually neatly put away in boxes was lying on the table, randomly strewn like dice cast by a soothsayer performing a prophecy ritual. Brushes made from delicate horsehair: the large ones used for powdering her face, the smaller ones which she used to apply lipstick to her mouth, and the utterly tiny ones for the henna she used to dye her eyelashes. Pencils and sticks for her eyelids and eyebrows. Delicate silver tweezers and spoons. Small jars and bottles made of porcelain and milky glass, containing, as he knew, elixirs and balms with ingredients as banal as soot, goose grease and carrot juice, and as menacingly mysterious as mandrake, antimony, belladonna, cannabis, dragon's blood and the concentrated venom of the giant scorpion. And above all of that, all around, in the air, the fragrance of lilac and gooseberry, the scent she always used.

She was present in those objects. She was present in the fragrance.

But she was not there.

He went downstairs, feeling anxiety and anger welling up in him. About everything.

He was annoyed by the cold, congealed scrambled egg he was served for breakfast by the innkeeper, who tore himself away for a moment from groping a girl in the kitchen. He was annoyed that the girl was no more than twelve years old. And had tears in her eyes.

The warm, spring weather and cheerful chatter of the vibrant streets did not improve Geralt's mood. He still did not enjoy being in Aedd Gynvael, a small town which he deemed to be a nasty parody of all the small towns he knew; it was grotesquely noisier, dirtier, more oppressive and more irritating.

He could still smell the faint stench of the midden on his clothes and in his hair. He decided to go to the bathhouse.

In the bathhouse, he was annoyed by the expression of the attendant, looking at his witcher medallion and his sword lying on the edge of the tub. He was annoyed by the fact that the attendant did not offer him a whore. He had no intention of availing himself of one, but in bathhouses everybody was offered them, so he was annoyed by the exception being made for him.

When he left, smelling strongly of lye ash soap, his mood had not improved, and Aedd Gynvael was no more attractive. There was still nothing there that he could find to like. The Witcher did not like the piles of sloppy manure filling the narrow streets. He did not like the beggars squatting against the wall of the temple. He did not like the crooked writing on the wall reading: 'ELVES TO THE RESERVATION!'.

He was not allowed to enter the castle; instead they sent him to speak to the mayor in the merchants' guild. That annoyed him. He was also annoyed when the dean of the guild, an elf, ordered him to search for the mayor in the market place, looking at him with a curious contempt and superiority for someone who was about to be sent to a reservation.

The market place was teeming with people; it was full of stalls, carts, wagons, horses, oxen and flies. On a platform stood a pillory with a criminal being showered by the throng in mud and dung. The criminal, with admirable composure, showered his tormentors with vile abuse, making little effort to raise his voice.

For Geralt, who possessed considerable refinement, the mayor's reason for being among this clamour was absolutely clear. The visiting merchants from caravans included bribes in their prices, and thus had to give someone the bribes. The mayor, well aware of this custom, would appear, to ensure that the merchants would not have to go to any trouble.

The place from which he officiated was marked by a dirty-blue canopy supported on poles. Beneath it stood a table besieged by vociferous applicants. Mayor Herbolth sat behind the table, displaying on his faded face scorn and disdain to all and sundry.

'Hey! Where might you be going?'

Geralt slowly turned his head. He instantly suppressed the anger he felt inside, overcame his annoyance and froze into a cold, hard shard of ice. He could not allow himself to become emotional. The

man who stopped him had hair as yellow as oriole feathers and the same colour eyebrows over pale, empty eyes. His slim, long-fingered hands were resting on a belt made from chunky brass plates, weighed down by a sword, mace and two daggers.

'Aha,' the man said. 'I know you. The Witcher, isn't it? To see Herbolth?'

Geralt nodded, watching the man's hands the whole time. He knew it would be dangerous to take his eyes off them.

'I've heard of you, the bane of monsters,' said the yellow-haired man, also vigilantly observing Geralt's hands. 'Although I don't think we've ever met, you must also have heard of me. I'm Ivo Mirce. But everyone calls me Cicada.'

The Witcher nodded to indicate he had heard of him. He also knew the price that had been offered for Cicada's head in Vizima, Caelf and Vattweir. Had he been asked his opinion he would have said it was a low price. But he had not been asked.

'Very well,' Cicada said. 'The mayor, from what I know, is waiting for you. You may go on. But you leave your sword, friend. I'm paid here, mark you, to make sure etiquette is observed. No one is allowed to approach Herbolth with a weapon. Understood?'

Geralt shrugged indifferently, unfastened his belt, wrapped it around the scabbard and handed the sword to Cicada. Cicada raised the corners of his mouth in a smile.

'Well, well,' he said. 'How meek, not a word of protest. I knew the rumours about you were exaggerated. I'd like you to ask for my sword one day; then you'd see my answer.'

'Hi, Cicada!' the mayor called, getting up. 'Let him through! Come here, Lord Geralt, look lively, greetings to you. Step aside, my dear merchants, leave us for a moment. Your business dealings must yield to issues of greater note for the town. Submit your entreaties to my secretary!'

The sham geniality of the greeting did not deceive Geralt. He knew it served exclusively as a bargaining ploy. The merchants were being given time to worry whether their bribes were sufficiently high.

'I'll wager Cicada tried to provoke you,' Herbolth said, raising his hand nonchalantly in response to the Witcher's equally nonchalant nod. 'Don't fret about it. Cicada only draws his weapon when ordered to. True, it's not especially to his liking, but while I pay him

he has to obey, or he'll be out on his ear, back on the highway. Don't fret about it.'

'Why the hell do you need someone like Cicada, mayor? Is it so dangerous here?'

'It's not dangerous, because I'm paying Cicada,' Herbolth laughed. 'His fame goes before him and that suits me well. You see, Aedd Gynvael and the other towns in the Dogbane valley fall under the authority of the viceroys of Rakverelin. And in recent times the viceroys have changed with every season. No one knows why they keep changing, because anyway every second one is a half-elf or quarter-elf; accursed blood and race. Everything bad is the fault of the elves.'

Geralt did not add that it was also the fault of the carters, because the joke, although well-known, did not amuse everybody.

'Every new viceroy,' Herbolth continued in a huff, 'begins by removing the castellans and mayors of the old regime, in order to give his friends and relations jobs. But after what Cicada once did to the emissaries of a certain viceroy, no one tries to unseat me from my position any more and I'm the oldest mayor of the oldest regime. Which one, I can't even remember. Well, but we're sitting here chin-wagging, and we need to get on, as my late first wife was wont to say. Let's get to the point. What kind of creature had infested our muck heap?'

'A zeugl.'

'First time I've ever heard of anything like that. I trust it's dead?'

'It is.'

'How much will it cost the town treasury? Seventy?'

'A hundred.'

'Oh, really, Witcher, sir! You must have been drinking hemlock! A hundred marks for killing a lousy worm that burrowed into a pile of shit?'

'Worm or no worm, mayor, it devoured eight people, as you said yourself.'

'People? I like that! The brute, so I am informed, ate old Zakorek, who was famous for never being sober, one old bag from up near the castle and several children of the ferryman Sulirad, which wasn't discovered very quickly, because Sulirad himself doesn't know how many children he has. He produces them too quickly to count them. People, my hat! Eighty.'

‘Had I not killed the zeugl, it would soon have devoured somebody more important. The apothecary, let us say. And then where would you get your chancre ointment from? One hundred.’

‘A hundred marks is a good deal of money. I don’t know if I’d give that much for a nine-headed hydra. Eighty-five.’

‘A hundred, Mayor Herbolth. Mark that although it wasn’t a nine-headed hydra, no local man, including the celebrated Cicada, was capable of dealing with the zeugl.’

‘Because no local man is accustomed to slopping around in dung and refuse. This is my last word: ninety.’

‘A hundred.’

‘Ninety-five, by all the demons and devils!’

‘Agreed.’

‘Well, now,’ Herbolth said, smiling broadly, ‘that’s settled. Do you always bargain so famously, Witcher?’

‘No,’ Geralt did not smile. ‘Seldom, actually. But I wanted to give you the pleasure, mayor.’

‘And you did, a pox on you,’ Herbolth cackled. ‘Hey, Peregrib! Over here! Give me the ledger and a purse and count me out ninety marks at once.’

‘It was supposed to be ninety-five.’

‘What about the tax?’

The Witcher swore softly. The mayor applied his sprawling mark to the receipt and then poked around in his ear with the clean end of the quill.

‘I trust things’ll be quiet on the muck heap now? Hey, Witcher?’

‘Ought to be. There was only one zeugl. Though there is a chance it managed to reproduce. Zeugls are hermaphroditic, like snails.’

‘What poppycock is that?’ Herbolth asked, looking askance at him. ‘You need two to reproduce, I mean a male and a female. What, do those zeugls hatch like fleas or mice, from the rotten straw in a palliasse? Every dimwit knows there aren’t he-mice and she-mice, that they’re all identical and hatch out of themselves from rotten straw.’

‘And snails hatch from wet leaves,’ secretary Peregrib interjected, still busy piling up coins.

‘Everyone knows,’ Geralt concurred, smiling cheerfully. ‘There

aren't he-snails and she-snails. There are only leaves. And anyone who thinks differently is mistaken.'

'Enough,' the mayor interrupted, looking at him suspiciously. 'I've heard enough about vermin. I asked whether anything might hatch from the muck heap, so be so gracious as to answer, clearly and concisely.'

'In a month or so the midden ought to be inspected, ideally using dogs. Young zeugls aren't dangerous.'

'Couldn't you do it, Witcher? We can come to agreement about payment.'

'No,' Geralt said, taking the money from Peregrib's hands. 'I have no intention of being stuck in your charming town for even a week, quite less a month.'

'Fascinating, what you're telling me.' Herbolth smiled wryly, looking him straight in the eye. 'Fascinating, indeed. Because I think you'll be staying here longer.'

'You think wrong, mayor.'

'Really? You came here with that black-haired witch, what was it again, I forget . . . Guinevere, wasn't it? You've taken lodgings with her at The Sturgeon. In a single chamber, they say.'

'And what of it?'

'Well, whenever she comes to Aedd Gynvael, she does not leave so quickly. It's not the first time she's been here.'

Peregrib smiled broadly, gap-toothed and meaningfully. Herbolth continued to look Geralt in the eye, without smiling. Geralt also smiled, as hideously as he could.

'Actually, I don't know anything,' the mayor looked away and bored his heel into the ground. 'And it interests me as much as dog's filth. But the wizard Istredd is an important figure here, mark you. Indispensable to this municipality. Invaluable, I'd say. People hold him in high regard, locals and outsiders, too. We don't stick our noses in his sorcery and especially not in his other matters.'

'Wisely, perhaps,' the Witcher agreed. 'And where does he live, if I may ask?'

'You don't know? Oh, it's right there, do you see that house? That tall, white one stuck between the storehouse and the armoury like, if you'll pardon the expression, a candle between two arsecheeks. But you won't find him there now. Not long ago, Istredd dug

something up by the southern embankment and is now burrowing around there like a mole. And he's put some men to work on the excavation. I went over there and asked politely, why, master, are you digging holes like a child, folk are beginning to laugh. What is in that ground there? And he looks at me like I'm some sort of pillock and says: "History". What do you mean, history? I asks. And he goes: "The history of humanity. Answers to questions. To the question of what there was, and the question of what there will be". There was fuck-all here, I says to that, except green fields, bushes and werewolves, before they built the town. And what there will be depends on who they appoint viceroy in Rakverelin; some lousy half-elf again. And there's no history in the ground, there's nothing there, except possibly worms, if someone's fond of angling. Do you think he listened? Fat chance. He's still digging. So if you want to see him, go to the southern embankment.'

'Oh, come on, mayor,' Peregrib snorted. ''E's at 'ome now. Why would 'e want to be at the diggings, when he's . . .'

Herbolth glanced at him menacingly. Peregrib bent over and cleared his throat, shuffling his feet. The Witcher, still smiling unpleasantly, crossed his arms on his chest.

'Yes, hem, hem,' the mayor coughed. 'Who knows, perhaps Istredd really is at home. After all, what does it . . .'

'Farewell, mayor,' Geralt said, not even bothering with an imitation of a bow. 'I wish you a good day.'

He went over to Cicada, who was coming out to meet him, his weapons clinking. Without a word he held out his hand for his sword, which Cicada was holding in the crook of his elbow. Cicada stepped back.

'In a hurry, Witcher?'

'Yes.'

'I've examined your sword.'

Geralt shot a look at him which, with the best will in the world, could not have been described as warm.

'That's quite something,' he nodded. 'Not many have. And even fewer could boast about it.'

'Ho, ho.' Cicada flashed his teeth. 'That sounded so menacing it's given me the shivers. It's always interested me, Witcher, why people are so afraid of you. And now I think I know.'

'I'm in a hurry, Cicada. Hand over the sword, if you don't mind.'

‘Smoke in the eyes, Witcher, nothing but smoke. You witchers frighten people like a beekeeper frightens his bees with smoke and stench, with your stony faces, with all your talk and those rumours, which you probably spread about yourselves. And the bees run from the smoke, foolish things, instead of shoving their stings in the witcher’s arse, which will swell up like any other. They say you can’t feel like people can. That’s lies. If one of you was properly stabbed, you’d feel it.’

‘Have you finished?’

‘Yes,’ Cicada said, handing him back his sword. ‘Know what interests me, Witcher?’

‘Yes. Bees.’

‘No. I was wondering if you was to enter an alley with a sword from one side and me from the other, who would come out the other side? I reckon it’s worth a wager.’

‘Why are you goading me, Cicada? Looking for a fight? What’s it about?’

‘Nothing. It just intrigues me how much truth there is in what folk say. That you’re so good in a fight, you witchers, because there’s no heart, soul, mercy or conscience in you. And that suffices? Because they say the same about me, for example. And not without reason. So I’m terribly interested which of us, after going into that alley, would come out of it alive. What? Worth a wager? What do you think?’

‘I said I’m in a hurry. I’m not going to waste time on your nonsense. And I’m not accustomed to betting. But if you ever decide to hinder me walking down an alley, take my advice, Cicada, think about it first.’

‘Smoke,’ Cicada smiled. ‘Smoke in the eyes, Witcher. Nothing more. To the next time. Who knows, maybe in some alley?’

‘Who knows.’

IV

‘We’ll be able to talk freely here. Sit down, Geralt.’

What was most conspicuous about the workshop was the impressive number of books; they took up most of the space in the large chamber. Bulky tomes filled the bookcases on the walls, weighed down shelves, and were piled high on chests and cabinets. The Witcher judged that they must have cost a fortune. Of course, neither was there any shortage of other typical elements of décor: a stuffed crocodile, dried porcupine fish hanging from the ceiling, a dusty skeleton, and a huge collection of jars full of alcohol containing, it seemed, every conceivable abomination: centipedes, spiders, serpents, toads, and also countless human and non-human parts, mainly entrails. There was even a homunculus, or something that resembled a homunculus, but might just as likely have been a smoked new-born baby.

The collection made no impression on Geralt, who had lived with Yennefer in Vengerberg for six months, and Yennefer had a yet more fascinating collection, even including a phallus of exceptional proportions, allegedly that of a mountain troll. She also possessed a very expertly stuffed unicorn, on whose back she liked to make love. Geralt was of the opinion that if there existed a place less suitable for having sex it was probably only the back of a live unicorn. Unlike him, who considered his bed a luxury and valued all the possible uses of that marvellous piece of furniture, Yennefer was capable of being extremely extravagant. Geralt recalled some pleasant moments spent with the sorceress on a sloping roof, in a tree hollow full of rotten wood, on a balcony (someone else’s, to boot), on the railing of a bridge, in a wobbly boat on a rushing river and levitating thirty fathoms above the earth. But the unicorn was the worst. One happy day, however, the dummy broke beneath him, split and fell apart, supplying much amusement.

‘What amuses you so much, Witcher?’ Istredd asked, sitting down behind a long table overlaid with a considerable quantity of mouldy skulls, bones and rusty ironware.

‘Whenever I see things like that,’ the Witcher said, sitting down opposite the sorceror, pointing at the array of jars, ‘I wonder whether you really can’t make magic without all that stomach-turning ghastliness.’

‘It’s a matter of taste,’ the sorcerer said, ‘and also of habit. What

disgusts one person, somehow doesn't bother another. And what, Geralt, repels you? I wonder what might disgust someone, who, as I've heard, is capable of standing up to his neck in dung and filth? Please do not treat that question as insulting or provocative. I am genuinely fascinated to learn what might trigger a feeling of repugnance in a witcher.'

'Does this jar, by any chance, contain the menstrual blood of an undefiled virgin, Istredd? Well it disgusts me when I picture you, a serious sorcerer, with a phial in your hand, trying to obtain that precious liquid, drop by drop, kneeling, so to speak, at the very source.'

'Touché,' Istredd said, smiling. 'I refer, naturally, to your cutting wit, because as regards the jar's contents, you were wide of the mark.'

'But you do use blood occasionally, don't you? You can't even contemplate some spells, I've heard, without the blood of a virgin, ideally one killed by a lightning bolt from a clear sky during a full moon. In what way, one wonders, is that blood better than that of an old strumpet, who fell, drunk, from a palisade?'

'In no way,' the sorcerer agreed, a pleasant smile playing on his lips. 'But if it became common knowledge that that role could actually be played just as easily by hog's blood, which is much easier to obtain, then the rabble would begin experimenting with spells. But if it means the rabble having to gather and use virgin's blood, dragon's tears, white tarantula's venom, decoction of severed babies' hands or a corpse exhumed at midnight, many would think again.'

They were silent. Istredd, apparently deep in thought, tapped his fingernails on a cracked, browned skull, which lacked its lower jaw, and ran his index finger over the serrated edge of a hole gaping in the temporal bone. Geralt observed him unobtrusively. He wondered how old the sorcerer might be. He knew that the more talented among them were capable of curbing the ageing process permanently and at any age they chose. Men preferred a mature age, suggesting knowledge and experience, for reasons of reputation and prestige. Women, like Yennefer, were concerned less with prestige and more with attractiveness. Istredd looked no older than a well-earned, robust forty. He had straight, slightly grizzled, shoulder-length hair and numerous wrinkles on his forehead, around his mouth and at the corners of his eyelids. Geralt did not know whether the profundity and wisdom in his benign, grey eyes were natural or brought on by charms. A moment later he

concluded that it made no difference.

‘Istredd,’ he interrupted the awkward silence, ‘I came here because I wanted to see Yennefer. Even though she isn’t here, you invited me inside. To talk. About what? About the rabble trying to break your monopoly on the use of magic? I know you include me among that rabble. That’s nothing new to me. For a while I had the impression you would turn out to be different to your confreres, who have often entered into serious conversations with me, in order just to inform me that they don’t like me.’

‘I have no intention of apologising to you for my – as you call them – confreres,’ the sorcerer answered calmly. ‘I understand them for, just like them, in order to gain any level of proficiency at sorcery, I had to apply myself seriously. While still a mere stripling, when my peers were running around fields with bows, fishing or playing odds and evens, I was poring over manuscripts. My bones and joints ached from the stone floor in the tower – in the summer, of course, because in the winter the enamel on my teeth cracked. I would cough from the dust on old scrolls and books until my eyes bulged from their sockets, and my master, old Roedskilde, never passed up an opportunity to flog me with a knout, clearly believing that without it I would not achieve satisfactory progress in my studies. I didn’t enjoy soldiering or wenching or drinking during the years when all those pleasures taste the best.’

‘Poor thing,’ the Witcher grimaced. ‘Indeed, it brings a tear to my eye.’

‘Why the sarcasm? I’m trying to explain why sorcerers aren’t fond of village quacks, charmers, healers, wise women and witchers. Call it what you will, even simple envy, but here lies the cause of the animosity. It annoys us when we see magic – a craft we were taught to treat as an elite art, a privilege of the few and a sacred mystery – in the hands of laymen and dilettantes. Even if it is shoddy, pitiable, derisory magic. That is why my confreres don’t like you. Incidentally, I don’t like you either.’

Geralt had had enough of the discussion, of pussyfooting around, of the feeling of anxiety which was crawling over the nape of his neck and his back like a snail. He looked straight into Istredd’s eyes and gripped the edge of the table.

‘It’s about Yennefer, isn’t it?’

The sorcerer lifted his head, but continued to tap the skull on the table with his fingernails.

‘I commend your perspicacity,’ he said, steadily returning the Witcher’s gaze. ‘My congratulations. Yes, it’s about Yennefer.’

Geralt was silent. Once, years ago, many, many years ago, as a young witcher, he had been waiting to ambush a manticore. And he sensed the manticore approaching. He did not see or hear it. He sensed it. He had never forgotten that feeling. And now he felt exactly the same.

‘Your perspicacity,’ the sorcerer went on, ‘will save us a great deal of the time we would have wasted on further fudging. And this way the issue is out in the open.’

Geralt did not comment.

‘My close acquaintance with Yennefer,’ Istredd continued, ‘goes back a long way, Witcher. For a long time it was an acquaintance without commitment, based on longer or shorter, more or less regular periods of time together. This kind of noncommittal partnership is widely practised among members of our profession. It’s just that it suddenly stopped suiting me. I determined to propose to her that she remain with me permanently.’

‘How did she respond?’

‘That she would think it over. I gave her time to do so. I know it is not an easy decision for her.’

‘Why are you telling me this, Istredd? What drives you, apart from this admirable – but astonishing – candour, so rarely seen among members of your profession? What lies behind it?’

‘Prosaicness,’ the sorcerer sighed. ‘For, you see, your presence hinders Yennefer in making a decision. I thus request you to remove yourself. To vanish from her life, to stop interfering. In short: that you get the hell out of here. Ideally quietly and without saying goodbye, which, as she confided in me, you are wont to do.’

‘Indeed,’ Geralt smiled affectedly, ‘your blunt sincerity astonishes me more and more. I might have expected anything, but not such a request. Don’t you think that instead of asking me, you ought rather to leap out and blast me with ball lightning? You’d be rid of the obstacle and there’d just be a little soot to scrape off the wall. An easier – and more reliable – method. Because, you see, a request can be declined, but ball lightning can’t be.’

‘I do not countenance the possibility of your refusing.’

‘Why not? Would this strange request be nothing but a warning preceding the lightning bolt or some other cheerful spell? Or is this

request to be supported by some weighty arguments? Or a sum which would stupefy an avaricious witcher? How much do you intend to pay me to get out of the path leading to your happiness?'

The sorcerer stopped tapping the skull, placed his hand on it and clenched his fingers around it. Geralt noticed his knuckles whitening.

'I did not mean to insult you with an offer of that kind,' he said. 'I had no intention of doing so. But . . . if . . . Geralt, I *am* a sorcerer, and not the worst. I wouldn't dream of feigning omnipotence here, but I could grant many of your wishes, should you wish to voice them. Some of them as easily as this.'

He waved a hand, carelessly, as though chasing away a mosquito. The space above the table suddenly teemed with fabulously coloured Apollo butterflies.

'My wish, Istredd,' the Witcher drawled, shooing away the insects fluttering in front of his face, 'is for you to stop pushing in between me and Yennefer. I don't care much about the propositions you're offering her. You could have proposed to her when she was with you. Long ago. Because then was then, and now is now. Now she's with me. You want me to get out of the way, make things easy for you? I decline. Not only will I not help you, but I'll hinder you, as well as my modest abilities allow. As you see, I'm your equal in candour.'

'You have no right to refuse me. Not you.'

'What do you take me for, Istredd?'

The sorcerer looked him in the eye and leaned across the table.

'A fleeting romance. A passing fascination, at best a whim, an adventure, of which Yenna has had hundreds, because Yenna loves to play with emotions; she's impulsive and unpredictable in her whims. That's what I take you for, since having exchanged a few words with you I've rejected the theory that she treats you entirely as an object. And, believe me, that happens with her quite often.'

'You misunderstood the question.'

'You're mistaken; I didn't. But I'm intentionally talking solely about Yenna's emotions. For you are a witcher and you cannot experience any emotions. You do not want to agree to my request, because you think she matters to you, you think she . . . Geralt, you're only with her because she wants it, and you'll only be with her as long as she wants it. And what you feel is a projection of her

emotions, the interest she shows in you. By all the demons of the Netherworld, Geralt, you aren't a child; you know what you are. You're a mutant. Don't understand me wrongly. I don't say it to insult you or show you contempt. I merely state a fact. You're a mutant, and one of the basic traits of your mutation is utter insensitivity to emotions. You were created like that, in order to do your job. Do you understand? You cannot feel anything. What you take for emotion is cellular, somatic memory, if you know what those words mean.'

'It so happens I do.'

'All the better. Then listen. I'm asking you for something which I can ask of a witcher, but which I couldn't ask of a man. I am being frank with a witcher; with a man I couldn't afford to be frank. Geralt, I want to give Yenna understanding and stability, affection and happiness. Could you, hand on heart, pledge the same? No, you couldn't. Those are meaningless words to you. You trail after Yenna like a child, enjoying the momentary affection she shows you. Like a stray cat that everyone throws stones at, you purr, contented, because here is someone who's not afraid to stroke you. Do you understand what I mean? Oh, I know you understand. You aren't a fool, that's plain. You see yourself that you have no right to refuse me if I ask politely.'

'I have the same right to refuse as you have to ask,' Geralt drawled, 'and in the process they cancel each other out. So we return to the starting point, and that point is this: Yen, clearly not caring about my mutation and its consequences, is with me right now. You proposed to her, that's your right. She said she'd think it over? That's her right. Do you have the impression I'm hindering her in taking a decision? That she's hesitating? That I'm the cause of her hesitation? Well, that's my right. If she's hesitating, she clearly has reason for doing so. I must be giving her something, though perhaps the word is absent from the witcher dictionary.'

'Listen—'

'No. You listen to me. She used to be with you, you say? Who knows, perhaps it wasn't me but you who was the fleeting romance, a caprice, a victim of those uncontrolled emotions so typical of her. Istredd, I cannot even rule out her treatment of you as completely objectionable. That, my dear sorcerer, cannot be ruled out just on the basis of a conversation. In this case, it seems to me, the object may be more relevant than eloquence.'

Istredd did not even flinch, he did not even clench his jaw. Geralt

admired his self-control. Nonetheless the lengthening silence seemed to indicate that the blow had struck home.

'You're playing with words,' the sorcerer said finally. 'You're becoming intoxicated with them. You try to substitute words for normal, human feelings, which you do not have. Your words don't express feelings, they are only sounds, like those that skull emits when you tap it. For you are just as empty as this skull. You have no right—'

'Enough,' Geralt interrupted harshly, perhaps even a little too harshly. 'Stop stubbornly denying me rights. I've had enough of it, do you hear? I told you our rights are equal. No, dammit, mine are greater.'

'Really?' the sorcerer said, paling somewhat, which caused Geralt unspeakable pleasure. 'For what reason?'

The Witcher wondered for a moment and decided to finish him off.

'For the reason,' he shot back, 'that last night she made love with me, and not with you.'

Istredd pulled the skull closer to himself and stroked it. His hand, to Geralt's dismay, did not even twitch.

'Does that, in your opinion, give you any rights?'

'Only one. The right to draw a few conclusions.'

'Ah,' the sorcerer said slowly. 'Very well. As you wish. She made love with *me* this morning. Draw your own conclusions, you have the right. I already have.'

The silence lasted a long time. Geralt desperately searched for words. He found none. None at all.

'This conversation is pointless,' he finally said, getting up, angry at himself, because it sounded blunt and stupid. 'I'm going.'

'Go to hell,' Istredd said, equally bluntly, not looking at him.

V

When she entered he was lying on the bed fully dressed, with his hands under his head.

He pretended to be looking at the ceiling. He looked at her.

Yennefer slowly closed the door behind her. She was ravishing.

How ravishing she is, he thought. Everything about her is ravishing. And menacing. Those colours of hers; that contrast of black and white. Beauty and menace. Her raven-black, natural curls. Her cheekbones, pronounced, emphasising a wrinkle, which her smile – if she deigned to smile – created beside her mouth, wonderfully narrow and pale beneath her lipstick. Her eyebrows, wonderfully irregular, when she washed off the kohl that outlined them during the day. Her nose, exquisitely too long. Her delicate hands, wonderfully nervous, restless and adroit. Her waist, willowy and slender, emphasised by an excessively tightened belt. Slim legs, setting in motion the flowing shapes of her black skirt. Ravishing.

She sat down at the table without a word, resting her chin on clasped hands.

‘Very well, let’s begin,’ she said. ‘This growing, dramatic silence is too banal for me. Let’s sort this out. Get out of bed and stop staring at the ceiling looking upset. The situation is idiotic enough and there’s no point making it any more idiotic. Get up, I said.’

He got up obediently, without hesitation, and sat astride the stool opposite her. She did not avoid his gaze. He might have expected that.

‘As I said, let’s sort it out and sort it out quickly. In order not to put you in an awkward situation, I’ll answer any questions at once. You don’t even have to ask them. Yes, it’s true that when I came with you to Aedd Gynvael I was coming to meet Istredd and I knew I would go to bed with him. I didn’t expect it to come out, that you’d boast about it to each other. I know how you feel now and I’m sorry about that. But no, I don’t feel guilty.’

He said nothing.

Yennefer shook her head, her shining, black locks cascading from her shoulders.

‘Geralt, say something.’

‘He . . .’ The Witcher cleared his throat, ‘he calls you Yenna.’

‘Yes,’ she said, not lowering her eyes, ‘and I call him Val. It’s his first name. Istredd is a nickname. I’ve known him for years. He’s very dear to me. Don’t look at me like that. You’re also dear to me. And that’s the whole problem.’

‘Are you considering accepting his proposal?’

‘For your information, I am. I told you, we’ve known each other for years. For . . . many years. We share common interests, goals and ambitions. We understand each other wordlessly. He can give me support, and – who knows – perhaps there’ll come a day when I’ll need it. And above all . . . he . . . he loves me. I think.’

‘I won’t stand in your way, Yen.’

She tossed her head and her violet eyes flashed with blue fire.

‘In my way? Don’t you understand anything, you idiot? If you’d been in my way, if you were bothering me, I’d have got rid of the obstacle in the blink of an eye, I’d have teleported you to the end of Cape Bremervoord or transported you to the land of Hann in a whirlwind. With a bit of effort I’d have embedded you in a piece of quartz and put you in the garden in a bed of peonies. I could have purged your brain such that you would have forgotten who I was and what my name was. I could have done all that had I felt like it. But I could also have simply said: “It was agreeable, farewell”. I could have quietly taken flight, as you once did when you fled my house in Vengerberg.’

‘Don’t shout, Yen, don’t be aggressive. And don’t drag up that story from Vengerberg, we swore not to go back to it, after all. I don’t bear a grudge against you, Yen, I’m not reproaching you, am I? I know you can’t be judged by ordinary standards. And the fact that I’m saddened . . . the fact that I know I’m losing you . . . is cellular memory. The atavistic remnants of feelings in a mutant purged of emotion—’

‘I can’t stand it when you talk like that!’ she exploded. ‘I can’t bear it when you use that word. Don’t ever use it again in my presence. Never!’

‘Does it change the fact? After all, I *am* a mutant.’

‘There is no fact. Don’t utter that word in front of me.’

The black kestrel sitting on the stag’s antlers flapped its wings and scratched the perch with its talons. Geralt glanced at the bird, at its motionless, yellow eye. Once again, Yennefer rested her chin

on clasped hands.

‘Yen.’

‘Yes, Geralt.’

‘You promised to answer my questions. Questions I don’t even have to ask. One remains; the most important. The one I’ve never asked you. Which I’ve been afraid to ask. Answer it.’

‘I’m incapable of it, Geralt,’ she said firmly.

‘I don’t believe you, Yen. I know you too well.’

‘No one can know a sorceress well.’

‘Answer my question, Yen.’

‘My answer is: I don’t know. But what kind of answer is that?’

They were silent. The din from the street had diminished, calmed down.

The sun setting in the west blazed through the slits of the shutters and pierced the chamber with slanting beams of light.

‘Aedd Gynvael,’ the Witcher muttered. ‘A shard of ice . . . I felt it. I knew this town . . . was hostile to me. Evil.’

‘Aedd Gynvael,’ she repeated slowly. ‘The sleigh of the Elf Queen. Why? Why, Geralt?’

‘I’m travelling with you, Yen, because the harness of my sleigh got entangled, caught up in your runners. And a blizzard is all around me. And a frost. It’s cold.’

‘Warmth would melt the shard of ice in you, the shard I stabbed you with,’ she whispered. ‘Then the spell would be broken and you would see me as I really am.’

‘Then lash your white horses, Yen. May they race north, where a thaw never sets in. I hope it never sets in. I want to get to your ice castle as quickly as I can.’

‘That castle doesn’t exist,’ Yennefer said, her mouth twitching. She grimaced. ‘It’s a symbol. And our sleigh ride is the pursuit of a dream which is unattainable. For I, the Elf Queen, desire warmth. That is my secret. Which is why, every year, my sleigh carries me amidst a blizzard through some little town and every year someone dazzled by my spell gets their harness caught in my runners. Every year. Every year someone new. Endlessly. Because the warmth I so desire at the same time blights the spell, blights the magic and the charm. My sweetheart, stabbed with that little icy star, suddenly

becomes an ordinary nobody. And I become, in his thawed out eyes, no better than all the other . . . mortal women . . .'

'And from under the unblemished whiteness emerges spring,' he said. 'Emerges Aedd Gynvael, an ugly little town with a beautiful name. Aedd Gynvael and its muck heap, that enormous, stinking pile of garbage which I have to enter, because they pay me to, because I was created to enter filth which fills other people with disgust and revulsion. I was deprived of the ability to feel so I wouldn't be able to feel how dreadfully vile is that vileness, so I wouldn't retreat from it, wouldn't run horror-stricken from it. Yes, I was stripped of feelings. But not utterly. Whoever did it made a botch of it, Yen.'

They were silent. The black kestrel rustled its feathers, unfurling and folding its wings.

'Geralt . . .'

'Yes, Yen.'

'Now you answer my question. The question I've never asked you. The one I've always feared. I won't ask you it this time, either, but answer it. Because . . . because I greatly desire to hear your answer. It's the one word, the only word you've never told me. Utter it, Geralt. Please.'

'I cannot, Yen.'

'Why not?'

'You don't know?' he smiled sadly. 'My answer would just be a word. A word which doesn't express a feeling, doesn't express an emotion, because I'm bereft of them. A word which would be nothing but the sound made when you strike a cold, empty skull.'

She looked at him in silence. Her eyes, wide open, assumed an ardent violet colour. 'No, Geralt,' she said, 'that's not the truth. Or perhaps it is, but not the whole truth. You aren't bereft of feeling. Now I see it. Now I know you . . .'

She was silent.

'Complete the sentence, Yen. You've decided. Don't lie. I know you. I can see it in your eyes.'

She did not lower her eyes. He knew.

'Yen,' he whispered.

'Give me your hand,' she said.

She took his hand between hers and at once he felt a tingling and the pulsing of blood in the veins of his forearm. Yennefer whispered a spell in a serene, measured voice, but he saw the beads of sweat which the effort caused to stipple her pale forehead, saw her pupils dilate in pain.

Releasing his arm, she extended her hands, and moved them, smoothing an invisible shape with tender strokes, slowly, from top to bottom. The air between her fingers began to congeal and become turbid, swell and pulsate like smoke.

He watched in fascination. Creational magic – considered the most elevated accomplishment among sorcerers – always fascinated him, much more than illusions or transformational magic. Yes, Istredd was right, he thought. In comparison with this kind of magic my Signs just look ridiculous.

The form of a bird, as black as coal, slowly materialised between Yennefer's hands, which were trembling with effort. The sorceress' fingers gently stroked the ruffled feathers, the small, flattened head and curved beak. One more hypnotically fluid, delicate movement and a black kestrel, turning its head, cried loudly. Its twin, still sitting motionless on the antlers, gave an answering cry.

'Two kestrels,' Geralt said softly. 'Two black kestrels, created by magic. I presume you need them both.'

'You presume right,' she said with effort. 'I need them both. I was wrong to believe one would suffice. How wrong I was, Geralt. To what an error the vanity of the Ice Queen, convinced of her omnipotence, has brought me. For there are some . . . things . . . which there is no way of obtaining, even by magic. And there are gifts which may not be accepted, if one is unable to . . . reciprocate them . . . with something equally precious. Otherwise such a gift will slip through the fingers, melt like a shard of ice gripped in the hand. Then only regret, the sense of loss and hurt will remain . . .'

'Yen—'

'I am a sorceress, Geralt . . . The power over matter which I possess is a gift. A reciprocated gift. For it I paid . . . with everything I possessed. Nothing remained.'

He said nothing. The sorceress wiped her forehead with a trembling hand.

'I was mistaken,' she repeated. 'But I shall correct my mistake. Emotions and feelings . . .'

She touched the black kestrel's head. The bird fluffed up its feathers and silently opened its curved beak.

'Emotions, whims and lies, fascinations and games. Feelings and their absence. Gifts, which may not be accepted. Lies and truth. What is truth? The negation of lies? Or the statement of a fact? And if the fact is a lie, what then is the truth? Who is full of feelings which torment him, and who is the empty carapace of a cold skull? Who? What is truth, Geralt? What is the essence of truth?'

'I don't know, Yen. Tell me.'

'No,' she said and lowered her eyes. For the first time. He had never seen her do that before. Never.

'No,' she repeated. 'I cannot, Geralt. I cannot tell you that. That bird, begotten from the touch of your hand, will tell you. Bird? What is the essence of truth?'

'Truth,' the kestrel said, 'is a shard of ice.'

VI

Although it seemed to him he was roaming the streets aimlessly and purposelessly, he suddenly found himself at the southern wall, by the excavations, among the network of trenches criss-crossing the ruins by the stone wall and wandering in zigzags among the exposed squares of ancient foundations.

Istredd was there. Dressed in a smock with rolled-up sleeves and high boots, he was shouting instructions to his servants, who were digging with hoes into the coloured stripes of earth, clay and charcoal which made up the walls of the excavation. Alongside, on planks, lay blackened bones, shards of pots and other objects; unidentifiable, corroded and gnarled into rusty lumps.

The sorcerer noticed him immediately. After giving the workers some loud instructions, he jumped out of the trench, and walked over, wiping his hands on his britches.

‘Yes? What is it?’ he asked bluntly.

The Witcher, standing in front of him without moving, did not answer. The servants, pretending to work, watched them attentively, whispering among themselves.

‘You’re almost bursting with hatred.’ Istredd grimaced. ‘What is it, I asked? Have you decided? Where’s Yenna? I hope she—’

‘Don’t hope too much, Istredd.’

‘Oho,’ the sorcerer said. ‘What do I hear in your voice? Is it what I sense it is?’

‘And what is it you sense?’

Istredd placed his fists on his hips and looked at the Witcher provocatively.

‘Let’s not deceive ourselves, Geralt,’ he said. ‘I hate you and you hate me. You insulted me by saying that Yennefer . . . you know what. I came back with a similar insult. You’re in my way and I’m in your way. Let’s solve this like men. I don’t see any other solution. That’s why you’ve come here, isn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ Geralt said, rubbing his forehead. ‘That’s right, Istredd. That’s why I came here. Undeniably.’

‘Indeed. It cannot go on like this. Only today did I learn that for several years Yenna has been circulating between us like a rag ball.

First she's with me, then she's with you. She runs from me to look for you, then the other way around. The others she's with during the breaks don't count. Only we two count. This can't go on. There are two of us, but only one can remain.'

'Yes,' Geralt repeated, without removing his hand from his forehead. 'Yes . . . You're right.'

'In our conceit,' the sorcerer continued, 'we thought that Yenna would, without hesitation, choose the better man. Neither of us was in any doubt as to who that was. In the end, we started to argue over her favours like whipsters, and like foolish whipsters understood what those favours were and what they meant. I suppose that, like me, you've thought it through and know how mistaken the two of us were. Yenna, Geralt, hasn't the slightest intention of choosing between us, were we even to assume she's capable of choosing. Well, we'll have to decide for her. For I wouldn't dream of sharing Yenna with anyone, and the fact that you're here says the same about you. We, Geralt, simply know her too well. While there are two of us neither of us can be certain. There can only be one. That's the truth, isn't it?'

'It is,' the Witcher said, moving his numb lips with difficulty. 'The truth is a shard of ice . . .'

'What?'

'Nothing.'

'What's the matter with you? Are you infirm or in your cups? Or perhaps stuffed full of witcher herbs?'

'There's nothing wrong with me. I've . . . I've got something in my eye. Istredd, there can only be one. Yes, that's why I came here. Undeniably.'

'I knew,' the sorcerer said. 'I knew you'd come. As a matter of fact, I'm going to be frank with you. You anticipated my plans.'

'Ball lightning?' the Witcher asked, smiling wanly. Istredd frowned.

'Perhaps,' he said. 'Perhaps there'll be ball lightning. But definitely not shot from around the corner. Honourably, face to face. You're a witcher; that evens things out. Very well, decide when and where.'

Geralt pondered. And decided.

'That little square . . . he pointed. 'I passed through it . . .'

‘I know. There’s a well there called the Green Key.’

‘By the well then. Yes indeed. By the well . . . Tomorrow, two hours after sunup.’

‘Very well. I shall be on time.’

They stood still for a moment, not looking at each other. The sorcerer finally muttered something to himself, kicked a lump of clay and crushed it under his heel.

‘Geralt?’

‘What?’

‘Do you feel foolish, by any chance?’

‘Yes, I do,’ the Witcher reluctantly admitted.

‘That’s a relief,’ Istredd muttered. ‘Because I feel like an utter dolt. I never expected I’d ever have to fight a witcher to the death over a woman.’

‘I know how you feel, Istredd.’

‘Well . . .’ the sorcerer smiled affectedly. ‘The fact that it’s come to this, that I’ve decided to do something so utterly against my nature, proves that . . . that it has to be done.’

‘I know, Istredd.’

‘Needless to say, you know that whichever of us survives will have to flee at once and hide from Yenna at the end of the world?’

‘I do.’

‘And needless to say you count on being able to go back to her when she simmers down?’

‘Of course.’

‘It’s all settled then,’ the sorcerer said, and made to turn away, but after a moment’s hesitation held out his hand to him. ‘Till tomorrow, Geralt.’

‘Till tomorrow,’ the Witcher said, shaking his hand. ‘Till tomorrow, Istredd.’

VII

‘Hey, Witcher!’

Geralt looked up from the table, on which he had been absentmindedly sketching fanciful squiggles in the spilled beer.

‘It was hard to find you,’ Mayor Herbolth said, sitting down and moving aside the jugs and beer mugs. ‘They said in the inn that you’d moved out to the stables, but I only found a horse and some bundles of clothes there. And you’re here . . . This is probably the most disreputable inn in the entire town. Only the worst scum comes here. What are you doing?’

‘Drinking.’

‘I can see that. I wanted to converse with you. Are you sober?’

‘As a child.’

‘I’m pleased.’

‘What is it you want, Herbolth? As you can see, I’m busy,’ Geralt smiled at the wench who was putting another jug on the table.

‘There’s a rumour doing the rounds,’ the mayor said, frowning, ‘that you and our sorcerer plan to kill each other.’

‘That’s our business. His and mine. Don’t interfere.’

‘No, it isn’t your business,’ Herbolth countered. ‘We need Istredd, we can’t afford another sorcerer.’

‘Go to the temple and pray for his victory, then.’

‘Don’t scoff,’ the mayor snapped, ‘and don’t be a smart-arse, you vagrant. By the Gods, if I didn’t know that the sorcerer would never forgive me, I would have thrown you into the dungeons, right at the very bottom, or dragged you beyond the town behind two horses, or ordered Cicada to stick you like a pig. But, alas, Istredd has a thing about honour and wouldn’t have excused me it. I know you wouldn’t forgive me, either.’

‘It’s turned out marvellously,’ the Witcher said, draining another mug and spitting out a straw which had fallen into it. ‘I’m a lucky fellow, amn’t I. Is that all?’

‘No,’ Herbolth said, taking a full purse out from under his coat. ‘Here is a hundred marks, Witcher. Take it and get out of Aedd Gynvael. Get out of here, at once if possible, but in any case before

sunrise. I told you we can't afford another sorcerer, and I won't let ours risk his neck in a duel with someone like you, for a stupid reason, because of some—'

He broke off, without finishing, although the Witcher did not even flinch.

'Take your hideous face away, Herbolth,' Geralt said. 'And stick your hundred marks up your arse. Go away, because the sight of you makes me sick. A little longer and I'll cover you in puke from your cap to your toes.'

The mayor put away the purse and put both hands on the table.

'If that's how you want it,' he said. 'I tried to let you leave of your own free will, but it's up to you. Fight, cut each other up, burn each other, tear each other to pieces for that slut, who spreads her legs for anyone who wants her. I think Istredd will give you such a thrashing, you thug, that only your boots will be left, and if not, I'll catch you before his body cools off and break all your bones on the wheel. I won't leave a single part of you intact, you—'

He did not manage to remove his hands from the table, the Witcher's movement was so swift. The arm which shot out from under the table was a blur in front of the mayor's eyes and a dagger lodged with a thud between his fingers.

'Perhaps,' the Witcher whispered, clenching his fist on the dagger's haft, and staring into Herbolth's face, from which the blood had drained, 'perhaps Istredd will kill me. But if not . . . Then I'll leave, and don't try to stop me, you vile scum, if you don't want the streets of your filthy town to foam with blood. Now get out of here.'

'Mayor. What's going on here? Hey, you—'

'Calm down, Cicada,' Herbolth said, slowly withdrawing his hand, cautiously sliding it across the table, as far as possible from the dagger's blade. 'It's nothing. Nothing.'

Cicada returned his half-drawn sword to its scabbard. Geralt did not look at him. He did not look at the mayor as he left the inn, shielded by Cicada from the staggering log drivers and carters. A small man with a ratty face and piercing, black eyes sitting a few tables away was watching him.

I'm annoyed, he realised in amazement. My hands are trembling. Really, my hands are trembling. It's astonishing what's happening to me. Could it mean that . . .?

Yes, he thought, looking at the little man with the ratty face. I think so.

I'll have to, he thought.

How cold it is . . .

He got up.

He smiled as he looked at the small man. Then he drew aside the front of his jacket, took two coins from the full purse and threw them on the table. The coins clinked. One of them rolled across the table and struck the dagger's blade, still stuck into the polished wood.

VIII

The blow fell unexpectedly, the club swished softly in the darkness, so fast that the Witcher only just managed to protect his head by instinctively raising an arm, and only just managed to cushion the blow by lithely twisting his body. He sprang aside, dropping on one knee, somersaulted, landed on his feet, felt a movement of the air yielding before another swing of the club, evaded the blow with a nimble pirouette, spinning between the two shapes closing in on him in the dark, and reached above his right shoulder. For his sword.

His sword was not there.

Nothing can take these reactions from me, he thought, leaping smoothly aside. Routine? Cellular memory? I'm a mutant, I react like a mutant, he thought, dropping to one knee again, dodging a blow, and reaching into his boot for his dagger. There was no dagger.

He smiled wryly and was hit on the head with a club. A light blazed in his eyes and the pain shot down to his fingertips. He fell, relaxing, still smiling.

Somebody flopped onto him, pressing him against the ground. Somebody else ripped the purse from his belt. His eye caught sight of a knife flashing. The one kneeling on his chest tore open his jerkin at the neck, seized the chain and pulled out his medallion. And immediately let go of it.

'By Baal-Zebuth,' Geralt heard somebody pant. 'It's a witcher . . . A real bruiser . . .'

The other swore, breathing heavily.

'He didn't have a sword . . . O Gods, save us from the Evil . . . Let's scarper, Radgast! Don't touch him.'

For a moment the moon shone through a wispy cloud. Geralt saw just above him a gaunt, ratty face and small, black, shining eyes. He heard the other man's loud footsteps fading away, vanishing into an alleyway reeking of cats and burnt fat.

The small man with the ratty face slowly removed his knee from Geralt's chest.

'Next time . . .' Geralt heard the clear whisper, 'next time you feel

like killing yourself, Witcher, don't drag other people into it. Just hang yourself in the stable from your reins.'

IX

It must have rained during the night.

Geralt walked out in front of the stable, wiping his eyes, combing the straw from his hair with his fingers. The rising sun glistened on the wet roofs, gleamed gold in the puddles. The Witcher spat. He still had a nasty taste in his mouth and the lump on his head throbbed with a dull ache.

A scrawny black cat sat on a rail in front of the stable, licking a paw intently.

'Here, kitty, kitty,' the Witcher said. The cat stopped what it was doing and looked at him malevolently, flattened its ears and hissed, baring its little fangs.

'I know,' Geralt nodded. 'I don't like you either. I'm only joking.'

He pulled tight the loosened buckles and clasps of his jerkin with unhurried movements, smoothed down the creases in his clothing, and made sure it did not hinder his freedom of movement at any point. He slung his sword across his back and adjusted the position of the hilt above his right shoulder. He tied a leather band around his forehead, pulling his hair back behind his ears. He pulled on long combat gloves, bristling with short, conical silver spikes.

He glanced up at the sun once more, his pupils narrowing into vertical slits. A glorious day, he thought. A glorious day for a fight.

He sighed, spat and walked slowly down the narrow road, beside walls giving off the pungent, penetrating aroma of wet plaster and lime mortar.

'Hey, freak!'

He looked around. Cicada, flanked by three suspicious-looking, armed individuals, sat on a heap of timbers piled up beside the embankment. He rose, stretched and walked into the middle of the alley, carefully avoiding the puddles.

'Where you going?' he asked, placing his slender hands on his belt, weighed down with weapons.

'None of your business.'

'Just to be clear, I don't give a tinker's cuss about the mayor, the sorcerer or this whole shitty town,' Cicada said, slowly emphasising the words. 'This is about you, Witcher. You won't make it to the

end of this alley. Hear me? I want to find out how good a fighter you are. The matter's tormenting me. Stop, I said.'

'Get out of my way.'

'Stop!' Cicada yelled, placing a hand on his sword hilt. 'Didn't you hear what I said? We're going to fight! I'm challenging you! We'll soon see who's the better man!'

Geralt shrugged without slowing down.

'I'm challenging you to fight! Do you hear me, mutant?' Cicada shouted, barring his way again. 'What are you waiting for? Draw your weapon! What, got cold feet? Or perhaps you're nothing more than one of those other fools who's humped that witch of yours, like Istredd?'

Geralt walked on, forcing Cicada to retreat, to walk clumsily backwards. The individuals with Cicada got up from the pile of timbers and followed them, although they hung back a little way off. Geralt heard the mud squelching beneath their boots.

'I challenge you!' Cicada repeated, blanching and flushing by turns. 'Do you hear me, you witcher pox? What else do I have to do to you? Spit in your ugly face?'

'Go ahead and spit.'

Cicada stopped and indeed took a breath, pursing his lips to spit. He was watching the Witcher's eyes, not his hands, and that was a mistake. Geralt, still not slowing down, struck him very fast, without a backswing, just flexing from the knees, his fist encased in the spiked glove. He punched Cicada right in the mouth, straight in his twisted lips. They split, exploding like mashed cherries. The Witcher crouched and struck once again, in the same place, this time from a short backswing, feeling the fury spilling from him with the force and the momentum. Cicada, whirling around with one foot in the mud and the other in the air, spat blood and splashed onto his back into a puddle. The Witcher, hearing behind him the hiss of a sword blade in the scabbard, stopped and turned sinuously around, his hand on his sword hilt.

'Well,' he said in a voice trembling with anger, 'be my guests.'

The one who had drawn the sword looked him in the eyes. Briefly. Then he averted his gaze. The others began to fall back. First slowly, then more and more quickly. Hearing it, the man with the sword also stepped back, noiselessly moving his lips. The furthest away of them turned and ran, splattering mud. The others

froze to the spot, not attempting to come closer.

Cicada turned over in the mud and dragged himself up on his elbows. He mumbled, hawked and spat out something white amid a lot of red. As Geralt passed he casually kicked him in the face, shattering his cheekbone, and sending him splashing into the puddle again.

He walked on without looking back.

Istredd was already by the well and stood leaning against it, against the wooden cover, green with moss. He had a sword in his belt. A magnificent, light, Terganian sword with a half-basket hilt, the metal-fitted end of the scabbard resting against the shining leg of a riding boot. A black bird with ruffled feathers sat on the sorcerer's shoulder.

It was a kestrel.

'You're here, Witcher,' Istredd said, proffering the kestrel a gloved hand and gently and cautiously setting the bird down on the canopy of the well.

'Yes, I am, Istredd.'

'I hadn't expected you to come. I thought you'd leave town.'

'I didn't.'

The sorcerer laughed loudly and freely, throwing his head back.

'She wanted . . . she wanted to save us,' he said. 'Both of us. Never mind, Geralt. Let's cross swords. Only one of us can remain.'

'Do you mean to fight with a sword?'

'Does that surprise you? After all, you do. Come on, have at you.'

'Why, Istredd? Why with swords and not with magic?'

The sorcerer blanched and his mouth twitched anxiously.

'Have at you, I said!' he shouted. 'This is not the time for questions; that time has passed! Now is the time for deeds!'

'I want to know,' Geralt said slowly. 'I want to know why with swords. I want to know why you have a black kestrel and where it came from. I have the right to know. I have the right to know the truth, Istredd.'

'The truth?' the sorcerer repeated bitterly. 'Yes, perhaps you have. Perhaps you have. Our rights are equal. The kestrel, you ask? It came at dawn, wet from the rain. It brought a letter. A very short one, I know it by heart. "Farewell, Val. Forgive me. There are gifts

which one may not accept, and there is nothing in me I could repay you with. And that is the truth, Val. Truth is a shard of ice". Well, Geralt? Are you satisfied? Have you availed yourself of your right?'

The Witcher slowly nodded.

'Good,' Istredd said. 'Now I shall avail myself of mine. Because I don't acknowledge that letter. Without her, I cannot . . . I prefer to . . . Have at you, dammit!'

He crouched over and drew his sword with a swift, lithe movement, demonstrating his expertise. The kestrel cried.

The Witcher stood motionless, his arms hanging at his sides.

'What are you waiting for?' the sorcerer barked.

Geralt slowly raised his head, looked at him for a moment and then turned on his heel.

'No, Istredd,' he said quietly. 'Farewell.'

'What do you bloody mean?'

Geralt stopped.

'Istredd,' he said over his shoulder. 'Don't drag other people into your suicide. If you must, hang yourself in the stable from your reins.'

'Geralt!' the sorcerer screamed, and his voice suddenly cracked, jarring the ear with a false, wrong note. 'I'm not giving up! She won't run away from me! I'll follow her to Vengerberg, I'll follow her to the end of the world. I'll find her! I'll never give her up! Know that!'

'Farewell, Istredd.'

He walked off into the alley, without turning back at all. He walked, paying no attention to the people quickly getting out of his way, or to the hurried slamming of doors and shutters. He did not notice anybody or anything.

He was thinking about the letter waiting for him in the inn.

He speeded up. He knew that a black kestrel, wet from the rain, holding a letter in its curved beak, was waiting for him on the bedhead. He wanted to read the letter as soon as possible.

Even though he knew what was in it.

ETERNAL FLAME

I

‘You pig! You plague-stricken warbler! You trickster!’

Geralt, his interest piqued, led his mare around the corner of the alleyway. Before he located the source of the screams, a deep, stickily glassy clink joined them. A large jar of cherry preserve, thought the Witcher. A jar of cherry preserve makes that noise when you throw it at somebody from a great height or with great force. He remembered it well. When he lived with Yennefer she would occasionally throw jars of preserve at him in anger. Jars she had received from clients. Yennefer had no idea how to make preserve – her magic was fallible in that respect.

A large group of onlookers had formed around the corner, outside a narrow, pink-painted cottage. A young, fair-haired woman in a nightdress was standing on a tiny balcony decorated with flowers, just beneath the steep eaves of the roof. Bending a plump, fleshy arm, visible beneath the frills of her nightdress, the woman hurled down a chipped flowerpot.

A slim man in a plum bonnet with a white feather jumped aside like a scalded cat, and the flowerpot crashed onto the ground just in front of him, shattering into pieces.

‘Please, Vespula!’ the man in the bonnet shouted, ‘Don’t lend credence to the gossip! I was faithful to you, may I perish if it is not true!’

‘You bastard! You son of the Devil! You wretch!’ the plump blonde yelled and went back into the house, no doubt in search of further missiles.

‘Hey, Dandelion,’ called the Witcher, leading his resisting and snorting mare onto the battlefield. ‘How are you? What’s going on?’

‘Nothing special,’ said the troubadour, grinning. ‘The usual. Greetings, Geralt. What are you doing here? Bloody hell, look out!’

A tin cup whistled through the air and bounced off the cobbles with a clang. Dandelion picked it up, looked at it and threw it in the gutter.

‘Take those rags,’ the blonde woman screamed, the frills on her plump breasts swaying gracefully, ‘and get out of my sight! Don’t

set foot here again, you bastard!'

'These aren't mine,' Dandelion said in astonishment, taking a pair of men's trousers with odd-coloured legs from the ground. 'I've never had trousers like these in my life.'

'Get out! I don't want to see you anymore! You . . . you . . . Do you know what you're like in bed? Pathetic! Pathetic, do you hear! Do you hear, everybody?'

Another flowerpot whistled down, a dried stalk that had grown out of it flapping. Dandelion barely managed to dodge. Following the flowerpot, a copper cauldron of at least two and a half gallons came spinning down. The crowd of onlookers standing a safe distance away from the cannonade reeled with laughter. The more active and unprincipled jokers among them applauded and incited the blonde to further action.

'She doesn't have a crossbow in the house, does she?' the Witcher asked anxiously.

'It can't be ruled out,' said the poet, lifting his head up towards the balcony. 'She has a load of junk in there. Did you see those trousers?'

'Perhaps we ought to get out of here? You can come back when she calms down.'

'Hell no,' Dandelion grimaced. 'I shall never go back to a house from which calumny and copper pots are showered on me. I consider this fickle relationship over. Let's just wait till she throws my . . . Oh, mother, no! Vespula! My lute!'

He lunged forward, arms outstretched, stumbled, fell and caught the instrument at the last moment, just above the cobbles. The lute spoke plaintively and melodiously.

'Phew,' sighed the bard, springing up, 'I've got it. It's fine, Geralt, we can go now. Admittedly my cloak with the marten collar is still there, but too bad, let it be my grievance. Knowing her she won't throw the cloak down.'

'You lying sloven!' the blonde screamed and spat copiously from the balcony. 'You vagrant! You croaking pheasant!'

'What's the matter with her? What have you been up to, Dandelion?'

'Nothing unusual,' the troubadour shrugged. 'She demands monogamy, like they all do, and then throws another man's trousers at a fellow. Did you hear what she was screaming about me? By the

Gods, I also know some women who decline their favours more prettily than she gives hers, but I don't shout about it from the rooftops. Let's go.'

'Where do you suggest we go?'

'Are you serious? The temple of the Eternal Fire? Let's drop into the Spear Blade. I have to calm my nerves.'

Without protest, the Witcher led his mare after Dandelion, who had headed off briskly into a narrow lane. The troubadour tightened the pegs of his lute as he strode, strummed the strings to test them, and played a deep, resounding chord.

The air bears autumn's cool scent

Our words seized by an icy gust

Your tears have my heart rent

But all is gone and part we must.

He broke off, waving cheerfully at two maids who were passing, carrying baskets of vegetables. The girls giggled.

'What brings you to Novigrad, Geralt?'

'Fitting out. A harness, some tackle. And a new jacket.' The Witcher pulled down the creaking, fresh-smelling leather. 'How do you like it, Dandelion?'

'You don't keep up with the fashion,' the bard grimaced, brushing a chicken feather from his gleaming, cornflower-blue kaftan with puffed sleeves and a serrated collar. 'Oh, I'm glad we've met. Here in Novigrad, the capital of the world, the centre and cradle of culture. *Here* a cultured man can live life to the full.'

'Let's live it one lane further on,' suggested Geralt, glancing at a tramp who had squatted down and was defecating, eyes bulging, in an alleyway.

'Your constant sarcasm is becoming annoying,' Dandelion said, grimacing again. 'Novigrad, I tell you, is the capital of the world. Almost thirty thousand dwellers, Geralt, not counting travellers; just imagine! Brick houses, cobbled main streets, a seaport, stores, shops, four watermills, slaughterhouses, sawmills, a large manufactory making beautiful slippers, and every conceivable guild and trade. A mint, eight banks and nineteen pawnbrokers. A castle

and guardhouse to take the breath away. And diversions: a scaffold, a gallows with a drop, thirty-five taverns, a theatre, a menagerie, a market and a dozen whorehouses. And I can't remember how many temples, but plenty. Oh, and the women, Geralt; bathed, coiffured and fragrant; those satins, velvets and silks, those whalebones and ribbons . . . Oh, Geralt! The rhymes pour out by themselves:

Around your house, now white from frost

Sparkles ice on the pond and marsh

Your longing eyes grieve what is lost

But naught can change this parting harsh . . .

'A new ballad?'

'Aye. I'll call it *Winter*. But it's not ready yet, I can't finish it. Vespula's made me completely jittery and the rhymes won't come together. Ah, Geralt, I forgot to ask, how is it with you and Yennefer?'

'It isn't.'

'I understand.'

'No you bloody don't. Is it far to this tavern?'

'Just round the corner. Ah, here we are. Can you see the sign?'

'Yes, I can.'

'My sincere and humble greetings!' Dandelion flashed a smile at the wench sweeping the steps. 'Has anyone ever told you, my lady, that you are gorgeous?'

The wench flushed and gripped her broom tightly. For a moment Geralt thought she would whack the troubadour with the handle. He was mistaken. The wench smiled engagingly and fluttered her eyelashes. Dandelion, as usual, paid absolutely no attention.

'Greetings to one and all! Good day!' he bellowed, entering the tavern and plucking the lute strings hard with his thumb. 'Master Dandelion, the most renowned poet in this land, has visited your tawdry establishment, landlord! For he has a will to drink beer! Do you mark the honour I do you, swindler?'

'I do,' said the innkeeper morosely, leaning forward over the bar. 'I'm content to see you, minstrel, sir. I see that your word is indeed your bond. After all, you promised to stop by first thing to pay for

yesterday's exploits. And I – just imagine – presumed you were lying, as usual. I swear I am ashamed.'

'There is no need to feel shame, my good man,' the troubadour said light-heartedly, 'for I have no money. We shall converse about that later.'

'No,' the innkeeper said coldly. 'We shall converse about it right away. Your credit has finished, my lord poet. No one befools me twice in a row.'

Dandelion hung up his lute on a hook protruding from the wall, sat down at a table, took off his bonnet and pensively stroked the egret's feather pinned to it.

'Do you have any funds, Geralt?' he asked with hope in his voice.

'No, I don't. Everything I had went on the jacket.'

'That is ill, that is ill,' Dandelion sighed. 'There's not a bloody soul to stand a round. Innkeeper, why is it so empty here today?'

'It's too early for ordinary drinkers. And the journeymen masons who are repairing the temple have already been and returned to the scaffolding, taking their master with them.'

'And there's no one, no one at all?'

'No one aside from the honourable merchant Biberveldt, who is breaking his fast in the large snug.'

'Dainty's here?' Dandelion said, pleased. 'You should have said at once. Come to the snug, Geralt. Do you know the halfling, Dainty Biberveldt?'

'No.'

'Never mind. You can make his acquaintance. Ah!' the troubadour called, heading towards the snug. 'I smell from the east a whiff and hint of onion soup, pleasing to my nostrils. Peekaboo! It's us! Surprise!'

A chubby-cheeked, curly-haired halfling in a pistachio-green waistcoat was sitting at the table in the centre of the chamber, beside a post decorated with garlands of garlic and bunches of herbs. In his left hand he held a wooden spoon and in his right an earthenware bowl. At the sight of Dandelion and Geralt, the halfling froze and opened his mouth, and his large nut-brown eyes widened in fear.

'What cheer, Dainty?' Dandelion said, blithely waving his bonnet. The halfling did not move or close his mouth. His hand, Geralt

noticed, was trembling a little, and the long strips of boiled onion hanging from the spoon were swinging like a pendulum.

‘Gggreetings . . . gggreetings, Dandelion,’ he stammered and swallowed loudly.

‘Do you have the hiccoughs? Would you like me to frighten you? Look out: your wife’s been seen on the turnpike! She’ll be here soon. Gardenia Biberveldt in person! Ha, ha, ha!’

‘You really are an ass, Dandelion,’ the halfling said reproachfully.

Dandelion laughed brightly again, simultaneously playing two complicated chords on his lute.

‘Well you have an exceptionally stupid expression on your face, and you’re goggling at us as though we had horns and tails. Perhaps you’re afraid of the Witcher? What? Perhaps you think halfling season has begun? Perhaps—’

‘Stop it,’ Geralt snapped, unable to stay quiet, and walked over to the table. ‘Forgive us, friend. Dandelion has experienced a serious personal tragedy, and he still hasn’t got over it. He’s trying to mask his sorrow, dejection and disgrace by being witty.’

‘Don’t tell me,’ the halfling said, finally slurping up the contents of the spoon. ‘Let me guess. Vespula has finally thrown you out on your ear? What, Dandelion?’

‘I don’t engage in conversations on sensitive subjects with individuals who drink and gorge themselves while their friends stand,’ the troubadour said, and then sat down without waiting. The halfling scooped up a spoon of soup and licked off the threads of cheese hanging from it.

‘Right you are,’ he said glumly. ‘So, be my guests. Sit you down, and help yourselves. Would you like some onion potage?’

‘In principle I don’t dine at such an early hour,’ Dandelion said, putting on airs, ‘but very well. Just not on an empty stomach. I say, landlord! Beer, if you please! And swiftly!’

A lass with an impressive, thick plait reaching her hips brought them mugs and bowls of soup. Geralt, observing her round, downy face, thought that she would have a pretty mouth if she remembered to keep it closed.

‘Forest dryad!’ Dandelion cried, seizing the girl’s arm and kissing her on her open palm. ‘Sylph! Fairy! O, Divine creature, with eyes like azure lakes! Thou art as exquisite as the morn, and the shape of thy parted lips are enticingly . . .’

‘Give him some beer, quick,’ Dainty groaned. ‘Or it’ll end in disaster.’

‘No, it won’t, no, it won’t,’ the bard assured him. ‘Right, Geralt? You’d be hard pressed to find more composed men than we two. I, dear sir, am a poet and a musician, and music soothes the savage breast. And the Witcher here present is menacing only to monsters. I present Geralt of Rivia, the terror of strigas, werewolves and sundry vileness. You’ve surely heard of Geralt, Dainty?’

‘Yes, I have,’ the halfling said, glowering suspiciously at the Witcher. ‘What . . . What brings you to Novigrad, sir? Have some dreadful monsters been sighted here? Have you been . . . hem, hem . . . commissioned?’

‘No,’ smiled the Witcher, ‘I’m here for my own amusement.’

‘Oh,’ Dainty said, nervously wriggling his hirsute feet, which were dangling half a cubit above the floor, ‘that’s good . . .’

‘What’s good?’ Dandelion asked, swallowing a spoonful of soup and sipping some beer. ‘Do you plan to support us, Biberveldt? In our amusements, I mean? Excellent. We intend to get tipsy, here, in the Spear Blade. And then we plan to repair to the Passiflora, a very dear and high-class den of iniquity, where we may treat ourselves to a half-blood she-elf, and who knows, maybe even a pure-blood she-elf. Nonetheless, we need a sponsor.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Someone to pay the bills.’

‘As I thought,’ Dainty muttered. ‘I’m sorry. Firstly, I’ve arranged several business meetings. Secondly, I don’t have the funds to sponsor such diversions. Thirdly, they only admit humans to the Passiflora.’

‘What are we, then, short-eared owls? Oh, I understand? They don’t admit halflings. That’s true. You’re right, Dainty. This is Novigrad. The capital of the world.’

‘Right then . . .’ the halfling said, still looking at the Witcher and twisting his mouth strangely. ‘I’ll be off. I’m due to be—’

The door to the chamber opened with a bang and in rushed . . .

Dainty Biberveldt.

‘O, ye Gods!’ Dandelion yelled.

The halfling standing in the doorway in no way differed from the halfling sitting at the table, if one were to disregard the fact that the

one at the table was clean and the one in the doorway was dirty, dishevelled and haggard.

'Got you, you bitch's tail!' the dirty halfling roared, lunging at the table. 'You thief!'

His clean twin leaped to his feet, overturning his stool and knocking the dishes from the table. Geralt reacted instinctively and very quickly. Seizing his scabbarded sword from the table, he lashed Biberveldt on the nape of his neck with the heavy belt. The halfling tumbled onto the floor, rolled over, dived between Dandelion's legs and scrambled towards the door on all fours, his arms and legs suddenly lengthening like a spider's. Seeing this the dirty Dainty Biberveldt swore, howled and jumped out of the way, slamming his back into the wooden wall. Geralt threw aside the scabbard and kicked the stool out of the way, darting after him. The clean Dainty Biberveldt – now utterly dissimilar apart from the colour of his waistcoat – cleared the threshold like a grasshopper and hurtled into the common bar, colliding with the lass with the half-open mouth. Seeing his long limbs and melted, grotesque physiognomy, the lass opened her mouth to its full extent and uttered an ear-splitting scream. Geralt, taking advantage of the loss of momentum caused by the collision, caught up with the creature in the centre of the chamber and knocked it to the ground with a deft kick behind the knee.

'Don't move a muscle, chum,' he hissed through clenched teeth, holding the point of his sword to the oddity's throat. 'Don't budge.'

'What's going on here?' the innkeeper yelled, running over clutching a spade handle. 'What's this all about? Guard! Detchka, run and get the guard!'

'No!' the creature wailed, flattening itself against the floor and deforming itself even more. 'Have mercy, nooooo!'

'Don't call them!' the dirty halfling echoed, rushing out of the snug. 'Grab that girl, Dandelion!'

The troubadour caught the screaming Detchka, carefully choosing the places to seize her by. Detchka squealed and crouched on the floor by his legs.

'Calm down, innkeeper,' Dainty Biberveldt panted. 'It's a private matter, we won't call out the guard. I'll pay for any damage.'

'There isn't any damage,' the innkeeper said level-headedly, looking around.

‘But there will be,’ the plump halfling said, gnashing his teeth, ‘because I’m going to thrash him. And properly. I’m going to thrash him cruelly, at length and frenziedly, and then everything here will be broken.’

The long-limbed and spread-out caricature of Dainty Biberveldt flattened on the floor snivelled pathetically.

‘Nothing doing,’ the innkeeper said coldly, squinting and raising the spade handle a little. ‘Thrash it in the street or in the yard, sir, not here. And I’m calling the guard. Needs must, it is my duty. Forsooth . . . it’s some kind of monster!’

‘Innkeeper, sir,’ Geralt said calmly, not relieving the pressure on the freak’s neck, ‘keep your head. No one is going to destroy anything, there won’t be any damage. The situation is under control. I’m a witcher, and as you can see, I have the monster in my grasp. And because, indeed, it does look like a private matter, we’ll calmly sort it out here in the snug. Release the girl, Dandelion, and come here. I have a silver chain in my bag. Take it out and tie the arms of this gentleman securely, around the elbows behind its back. Don’t move, chum.’

The creature whimpered softly.

‘Very well, Geralt,’ Dandelion said, ‘I’ve tied it up. Let’s go to the snug. And you, landlord, what are you standing there for? I ordered beer. And when I order beer, you’re to keep serving me until I shout “Water”.’

Geralt pushed the tied-up creature towards the snug and roughly sat him down by the post. Dainty Biberveldt also sat down and looked at him in disgust.

‘It’s monstrous, the way it looks,’ he said. ‘Just like a pile of fermenting dough. Look at its nose, Dandelion, it’ll fall off any second, gorblimey. And its ears are like my mother-in-law’s just before her funeral. Ugh!’

‘Hold hard, hold hard,’ Dandelion muttered. ‘Are you Biberveldt? Yes, you are, without doubt. But whatever’s sitting by that post was you a moment ago. If I’m not mistaken. Geralt! Everybody’s watching you. You’re a witcher. What the bloody hell is going on here? What is it?’

‘It’s a mimic.’

‘You’re a mimic yourself,’ the creature said in a guttural voice, swinging its nose. ‘I am not a mimic, I’m a doppler, and my name is

Tellico Lunngrevink Letorte. Penstock for short. My close friends call me Dudu.'

'I'll give you Dudu, you whoreson!' Dainty yelled, aiming a punch at him. 'Where are my horses? You thief!'

'Gentlemen,' the innkeeper cautioned them, entering with a jug and a handful of beer mugs, 'you promised things would be peaceful.'

'Ah, beer,' the halfling sighed. 'Oh, but I'm damned thirsty. And hungry!'

'I could do with a drink, too,' Tellico Lunngrevink Letorte declared gurglingly. He was totally ignored.

'What is it?' the innkeeper asked, contemplating the creature, who at the sight of the beer stuck its long tongue out beyond sagging, doughy lips. 'What is it, gentlemen?'

'A mimic,' the Witcher repeated, heedless of the faces the monster was making. 'It actually has many names. A changeling, shapeshifter, vexling, or fetch. Or a doppler, as it called itself.'

'A vexling!' the innkeeper yelled. 'Here, in Novigrad? In my inn? Swiftly, we must call the guard! And the priests! Or it will be on my head . . .'

'Easy does it,' Dainty Biberveldt rasped, hurriedly finishing off Dandelion's soup from a bowl which by some miracle had not been spilled. 'There'll be time to call anyone we need. But later. This scoundrel robbed me and I have no intention of handing it over to the local law before recovering my property. I know you Novigradians – and your judges. I might get a tenth, nothing more.'

'Have mercy,' the doppler whimpered plaintively. 'Don't hand me over to humans! Do you know what they do to the likes of me?'

'Naturally we do,' the innkeeper nodded. 'The priests perform exorcisms on any vexling they catch. Then they tie it up with a stick between its knees and cover it thickly with clay mixed with iron filings, roll it into a ball, and bake it in a fire until the clay hardens into brick. At least that's what used to be done years ago, when these monsters occurred more often.'

'A barbaric custom. Human indeed,' Dainty, said, grimacing and pushing the now empty bowl away, 'but perhaps it is a just penalty for banditry and thievery. Well, talk, you good-for-nothing, where are my horses? Quickly, before I stretch that nose of yours between your legs and shove it up your backside! Where are my horses, I

said.'

'I've . . . I've sold them,' Tellico Lunngrevink Letorte stammered, and his sagging ears suddenly curled up into balls resembling tiny cauliflowers.

'Sold them! Did you hear that?' the halfling cried, frothing at the mouth. 'It sold my horses!'

'Of course,' Dandelion said. 'It had time to. It's been here for three days. For the last three days you've . . . I mean, it's . . . Dammit, Dainty, does that mean—'

'Of course that's what it means!' the merchant yelled, stamping his hairy feet. 'It robbed me on the road, a day's ride from the city! It came here as me, get it? And sold my horses! I'll kill it! I'll strangle it with my bare hands!'

'Tell us how it happened, Mr Biberveldt.'

'Geralt of Rivia, if I'm not mistaken? The Witcher?'

Geralt nodded in reply.

'That's a stroke of luck,' the halfling said. 'I'm Dainty Biberveldt of Knotgrass Meadow. Farmer, stock breeder and merchant. Call me Dainty, Geralt.'

'Say on, Dainty.'

'Very well, it was like this. Me and my ostlers were driving my horses to be sold at the market in Devil's Ford. We had our last stop a day's ride from the city. We overnighted, having first dealt with a small cask of burnt caramel vodka. I woke up in the middle of the night feeling like my bladder was about to burst, got off the wagon, and I thought to myself I'll take a look at what the nags are doing in the meadow. I walk out, fog thick as buggery, I look and suddenly someone's coming. Who goes there? I ask. He says nothing. I walk up closer and see . . . myself. Like in a looking glass. I think I oughtn't to have drunk that bloody moonshine, accursed spirit. And this one here – for that's what it was – ups and conks me on the noggin! I saw stars and went arse over tit. The next day I woke up in a bloody thicket, with a lump like a cucumber on my head, and not a soul in sight, not a sign of our camp, either. I wandered the whole day before I finally found the trail. Two days I trudged, eating roots and raw mushrooms. And in the meantime that . . . that lousy Dudulico, or whatever it was, has ridden to Novigrad as me and flogged my horses! I'll get the bloody . . . And I'll thrash my ostlers! I'll give each one a hundred lashes on his bare arse, the

cretins! Not to recognise their own guvnor, to let themselves be outwitted like that! Numbskulls, imbeciles, sots . . .'

'Don't be too hard on them, Dainty,' Geralt said. 'They didn't have a chance. A mimic copies so exactly there's no way of distinguishing it from the original – I mean, from its chosen victim. Have you never heard of mimics?'

'Some. But I thought it was all fiction.'

'Well it isn't. All a doppler has to do is observe its victim closely in order to quickly and unerringly adapt to the necessary material structure. I would point out that it's not an illusion, but a complete, precise transformation. To the minutest detail. How a mimic does it, no one knows. Sorcerers suspect the same component of the blood is at work here as with lycanthropy, but I think it's either something totally different or a thousandfold more powerful. After all, a werewolf has only two – at most three – different forms, while a doppler can transform into anything it wants to, as long as the body mass more or less tallies.'

'Body mass?'

'Well, he won't turn into a mastodon. Or a mouse.'

'I understand. And the chain you've bound him up in, what's that about?'

'It's silver. It's lethal to a lycanthrope, but as you see, for a mimic it merely stops the transmutations. That's why it's sitting here in its own form.'

The doppler pursed its glutinous lips and glowered at the Witcher with an evil expression in its dull eyes, which had already lost the hazel colour of the halfling's irises and were now yellow.

'I'm glad it's sitting, cheeky bastard,' Dainty snarled. 'Just to think it even stopped here, at the Blade, where I customarily lodge! It already thinks it's me!'

Dandelion nodded.

'Dainty,' he said, 'It *was* you. I've been meeting it here for three days now. It looked like you and spoke like you. And when it came to standing a round, it was as tight as you. Possibly even tighter.'

'That last point doesn't worry me,' the halfling said, 'because perhaps I'll recover some of my money. It disgusts me to touch it. Take the purse off it, Dandelion, and check what's inside. There ought to be plenty, if that horse thief really did sell my nags.'

‘How many horses did you have, Dainty?’

‘A dozen.’

‘Calculating according to world prices,’ the troubadour said, looking into the purse, ‘what’s here would just about buy a single horse, if you chanced upon an old, foundered one. Calculating according to Novigradian prices, there’s enough for two goats, three at most.’

The merchant said nothing, but looked as though he were about to cry. Tellico Lunngrevink Letorte hung his nose down low, and his lower lip even lower, after which he began to softly gurgle.

‘In a word,’ the halfling finally sighed, ‘I’ve been robbed and ruined by a creature whose existence I previously didn’t believe in. That’s what you call bad luck.’

‘That about sums it up,’ the Witcher said, casting a glance at the doppler huddled on the stool. ‘I was also convinced that mimics had been wiped out long ago. In the past, so I’ve heard, plenty of them used to live in the nearby forests and on the plateau. But their ability to mimic seriously worried the first settlers and they began to hunt them. Quite effectively. Almost all of them were quickly exterminated.’

‘And lucky for us,’ the innkeeper said, spitting onto the floor. ‘I swear on the Eternal Fire, I prefer a dragon or a demon, which is always a dragon or a demon. You know where you are with them. But werewolfery, all those transmutations and metamorphoses, that hideous, demonic practice, trickery and the treacherous deceit conjured up by those hideous creatures, will be the detriment and undoing of people! I tell you, let’s call the guard and into the fire with this repugnance!’

‘Geralt?’ Dandelion asked curiously. ‘I’d be glad to hear an expert’s opinion. Are these mimics really so dangerous and aggressive?’

‘Their ability to mimic,’ the Witcher said, ‘is an attribute which serves as defence rather than aggression. I haven’t heard of—’

‘A pox on it,’ Dainty interrupted angrily, slamming his fist down on the table. ‘If thumping a fellow in the head and plundering him isn’t aggression, I don’t know what it is. Stop being clever. The matter is simple; I was waylaid and robbed, not just of my hard-earned property, but also of my own form. I demand compensation, and I shall not rest—’

‘The guard, we must call the guard,’ the innkeeper said. ‘And we should summon the priests! And burn that monster, that non-human!’

‘Give over, landlord,’ the halfling said, raising his head. ‘You’re becoming a bore with that guard of yours. I would like to point out that that non-human hasn’t harmed anybody else, only me. And incidentally, I’m also a non-human.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, Mr Biberveldt,’ the innkeeper laughed nervously. ‘What are you and what is that? You’re not far off being a man, and that’s a monster. It astonishes me that you’re sitting there so calmly, Witcher, sir. What’s your trade, if you’ll pardon me? It’s your job to kill monsters, isn’t it?’

‘Monsters,’ Geralt said coldly, ‘but not the members of intelligent races.’

‘Come, come, sir,’ the innkeeper said. ‘That’s a bit of an exaggeration.’

‘Indeed,’ Dandelion cut in, ‘you’ve overstepped the mark, Geralt, with that “intelligent race”. Just take a look at it.’

Tellico Lunngrevink Letorte, indeed, did not resemble a member of an intelligent race at that moment. He resembled a puppet made of mud and flour, looking at the Witcher with a beseeching look in its dull, yellow eyes. Neither were the snuffling sounds being emitted from its nose – which now reached the table – consistent with a member of an intelligent race.

‘Enough of this empty bullshit!’ Dainty Biberveldt suddenly roared. ‘There’s nothing to argue about! The only thing that counts is my horses and my loss! Do you hear, you bloody slippery jack, you? Who did you sell my nags to? What did you do with the money? Tell me now, before I kick you black and blue and flay you alive!’

Detchka, opening the door slightly, stuck her flaxen-haired head into the chamber.

‘We have visitors, father,’ she whispered. ‘Journeymen masons from the scaffolding and others. I’m serving them, but don’t shout so loudly in here, because they’re beginning to look funny at the snug.’

‘By the Eternal Fire!’ the innkeeper said in horror, looking at the molten doppler. ‘If someone looks in and sees it . . . Oh, it’ll look bad. If we aren’t to call the guard, then . . . Witcher, sir! If it really

is a vexling, tell it to change into something decent, as a disguise, like. Just for now.'

'That's right,' Dainty said. 'Have him change into something, Geralt.'

'Into whom?' the doppler suddenly gurgled. 'I can only take on a form I've had a good look at. Which of you shall I turn into?'

'Not me,' the innkeeper said hurriedly.

'Nor me,' Dandelion snorted. 'Anyway, it wouldn't be any disguise. Everybody knows me, so the sight of two Dandelions at one table would cause a bigger sensation than the one here in person.'

'It would be the same with me,' Geralt smiled. 'That leaves you, Dainty. And it's turned out well. Don't be offended, but you know yourself that people have difficulty distinguishing one halfling from another.'

The merchant did not ponder this for long.

'Very well,' he said. 'Let it be. Take the chain off him, Witcher. Right then, turn yourself into me, O intelligent race.'

After the chain had been removed the doppler rubbed its doughy hands together, felt its nose and stared goggle-eyed at the halfling. The sagging skin on its face tightened up and acquired colour. Its nose shrank and drew in with a dull, squelching sound, and curly hair sprouted on its bald pate. Now it was Dainty's turn to goggle, the innkeeper opened his mouth in mute astonishment and Dandelion heaved a sigh and groaned.

The last thing to change was the colour of its eyes.

The second Dainty Biberveldt cleared its throat, reached across the table, seized the first Dainty Biberveldt's beer mug and greedily pressed its mouth to it.

'It can't be, it can't be,' Dandelion said softly. 'Just look, he's been copied exactly. They're indistinguishable. Down to the last detail. This time even the mosquito bites and stains on its britches . . . Yes, on its britches! Geralt, not even sorcerers can manage that! Feel it, it's real wool, that's no illusion! Extraordinary! How does it do it?'

'No one knows,' the Witcher muttered. 'It doesn't, either. I said it has the complete ability for the free transformation of material structure, but it is an organic, instinctive ability . . .'

'But the britches . . . What has it made the britches out of? And

the waistcoat?'

'That's its own adapted skin. I don't think it'd be happy to give up those trousers. Anyway, they'd immediately lose the properties of wool—'

'Pity,' Dainty said, showing cunning, 'because I was just wondering whether to make it change a bucket of matter into a bucket of gold.'

The doppler, now a faithful copy of the halfling, lounged comfortably and grinned broadly, clearly glad to be the centre of interest. It was sitting in an identical pose to Dainty, swinging its hairy feet the same way.

'You know plenty about dopplers, Geralt,' it said, then took a swig from the mug, smacked its lips and belched. 'Plenty, indeed.'

'Ye Gods, its voice and mannerisms are also Biberveldt's,' Dandelion said. 'Haven't any of you got a bit of red silk thread? We ought to mark it, dammit, because there might be trouble.'

'Come on, Dandelion,' the first Dainty Biberveldt said indignantly. 'Surely you won't mistake it for me? The differences are clear at . . .'

'. . . first glance,' the second Dainty Biberveldt completed the sentence and belched again gracefully. 'Indeed, in order to be mistaken you'd have to be more stupid than a mare's arse.'

'Didn't I say?' Dandelion whispered in amazement. 'It thinks and talks like Biberveldt. They're indistinguishable . . .'

'An exaggeration,' the halfling said, pouting. 'A gross exaggeration.'

'No,' Geralt rebutted. 'It's not an exaggeration. Believe it or not, but at this moment it *is* you, Dainty. In some unknown way the doppler also precisely copies its victim's mentality.'

'Mental what?'

'The mind's properties, the character, feelings, thoughts. The soul. Which would confirm what most sorcerers and all priests would deny. That the soul is also matter.'

'Blasphemy!' The innkeeper gasped.

'And poppycock,' Dainty Biberveldt said firmly. 'Don't tell stories, Witcher. The mind's properties, I like that. Copying someone's nose and britches is one thing, but someone's mind is no bloody mean feat. I'll prove it to you now. If that lousy doppler had copied my

merchant's mind he wouldn't have sold the horses in Novigrad, where there's no market for them; he would have ridden to the horse fair in Devil's Ford where they're sold to the highest bidder. You don't lose money there—'

'Well actually, you do.' The doppler imitated the halfling's offended expression and snorted characteristically. 'First of all, the prices at the auctions in Devil's Ford are coming down, because the merchants are fixing the bidding. And in addition you have to pay the auctioneer's commission.'

'Don't teach me how to trade, you prat,' Biberveldt said indignantly. 'I would have taken ninety or a hundred a piece in Devil's Ford. And how much did you get off those Novigradian chancers?'

'A hundred and thirty,' the doppler replied.

'You're lying, you rascal.'

'I am not. I drove the horses straight to the port, sir, and found a foreign fur trader. Furriers don't use oxen when they assemble their caravans, because oxen are too slow. Furs are light, but costly, so one needs to travel swiftly. There's no market for horses in Novigrad, so neither are there any horses. I had the only available ones, so I could name my price. Simple—'

'Don't teach me, I said!' Dainty yelled, flushing red. 'Very well, you made a killing. So where's the money?'

'I reinvested it,' Tellico said proudly, imitating the halfling's typical raking of his fingers through his thick mop of hair. 'Money, Mr Dainty, has to circulate, and business has to be kept moving.'

'Be careful I don't wring your neck! Tell me what you did with the cash you made on the horses.'

'I told you. I sank it into goods.'

'What goods? What did you buy, you freak?'

'Co . . . cochineal,' the doppler stuttered, and then enumerated quickly: 'A thousand bushels of cochineal, sixty-two hundredweight of mimosa bark, fifty-five gallons of rose oil, twenty-three barrels of cod liver oil, six hundred earthenware bowls and eighty pounds of beeswax. I bought the cod liver oil very cheaply, incidentally, because it was a little rancid. Oh, yes, I almost forgot. I also bought a hundred cubits of cotton string.'

A long – very long – silence fell.

‘Cod liver oil,’ Dainty finally said, enunciating each word very slowly. ‘Cotton string. Rose oil. I must be dreaming. Yes, it’s a nightmare. You can buy anything in Novigrad, every precious and everyday thing, and this moron here spends my money on shit. Pretending to be me. I’m finished, my money’s lost, my merchant’s reputation is lost. No, I’ve had enough of this. Lend me your sword, Geralt. I’ll cut him to shreds here and now.’

The door to the chamber creaked open.

‘The merchant Biberveldt!’ crowed an individual in a purple toga which hung on his emaciated frame as though on a stick. He had a hat on his head shaped like an upturned chamber pot. ‘Is the merchant Biberveldt here?’

‘Yes,’ the two halflings answered in unison.

The next moment, one of the Dainty Biberveldts flung the contents of the mug in the Witcher’s face, deftly kicked the stool from under Dandelion and slipped under the table towards the door, knocking over the individual in the ridiculous hat on the way.

‘Fire! Help!’ it yelled, rushing out towards the common chamber. ‘Murder! Calamity!’

Geralt, shaking off the beer froth, rushed after him, but the second Biberveldt, who was also tearing towards the door, slipped on the sawdust and fell in front of him. The two of them fell over, right on the threshold. Dandelion, clambering out from under the table, cursed hideously.

‘Assaaault!’ yelled the skinny individual, entangled in his purple toga, from the floor. ‘Rooobberrrryyyy! Criminals!

Geralt rolled over the halfling and rushed into the main chamber, to see the doppler – jostling the drinkers – running out into the street. He rushed after him, only to run into a resilient but hard wall of men barring his way. He managed to knock one of them over, smeared with clay and stinking of beer, but others held him fast in the iron grip of powerful hands. He fought furiously, but heard the dry report of snapping thread and rending leather, and the sleeve become loose under his right armpit. The Witcher swore and stopped struggling.

‘We ’ave ‘im!’ the masons yelled. ‘We’ve got the robber! What do we do now, master?’

‘Lime!’ the master bellowed, raising his head from the table and looking around with unseeing eyes.

‘Guaaard!’ the purple one yelled, crawling from the chamber on all fours. ‘An official has been assaulted! Guard! It will be the gallows for you, villain!’

‘We ‘ave ‘im!’ the masons shouted. ‘We ‘ave ‘im, sir!’

‘That’s not him!’ the individual in the toga bellowed, ‘Catch the scoundrel! After him!’

‘Who?’

‘Biberveldt, the halfling! After him, give chase! To the dungeons with him!’

‘Hold on a moment,’ Dainty said, emerging from the snug. ‘What’s it all about, Mr Schwann? Don’t drag my name through the mud. And don’t sound the alarm, there’s no need.’

Schwann was silent and looked at the halfling in astonishment. Dandelion emerged from the chamber, bonnet at an angle, examining his lute. The masons, whispering among themselves, finally released Geralt. The Witcher, although absolutely furious, limited himself to spitting copiously on the floor.

‘Merchant Biberveldt!’ Schwann crowed, narrowing his myopic eyes. ‘What is the meaning of this? An assault on a municipal official may cost you dearly . . . Who was that? That halfling, who bolted?’

‘My cousin,’ Dainty said quickly. ‘A distant cousin . . .’

‘Yes, yes,’ Dandelion agreed, swiftly backing him up and feeling in his element. ‘Biberveldt’s distant cousin. Known as Nutcase-Biberveldt. The black sheep of the family. When he was a child he fell into a well. A dried-up well. But unfortunately the pail hit him directly on his head. He’s usually peaceful, it’s just that the colour purple infuriates him. But there’s nothing to worry about, because he’s calmed by the sight of red hairs on a lady’s loins. That’s why he rushed straight to Passiflora. I tell you, Mr Schwann—’

‘That’s enough, Dandelion,’ the Witcher hissed. ‘Shut up, dammit.’

Schwann pulled his toga down, brushed the sawdust off it and straightened up, assuming a haughty air.

‘Now, then,’ he said. ‘Heed your relatives more attentively, merchant Biberveldt, because as you well know, you are responsible. Were I to lodge a complaint . . . But I cannot afford the time. I am here, Biberveldt, on official business. On behalf of the municipal authorities I summon you to pay tax.’

‘Eh?’

‘Tax,’ the official repeated, and pouted his lips in a grimace probably copied from someone much more important. ‘What are you doing? Been infected by your cousin? If you make a profit, you have to pay taxes. Or you’ll have to do time in the dungeon.’

‘Me?’ Dainty roared. ‘Me, make a profit? All I have is losses, for fuck’s sake! I—’

‘Careful, Biberveldt,’ the Witcher hissed, while Dandelion kicked the halfling furtively in his hairy shin. The halfling coughed.

‘Of course,’ he said, struggling to put a smile on his chubby face, ‘of course, Mr Schwann. If you make a profit, you have to pay taxes. High profits, high taxes. And the other way around, I’d say.’

‘It is not for me to judge your business, sir,’ the official said, making a sour face. He sat down at the table, removing from the fathomless depths of his toga an abacus and a scroll of parchment, which he unrolled on the table, first wiping it with a sleeve. ‘It is my job to count up and collect. Now, then . . . Let us reckon this up . . . That will be . . . hmmm . . . Two down, carry the one . . . Now, then . . . one thousand five hundred and fifty-three crowns and twenty pennies.

A hushed wheeze escaped Dainty Biberveldt’s lips. The masons muttered in astonishment. The innkeeper dropped a bowl. Dandelion gasped.

‘Very well. Goodbye, lads,’ the halfling said bitterly. ‘If anybody asks; I’m in the dungeon.’

II

‘By tomorrow at noon,’ Dainty groaned. ‘And that whoreson, that Schwann, damn him, the repulsive creep, could have extended it. Over fifteen hundred crowns. How am I to come by that kind of coin by tomorrow? I’m finished, ruined, I’ll rot in the dungeons! Don’t let’s sit here, dammit, let’s catch that bastard doppler, I tell you! We have to catch it!’

The three of them were sitting on the marble sill of a disused fountain, occupying the centre of a small square among sumptuous, but extremely tasteless, merchants’ townhouses. The water in the fountain was green and dreadfully dirty, and the golden ides swimming among the refuse worked their gills hard and gulped in air from the surface through open mouths. Dandelion and the halfling were chewing some fritters which the troubadour had swiped from a stall they had just passed.

‘In your shoes,’ the bard said, ‘I’d forget about catching it and start looking around for somebody to borrow the money off. What will you get from catching the doppler? Perhaps you think Schwann will accept it as an equivalent?’

‘You’re a fool, Dandelion. When I catch the doppler, I’ll get my money back.’

‘What money? Everything he had in that purse went on covering the damage and a bribe for Schwann. It didn’t have any more.’

‘Dandelion,’ the halfling grimaced. ‘You may know something about poetry, but in business matters, forgive me, you’re a total blockhead. Did you hear how much tax Schwann is charging me? And what do you pay tax on? Hey? On what?’

‘On everything,’ the poet stated. ‘I even pay tax on singing. And they don’t give a monkey’s about my explanations that I was only singing from an inner need.’

‘You’re a fool, I said. In business you pay taxes on profits. On profits. Dandelion! Do you comprehend? That rascal of a doppler impersonated me and made some business transactions – fraudulent ones, no doubt. And made money on them! It made a profit! And I’ll have to pay tax, and probably cover the debts of that scoundrel, if it has run up any debts! And if I don’t pay it off, I’m going to the dungeons, they’ll brand me with a red-hot iron in public and send me to the mines! A pox on it!’

‘Ha,’ Dandelion said cheerfully. ‘So you don’t have a choice, Dainty. You’ll have to flee the city in secret. Know what? I have an idea. We’ll wrap you up in a sheepskin. You can pass through the gate calling: “I’m a little baa-lamb, baa, baa”. No one will recognise you.’

‘Dandelion,’ the halfling said glumly. ‘Shut up or I’ll kick you. Geralt?’

‘What, Dainty?’

‘Will *you* help me catch the doppler?’

‘Listen,’ the Witcher said, still trying in vain to sew up his torn jacket sleeve, ‘this is Novigrad. A population of thirty thousand: humans, dwarves, half-elves, halflings and gnomes, and probably as many out-of-towners again. How do you mean to find someone in this rabbit warren?’

Dainty swallowed a fritter and licked his fingers.

‘And magic, Geralt? Those witcher spells of yours, about which so many tales circulate?’

‘A doppler is only magically detectable in its own form, and it doesn’t walk down the street in it. And even if it did, magic would be no use, because there are plenty of weak sorcerers’ signals all around. Every second house has a magical lock on the door and three quarters of the people wear amulets, of all kinds: against thieves, fleas and food poisoning. Too many to count.’

Dandelion ran his fingers over the lute’s fingerboard and strummed the strings.

‘Spring will return, with warm rain perfumed!’ he sang. ‘No, that’s no good. Spring will return, the sun— No, dammit. It’s just not coming. Not at all . . .’

‘Stop squawking,’ the halfling snapped. ‘You’re getting on my nerves.’

Dandelion threw the ides the rest of his fritter and spat into the fountain.

‘Look,’ he said. ‘Golden fish. It’s said that they grant wishes.’

‘Those ones are red,’ Dainty observed.

‘Never mind, it’s a trifle. Dammit, there are three of us, and they grant three wishes. That works out at one each. What, Dainty? Wouldn’t you wish for the fish to pay the tax for you?’

‘Of course. And apart from that for something to fall from the sky and whack the doppler on the noggin. And also—’

‘Stop, stop. We also have our wishes. I’d like the fish to supply me with an ending for my ballad. And you, Geralt?’

‘Get off my back, Dandelion.’

‘Don’t spoil the game, Witcher. Tell us what you’d wish for.’

The Witcher got up.

‘I would wish,’ he murmured, ‘that the fact we’re being surrounded would turn out to be a misunderstanding.’

From an alleyway opposite the fountain emerged four individuals dressed in black, wearing round, leather caps, heading slowly towards them. Dainty swore softly and looked around.

Another four men came out of a street behind their backs. They did not come any closer and, having positioned themselves, stood blocking the street. They were holding strange looking discs resembling coiled ropes. The Witcher looked around and moved his shoulders, adjusting the sword slung across his back. Dandelion groaned.

From behind the backs of the individuals in black emerged a small man in a white kaftan and a short, grey cape. The gold chain on his neck sparkled to the rhythm of his steps, flashing yellow.

‘Chappelle . . .’ Dandelion groaned. ‘It’s Chappelle . . .’

The individuals in black behind them moved slowly towards the fountain. The Witcher reached for his sword.

‘No, Geralt,’ Dandelion whispered, moving closer to him. ‘For the Gods’ sake, don’t draw your weapon. It’s the temple guard. If we resist we won’t leave Novigrad alive. Don’t touch your sword.’

The man in the white kaftan walked swiftly towards them. The individuals in black followed him, surrounding the fountain at a march, and occupied strategic, carefully chosen positions. Geralt observed them vigilantly, crouching slightly. The strange discs they were holding were not – as he had first thought – ordinary whips. They were lamias.

The man in the white kaftan approached them.

‘Geralt,’ the bard whispered. ‘By all the Gods, keep calm—’

‘I won’t let them touch me,’ the Witcher muttered. ‘I won’t let them touch me, whoever they are. Be careful, Dandelion . . . When

it starts, you two flee, as fast as you can. I'll keep them busy . . . for some time . . .'

Dandelion did not answer. Slinging the lute over one shoulder, he bowed low before the man in the white kaftan, which was ornately embroidered with gold and silver threads in an intricate, mosaic pattern.

'Venerable Chappelle . . .'

The man addressed as Chappelle stopped and swept them with his gaze. His eyes, Geralt noticed, were frost-cold and the colour of steel. His forehead was pale, beaded unhealthily with sweat and his cheeks were flushed with irregular, red blotches.

'Mr Dainty Biberveldt, merchant,' he said. 'The talented Dandelion. And Geralt of Rivia, a representative of the oh-so rare witcher's profession. A reunion of old friends? Here, in Novigrad?'

None of them answered.

'I consider it highly regrettable,' Chappelle continued, 'that a report has been submitted about you.'

Dandelion blanched slightly and the halfling's teeth chattered. The Witcher was not looking at Chappelle. He did not take his eyes off the weapons of the men in leather caps surrounding the fountain. In most of the countries known to Geralt the production and possession of spiked lamias, also called Mayhenian scourges, were strictly prohibited. Novigrad was no exception. Geralt had seen people struck in the face by a lamia. He would never forget those faces.

'The keeper of the Spear Blade inn,' Chappelle continued, 'had the audacity to accuse you gentlemen of collusion with a demon, a monster, known as a changeling or a vexling.'

None of them answered. Chappelle folded his arms on his chest and looked at them coldly.

'I felt obliged to forewarn you of that report. I shall also inform you that the above-mentioned innkeeper has been imprisoned in the dungeons. There is a suspicion that he was raving under the influence of beer or vodka. Astonishing what people will concoct. Firstly, there are no such things as vexlings. It is a fabrication of superstitious peasants.'

No one commented on this.

'Secondly, what vexling would dare to approach a witcher,' Chappelle smiled, 'and not be killed at once? Am I right? The

innkeeper's accusation would thus be ludicrous, were it not for one vital detail.'

Chappelle nodded, pausing dramatically. The Witcher heard Dainty slowly exhaling a large lungful of air.

'Yes, a certain, vital detail,' Chappelle repeated. 'Namely, we are facing heresy and sacrilegious blasphemy here. For it is a well-known fact that no vexling, absolutely no vexling, nor any other monster, could even approach the walls of Novigrad, because here, in nineteen temples, burns the Eternal Fire, whose sacred power protects the city. Whoever says that he saw a vexling at the Spear Blade, a stone's throw from the chief altar of the Eternal Fire, is a blasphemous heretic and will have to retract his claim. Should he not want to, he shall be assisted by the power and means, which, trust me, I keep close at hand in the dungeons. Thus, as you can see, there is nothing to be concerned about.'

The expressions on the faces of Dandelion and the halfling showed emphatically that they both thought differently.

'There is absolutely nothing to be concerned about,' Chappelle repeated. 'You may leave Novigrad without let or hindrance. I will not detain you. I do have to insist, gentlemen, however, that you do not broadcast the lamentable fabrications of the innkeeper, that you do not discuss this incident openly. Statements calling into question the divine power of the Eternal Fire, irrespective of the intention, we, the humble servants of the temple, would have to treat as heresy, with all due consequences. Your personal religious convictions, whatever they might be, and however I respect them, are of no significance. Believe in what you will. I am tolerant while somebody venerates the Eternal Fire and does not blaspheme against it. But should they blaspheme, I shall order them burnt at the stake, and that is that. Everybody in Novigrad is equal before the law. And the law applies equally to everybody; anyone who blasphemes against the Eternal Fire perishes at the stake, and their property is confiscate. But enough of that. I repeat; you may pass through the gates of Novigrad without hindrance. Ideally . . .'

Chappelle smiled slightly, sucked in his cheeks in a cunning grimace, and his eyes swept the square. The few passers-by observing the incident quickened their step and rapidly turned their heads away.

'. . . ideally,' Chappelle finished, 'ideally with immediate effect. Forthwith. Obviously, with regard to the honourable merchant Biberveldt, that "forthwith" means "forthwith, having settled all

fiscal affairs". Thank you for the time you have given me.'

Dainty turned away, mouth moving noiselessly. The Witcher had no doubt that the noiseless word had been 'whoreson'. Dandelion lowered his head, smiling foolishly.

'My dear Witcher,' Chappelle suddenly said, 'a word in private, if you would.'

Geralt approached and Chappelle gently extended an arm. If he touches my elbow, I'll strike him, the Witcher thought. I'll strike him, whatever happens.

Chappelle did not touch Geralt's elbow.

'My dear Witcher,' he said quietly, turning his back on the others, 'I am aware that some cities, unlike Novigrad, are deprived of the divine protection of the Eternal Fire. Let us then suppose that a creature similar to a vexling was prowling in one of those cities. I wonder how much you would charge in that case for undertaking to catch a vexling alive?'

'I don't hire myself out to hunt monsters in crowded cities,' the Witcher shrugged. 'An innocent bystander might suffer harm.'

'Are you so concerned about the fate of innocent bystanders?'

'Yes, I am. Because I am usually held responsible for their fate. And have to cope with the consequences.'

'I understand. And would not your concern for the fate of innocent bystanders be in inverse proportion to the fee?'

'It would not.'

'I do not greatly like your tone, Witcher. But no matter, I understand what you hint at by it. You are hinting that you do not want to do . . . what I would ask you to do, making the size of the fee meaningless. And the form of the fee?'

'I do not understand.'

'Come, come.'

'I mean it.'

'Purely theoretically,' Chappelle said, quietly, calmly, without any anger or menace in his voice, 'it might be possible that the fee for your services would be a guarantee that you and your friends would leave this— leave the theoretical city alive. What then?'

'It is impossible,' the Witcher said, smiling hideously, 'to answer that question theoretically. The situation you are discussing,

Reverend Chappelle, would have to be dealt with in practice. I am in no hurry to do so, but if the necessity arises . . . If there proves to be no other choice . . . I am prepared to go through with it.'

'Ha, perhaps you are right,' Chappelle answered dispassionately. 'Too much theory. As concerns practice, I see that there will be no collaboration. A good thing, perhaps? In any case, I cherish the hope that it will not be a cause for conflict between us.'

'I also cherish that hope.'

'Then may that hope burn in us, Geralt of Rivia. Do you know what the Eternal Fire is? A flame that never goes out, a symbol of permanence, a way leading through the gloom, a harbinger of progress, of a better tomorrow. The Eternal Fire, Geralt, is hope. For everybody, everybody without exception. For if something exists that embraces us all . . . you, me . . . others . . . then that something is precisely hope. Remember that. It was a pleasure to meet you, Witcher.'

Geralt bowed stiffly, saying nothing. Chappelle looked at him for a moment, then turned about energetically and marched through the small square, without looking around at his escort. The men armed with the lamias fell in behind him, forming up into a well-ordered column.

'Oh, mother of mine,' Dandelion whimpered, timidly watching the departing men, 'but we were lucky. If that is the end of it. If they don't collar us right away—'

'Calm down,' the Witcher said, 'and stop whining. Nothing happened, after all.'

'Do you know who that was, Geralt?'

'No.'

'That was Chappelle, minister for security affairs. The Novigrad secret service is subordinate to the temple. Chappelle is not a priest but the eminence grise to the hierarch, the most powerful and most dangerous man in the city. Everybody, even the Council and the guilds, shake in their shoes before him, because he's a first-rate bastard, Geralt, drunk on power, like a spider drunk on fly's blood. It's common knowledge – though not discussed openly in the city – what he's capable of. People vanishing without trace. Falsified accusations, torture, assassinations, terror, blackmail and plain plunder. Extortion, swindles and fraud. By the Gods, you've landed us in a pretty mess, Biberveldt.'

‘Give it a rest, Dandelion,’ Dainty snapped. ‘It’s not that you have to be afraid of anything. No one ever touches a troubadour. For unfathomable reasons you are inviolable.’

‘In Novigrad,’ Dandelion whined, still pale, ‘an inviolable poet may still fall beneath a speeding wagon, be fatally poisoned by a fish, or accidentally drown in a moat. Chappelle specialises in mishaps of that nature. I consider the fact that he talked to us at all something exceptional. One thing is certain, he didn’t do it without a reason. He’s up to something. You’ll see, they’ll soon embroil us in something, clap us in irons and drag us off to be tortured with the sanction of the law. That’s how things are done here!’

‘There is quite some truth,’ the halfling said to Geralt, ‘in what he says. We must watch out. It’s astonishing that that scoundrel Chappelle hasn’t keeled over yet. For years they’ve been saying he’s sick, that his heart will give out, and everybody’s waiting for him to croak . . .’

‘Be quiet, Biberveldt,’ the troubadour hissed apprehensively, looking around, ‘because somebody’s bound to be listening. Look how everybody’s staring at us. Let’s get out of here, I’m telling you. And I suggest we treat seriously what Chappelle told us about the doppler. I, for example, have never seen a doppler in my life, and if it comes to it I’ll swear as much before the Eternal Fire.’

‘Look,’ the halfling suddenly said. ‘Somebody is running towards us.’

‘Let’s flee!’ Dandelion howled.

‘Calm yourself, calm yourself,’ Dainty grinned and combed his mop of hair with his fingers. ‘I know him. It’s Muskrat, a local merchant, the Guild’s treasurer. We’ve done business together. Hey, look at the expression on his face! As though he’s shat his britches. Hey, Muskrat, are you looking for me?’

‘I swear by the Eternal Fire,’ Muskrat panted, pushing back a fox fur cap and wiping his forehead with his sleeve, ‘I was certain they’d drag you off to the barbican. It’s truly a miracle. I’m astonished—’

‘It’s nice of you,’ the halfling sneeringly interrupted, ‘to be astonished. You’ll delight us even more if you tell us why.’

‘Don’t play dumb, Biberveldt,’ Muskrat frowned. ‘The whole city already knows the profit you made on the cochineal. Everybody’s talking about it already and it has clearly reached the hierarch and Chappelle. How cunning you are, how craftily you benefited from

what happened in Poviss.'

'What are you blathering about, Muskrat?'

'Ye Gods, would you stop trying to play the innocent, Dainty? Did you buy that cochineal? For a song, at ten-forty a bushel? Yes, you did. Taking advantage of the meagre demand you paid with a backed bill, without paying out a penny of cash. And what happened? In the course of a day you palmed off the entire cargo at four times the price, for cash on the table. Perhaps you'll have the cheek to say it was an accident, a stroke of luck? That when buying the cochineal you knew nothing about the coup in Poviss?'

'The what? What are you talking about?'

'There was a coup in Poviss!' Muskrat yelled. 'And one of those, you know . . . levorutions! King Rhyd was overthrown and now the Thyssenid clan is in power! Rhyd's court, the nobility and the army wore blue, and the weaving mills there only bought indigo. But the colour of the Thyssenids is scarlet, so the price of indigo went down, and cochineal's gone up, and then it came out that you, Biberveldt, had the only available cargo in your grasp! Ha!'

Dainty fell silent and looked distressed.

'Crafty, Biberveldt, must be said,' Muskrat continued. 'And you didn't tell anybody anything, not even your friends. If you'd let on, we might both have made a profit, might even have set up a joint factory. But you preferred to act alone, softly-softly. Your choice; but don't count on me any longer either. On the Eternal Fire, it's true that every halfling is a selfish bastard and a whoreson. Vimme Vivaldi never gives me a backed bill; and you? On the spot. Because you're one tribe, you damned inhumans, you poxy halflings and dwarves. Damn the lot of you!'

Muskrat spat, turned on his heel and walked off. Dainty, lost in thought, scratched his head until his mop of hair crunched.

'Something's dawning on me, boys,' he said at last. 'Now I know what needs to be done. Let's go to the bank. If anyone can make head or tail of all this, that someone is the banker friend of mine, Vimme Vivaldi.'

III

‘I imagined the bank differently,’ Dandelion whispered, looking around the room. ‘Where do they keep the money, Geralt?’

‘The Devil only knows,’ the Witcher answered quietly, hiding his torn jacket sleeve. ‘In the cellars, perhaps?’

‘Not a chance. I’ve had a look around. There aren’t any cellars here.’

‘They must keep it in the loft then.’

‘Would you come to my office, gentlemen?’ Vimme Vivaldi asked.

Young men and dwarves of indiscernible age sitting at long tables were busy covering sheets of parchment with columns of figures and letters. All of them – without exception – were hunched over, with the tips of their tongues sticking out. The work, the Witcher judged, was fiendishly monotonous, but seemed to preoccupy the staff utterly. In the corner, on a low stool, sat an elderly, beggarly-looking man busy sharpening quills. He was making hard work of it.

The banker carefully closed the door to the office, stroked his long, white, well-groomed beard, spotted here and there with ink, and straightened a claret-coloured velvet jerkin stretched over a prominent belly.

‘You know, Dandelion, sir,’ he said, sitting down at an enormous, mahogany table, piled with parchments, ‘I imagined you quite differently. And I know your songs, I know them, I’ve heard them. About Princess Vanda, who drowned in the River Duppie, because no one wanted her. And about the kingfisher that fell into a privy—’

‘They aren’t mine,’ Dandelion flushed in fury. ‘I’ve never written anything like that!’

‘Ah. I’m sorry then.’

‘Perhaps we could get to the point?’ Dainty cut in. ‘Time is short, and you’re talking nonsense. I’m in grave difficulties, Vimme.’

‘I was afraid of that,’ the dwarf nodded. ‘As you recall, I warned you, Biberveldt. I told you three days ago not to sink any resources into that rancid cod liver oil. What if it was cheap? It is not the nominal price that is important, but the size of the profit on resale. The same applies to the rose oil and the wax, and those

earthenware bowls. What possessed you, Dainty, to buy that shit, and in hard cash to boot, rather than judiciously pay with a letter of credit or by draft? I told you that storage costs in Novigrad are devilishly high; in the course of two weeks they will surpass the value of those goods threefold. But you—'

'Yes,' the halfling quietly groaned. 'Tell me, Vivaldi. What did I do?'

'But you told me not to worry, that you would sell everything in the course of twenty-four hours. And now you come and declare that you are in trouble, smiling foolishly and disarmingly all the while. But it's not selling, is it? And costs are rising, what? Ha, that's not good, not good. How am I to get you out of it, Dainty? Had you at least insured that junk, I would have sent one of the clerks at once to quietly torch the store. No, my dear, the only thing to be done is to approach the matter philosophically, and say to oneself: "Fuck this for a game of soldiers". This is business; you win some, you lose some. What kind of profit was it anyway, that cod liver oil, wax and rose oil? Risible. Let us talk about serious business. Tell me if I should sell the mimosa bark yet, because the offers have begun to stabilise at five and five-sixths.'

'Hey?'

'Are you deaf?' the banker frowned. 'The last offer was exactly five and five-sixths. You came back, I hope, to close the deal? You won't get seven, anyhow, Dainty.'

'I came back?'

Vivaldi stroked his beard and picked some crumbs of fruit cake from it.

'You were here an hour since,' he said calmly, 'with instructions to hold out for seven. A sevenfold increase on the price you paid is two crowns five-and-forty pennies a pound. That is too high, Dainty, even for such a perfectly timed market. The tanneries will already have reached agreement and they will solidly stick to the price. I'm absolutely certain—'

The door to the office opened and something in a green felt cap and a coat of dappled coney fur girded with hempen twine rushed in.

'Merchant Sulimir is offering two crowns fifteen!' it squealed.

'Six and one-sixth,' Vivaldi swiftly calculated. 'What do we do, Dainty?'

‘Sell!’ the halfling yelled. ‘A six-fold profit, and you’re still bloody wondering?’

Another something in a yellow cap and a mantle resembling an old sack dashed into the office. Like the first something, it was about two cubits tall.

‘Merchant Biberveldt instructs not to sell for below seven!’ it shouted, wiped its nose on its sleeve and ran out.

‘Aha,’ the dwarf said after a long silence. ‘One Biberveldt orders us to sell, and another Biberveldt orders us to wait. An interesting situation. What do we do, Dainty? Do you set about explaining at once, or do we wait until a third Biberveldt orders us to load the bark onto galleys and ship it to the Land of the Cynocephali? Hey?’

‘What is that?’ Dandelion stammered, pointing at the something in a green cap still standing in the doorway. ‘What the bloody hell is it?’

‘A young gnome,’ Geralt said.

‘Undoubtedly,’ Vivaldi confirmed coldly. ‘It is not an old troll. Anyway, it’s not important what it is. Very well, Dainty, if you please.’

‘Vimme,’ the halfling said. ‘If you don’t mind. Don’t ask questions. Something awful has happened. Just accept that I, Dainty Biberveldt of Knotgrass Meadow, an honest merchant, do not have a clue what’s happening. Tell me everything, in detail. The events of the last three days. Please, Vimme.’

‘Curious,’ the dwarf said. ‘Well, for the commission I take I have to grant the wishes of the client, whatever they might be. So listen. You came rushing in here three days ago, out of breath, gave me a deposit of a thousand crowns and demanded an endorsement on a bill amounting to two thousand five hundred and twenty, to the bearer. I gave you that endorsement.’

‘Without a guaranty?’

‘Correct. I like you, Dainty.’

‘Go on, Vimme.’

‘The next day you rushed in with a bang and a clatter, demanding that I issue a letter of credit on a bank in Vizima. For the considerable sum of three thousand five hundred crowns. The beneficiary was to be, if I remember rightly, a certain Ther Lukokian, alias Truffle. Well, I issued that letter of credit.’

‘Without a guaranty,’ the halfling said hopefully.

‘My affection for you, Biberveldt,’ the banker said, ‘ceases at around three thousand crowns. This time I took from you a written obligation that in the event of insolvency the mill would be mine.’

‘What mill?’

‘That of your father-in-law, Arno Hardbottom, in Knotgrass Meadow.’

‘I’m not going home,’ Dainty declared glumly, but determinedly. ‘I’ll sign on to a ship and become a pirate.’

Vimme Vivaldi scratched an ear and looked at him suspiciously.

‘Oh, come on,’ he said, ‘you took that obligation and tore it up almost right away. You are solvent. No small wonder, with profits like that—’

‘Profits?’

‘That’s right, I forgot,’ muttered the dwarf. ‘I was meant not to be surprised by anything. You made a good profit on the cochineal, Biberveldt. Because, you see, there was a coup in Poviss—’

‘I already know,’ the dwarf interrupted. ‘Indigo’s gone down and cochineal’s gone up. And I made a profit. Is that true, Vimme?’

‘Yes, it is. You have in my safe keeping six thousand three hundred and forty-six crowns and eighty pennies. Net, after deducting my commission and tax.’

‘You paid the tax for me?’

‘What else would I do?’ Vivaldi said in astonishment. ‘After all, you were here an hour ago and told me to pay it. The clerk has already delivered the entire sum to city hall. Something around fifteen hundred, because the sale of the horses was, of course, included in it.’

The door opened with a bang and something in a very dirty cap came running in.

‘Two crowns thirty!’ it shouted. ‘Merchant Hazelquist!’

‘Don’t sell!’ Dainty called. ‘We’ll wait for a better price! Be gone, back to the market with the both of you!’

The two gnomes caught some coppers thrown to them by the dwarf, and disappeared.

‘Right . . . Where was I?’ Vivaldi wondered, playing with a huge, strangely-formed amethyst crystal serving as a paperweight. ‘Aha,

with the cochineal bought with a bill of exchange. And you needed the letter of credit I mentioned to purchase a large cargo of mimosa bark. You bought a deal of it, but quite cheaply, for thirty-five pennies a pound, from a Zangwebarian factor, that Truffle, or perhaps Morel. The galley sailed into port yesterday. And then it all began.'

'I can imagine,' Dainty groaned.

'What is mimosa bark needed for?' Dandelion blurted out.

'Nothing,' the halfling muttered dismally. 'Unfortunately.'

'Mimosa bark, poet, sir,' the dwarf explained, 'is an agent used for tanning hides.'

'If somebody was so stupid,' Dainty interrupted, 'as to buy mimosa bark from beyond the seas, when oak bark can be bought in Temeria for next to nothing . . .'

'And here is the nub of the matter,' Vivaldi said, 'because in Temeria the druids have just announced that if the destruction of oaks is not stopped immediately they will afflict the land with a plague of hornets and rats. The druids are being supported by the dryads, and the king there is fond of dryads. In short: since yesterday there has been a total embargo on Temerian oak, for which reason mimosa is going up. Your information was accurate, Dainty.'

A stamping was heard from the chambers beyond the room, and then the something in a green cap came running into the office, out of breath.

'The honourable merchant Sulimir . . .' the gnome panted, 'has instructed me to repeat that merchant Biberveldt, the halfling, is a reckless, bristly swine, a profiteer and charlatan, and that he, Sulimir, hopes that Biberveldt gets the mange. He'll give two crowns forty-four and that is his last word.'

'Sell,' the halfling blurted out. 'Go on, shorty, run off and accept it. Count it up, Vimme.'

Vivaldi reached beneath some scrolls of parchment and took out a dwarven abacus, a veritable marvel. Unlike abacuses used by humans, the dwarven one was shaped like a small openwork pyramid. Vivaldi's abacus, though, was made of gold wires, over which slid angular beads of ruby, emerald, onyx and black agate, which fitted into each other. The dwarf slid the gemstones upwards, downwards and sideways for some time, with quick, deft

movements of his plump finger.

‘That will be . . . hmm, hmm . . . Minus the costs and my commission . . . Minus tax . . . Yes. Fifteen thousand six hundred and twenty-two crowns and five-and-twenty pennies. Not bad.’

‘If I’ve reckoned correctly,’ Dainty Biberveldt said slowly, ‘all together, net, then I ought to have in my account . . .’

‘Precisely twenty-one thousand nine hundred and sixty-nine crowns and five pennies. Not bad.’

‘Not bad?’ Dandelion roared. ‘Not bad? You could buy a large village or a small castle for that! I’ve never, ever, seen that much money at one time!’

‘I haven’t either,’ the halfling said. ‘But simmer down, Dandelion. It so happens that no one has seen that money yet, and it isn’t certain if anyone ever will.’

‘Hey, Biberveldt,’ the dwarf snorted. ‘Why such gloomy thoughts? Sulimir will pay in cash or by a bill of exchange, and Sulimir’s bills are reliable. What then, is the matter? Are you afraid of losing on that stinking cod liver oil and wax? With profits like that you’ll cover the losses with ease . . .’

‘That’s not the point.’

‘So what *is* the point?’

Dainty coughed, and lowered his curly mop.

‘Vimme,’ he said, eyes fixed on the floor. ‘Chappelle is snooping around me.’

The banker clicked his tongue.

‘Very bad,’ he drawled. ‘But it was to be expected. You see, Biberveldt, the information you used when carrying out the transactions does not just have commercial significance, but also political. No one knew what was happening in Poviss and Temeria – Chappelle included – and Chappelle likes to be the first to know. So now, as you can imagine, he is wracking his brains about how you knew. And I think he has guessed. Because I think I’ve also worked it out.’

‘That’s fascinating.’

Vivaldi swept his eyes over Dandelion and Geralt, and wrinkled his snub nose.

‘Fascinating? I’ll tell you what’s fascinating; your party, Dainty,’

he said. ‘A troubadour, a witcher and a merchant. Congratulations. Master Dandelion shows up here and there, even at royal courts, and no doubt keeps his ears open. And the Witcher? A bodyguard? Someone to frighten debtors?’

‘Hasty conclusions, Mr Vivaldi,’ Geralt said coldly. ‘We are not partners.’

‘And I,’ Dandelion said, flushing, ‘do not eavesdrop anywhere. I’m a poet, not a spy!’

‘People say all sorts of things,’ the dwarf grimaced. ‘*All* sorts of things, Master Dandelion.’

‘Lies!’ the troubadour yelled. ‘Damned lies!’

‘Very well, I believe you, I believe you. I just don’t know if Chappelle will believe it. But who knows, perhaps it will all blow over. I tell you, Biberveldt, that Chappelle has changed a lot since his last attack of apoplexy. Perhaps the fear of death looked him in the arse and forced him to think things over? I swear, he is not the same Chappelle. He seems to have become courteous, rational, composed and . . . and somehow honest.’

‘Get away,’ the halfling said. ‘Chappelle, honest? Courteous? Impossible.’

‘I’m telling you how it is,’ Vivaldi replied. ‘And how it is, is what I’m telling you. What is more, now the temple is facing another problem: namely the Eternal Fire.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘The Eternal Fire, as it’s known, is supposed to burn everywhere. Altars dedicated to that fire are going to be built everywhere, all over the city. A huge number of altars. Don’t ask me for details, Dainty, I am not very familiar with human superstitions. But I know that all the priests, and Chappelle also, are concerned about almost nothing else but those altars and that fire. Great preparations are being made. Taxes will be going up, that is certain.’

‘Yes,’ Dainty said. ‘Cold comfort, but—’

The door to the office opened again and the Witcher recognised the something in a green cap and coney fur coat.

‘Merchant Biberveldt,’ it announced, ‘instructs to buy more pots, should they run out. Price no object.’

‘Excellent,’ the halfling smiled, and his smile called to mind the twisted face of a furious wildcat. ‘We will buy huge quantities of

pots; Mr Biberveldt's wish is our command. What else shall we buy more of? Cabbage? Wood tar? Iron rakes?'

'Furthermore,' the something in the fur coat croaked, 'merchant Biberveldt requests thirty crowns in cash, because he has to pay a bribe, eat something and drink some beer, and three miscreants stole his purse in the Spear Blade.'

'Oh. Three miscreants,' Dainty said in a slow, drawling voice. 'Yes, this city seems to be full of miscreants. And where, if one may ask, is the Honourable Merchant Biberveldt at this very moment?'

'Where else would he be,' the something said, sniffing, 'than at the Western Market?'

'Vimme,' Dainty said malevolently, 'don't ask questions, but find me a stout, robust stick from somewhere. I'm going to the Western Market, but I can't go without a stick. There are too many miscreants and thieves there.'

'A stick, you say? Of course. But, Dainty, I'd like to know something, because it is preying on me. I was supposed not to ask any questions, but I shall make a guess, and you can either confirm or deny it. All right?'

'Guess away.'

'That rancid cod liver oil, that oil, that wax and those bowls, that bloody twine, it was all a tactical gambit, wasn't it? You wanted to distract the competition's attention from the cochineal and the mimosa, didn't you? To stir up confusion on the market? Hey, Dainty?'

The door opened suddenly and something without a cap ran in.

'Sorrel reports that everything is ready!' it yelled shrilly. 'And asks if he should start pouring.'

'Yes, he should!' the halfling bellowed. 'At once!'

'By the red beard of old Rhundurin!' Vimme Vivaldi bellowed, as soon as the gnome had shut the door. 'I don't understand anything! What is happening here? Pour what? Into what?'

'I have no idea,' Dainty admitted. 'But, Vimme, the wheels of business must be oiled.'

IV

Pushing through the crowd with difficulty, Geralt emerged right in front of a stall laden with copper skillets, pots and frying pans, sparkling in the rays of the twilight sun. Behind the stall stood a red-bearded dwarf in an olive-green hood and heavy sealskin boots. The dwarf's face bore an expression of visible dislike; to be precise he looked as though any moment he intended to spit on the female customer sifting through the goods. The customer's breast was heaving, she was shaking her golden curls and was besetting the dwarf with a ceaseless and chaotic flow of words.

The customer was none other than Vespula, known to Geralt as the thrower of missiles. Without waiting for her to recognise him, he melted swiftly back into the crowd.

The Western Market was bustling with life and getting through the crowd was like forcing one's way through a hawthorn bush. Every now and then something caught on his sleeves and trouser legs; at times it was children who had lost their mothers while they were dragging their fathers away from the beer tent, at others it was spies from the guardhouse, at others shady vendors of caps of invisibility, aphrodisiacs and bawdy scenes carved in cedar wood. Geralt stopped smiling and began to swear, making judicious use of his elbows.

He heard the sound of a lute and a familiar peal of laughter. The sounds drifted from a fabulously coloured stall, decorated with the sign: 'Buy your wonders, amulets and fish bait here'.

'Has anyone ever told you, madam, that you are gorgeous?' Dandelion yelled, sitting on the stall and waving his legs cheerfully. 'No? It cannot be possible! This is a city of blind men, nothing but a city of blind men. Come, good folk! Who would hear a ballad of love? Whoever would be moved and enriched spiritually, let him toss a coin into the hat. What are you shoving your way in for, you bastard? Keep your pennies for beggars, and don't insult an artist like me with copper. Perhaps *I* could forgive you, but art never could!'

'Dandelion,' Geralt said, approaching. 'I thought we had split up to search for the doppler. And you're giving concerts. Aren't you ashamed to sing at markets like an old beggar?'

'Ashamed?' the bard said, astonished. 'What matters is *what* and

how one sings, and not *where*. Besides, I'm hungry, and the stallholder promised me lunch. As far as the doppler is concerned, look for it yourselves. I'm not cut out for chases, brawls or mob law. I'm a poet.'

'You would do better not to attract attention, O poet. Your fiancée is here. There could be trouble.'

'Fiancée?' Dandelion blinked nervously. 'Which one do you mean? I have several.'

Vespula, clutching a copper frying pan, had forced her way through the audience with the momentum of a charging aurochs. Dandelion jumped up from the stall and darted away, nimbly leaping over some baskets of carrots. Vespula turned towards the Witcher, dilating her nostrils. Geralt stepped backwards, his back coming up against the hard resistance of the stall's wall.

'Geralt!' Dainty Biberveldt shouted, jumping from the crowd and bumping into Vespula. 'Quickly, quickly! I've seen him! Look, there, he's getting away!'

'I'll get you yet, you lechers!' Vespula screamed, trying to regain her balance. 'I'll catch up with the whole of your debauched gang! A fine company! A pheasant, a scruff and a midget with hairy heels! You'll be sorry!'

'This way, Geralt!' Dainty yelled as he ran, jostling a small group of schoolboys intently playing the shell game. 'There, there, he's scarpered between those wagons! Steal up on him from the left! Quick!'

They rushed off in pursuit, the curses of the stallholders and customers they had knocked over ringing in their ears. By a miracle Geralt avoided tripping over a snot-nosed tot caught up in his legs. He jumped over it, but knocked over two barrels of herrings, for which an enraged fisherman lashed him across the back with a live eel, which he was showing to some customers at that moment.

They saw the doppler trying to flee past a sheep pen.

'From the other side!' Dainty yelled. 'Cut him off from the other side, Geralt!'

The doppler shot like an arrow along the fence, green waistcoat flashing. It was becoming clear why he was not changing into anybody else. No one could rival a halfling's agility. No one. Apart from another halfling. Or a witcher.

Geralt saw the doppler suddenly changing direction, kicking up a

cloud of dust, and nimbly ducking into a hole in the fence surrounding a large tent serving as a slaughterhouse and a shambles. Dainty also saw it. The doppler jumped between the palings and began to force his way between the flock of bleating sheep crowded into the enclosure. It was clear he would not make it. Geralt turned and rushed after him between the palings. He felt a sudden tug, heard the crack of leather tearing, and the leather suddenly became very loose under his other arm.

The Witcher stopped. Swore. Spat. And swore again.

Dainty rushed into the tent after the doppler. From inside came screaming, the noise of blows, cursing and an awful banging noise.

The Witcher swore a third time, extremely obscenely, then gnashed his teeth, raised his hand and formed his fingers into the Aard Sign, aiming it straight at the tent. The tent billowed up like a sail during a gale, and from the inside reverberated a hellish howling, clattering and lowing of oxen. The tent collapsed.

The doppler, crawling on its belly, darted out from beneath the canvas and dashed towards another, smaller tent, probably the cold store. Right away, Geralt pointed his hand towards him and jabbed him in the back with the Sign. The doppler tumbled to the ground as though struck by lightning, turned a somersault, but immediately sprang up and rushed into the tent. The Witcher was hot on his heels.

It stank of meat inside the tent. And it was dark.

Tellico Lunngrevink Letorte was standing there, breathing heavily, clinging with both hands onto a side of pork hanging on a pole. There was no other way out of the tent, the canvas firmly fastened to the ground with numerous pegs.

‘It’s a pleasure to meet you again, mimic,’ Geralt said coldly.

The doppler was breathing heavily and hoarsely.

‘Leave me alone,’ it finally grunted. ‘Why are you tormenting me, Witcher?’

‘Tellico,’ Geralt said, ‘You’re asking foolish questions. In order to come into possession of Biberveldt’s horses and identity, you cut his head open and abandoned him in the wilds. You’re still making use of his personality and ignoring the problems you are causing him. The Devil only knows what else you’re planning, but I shall confuse those plans, in any event. I don’t want to kill you or turn you over to the authorities, but you must leave the city. I’ll see to it that you

do.'

'And if I don't want to?'

'I'll carry you out in a sack on a handcart.'

The doppler swelled up abruptly, and then suddenly became thinner and began to grow, his curly, chestnut hair turning white and straightening, reaching his shoulders. The halfling's green waistcoat shone like oil, becoming black leather, and silver studs sparkled on the shoulders and sleeves. The chubby, ruddy face elongated and paled.

The hilt of a sword extended above its right shoulder.

'Don't come any closer,' the second Witcher said huskily and smiled. 'Don't come any nearer, Geralt. I won't let you lay hands on me.'

What a hideous smile I have, Geralt thought, reaching for his sword. What a hideous face I have. And how hideously I squint. So is that what I look like? Damn.

The hands of the doppler and the Witcher simultaneously touched their sword hilts, and both swords simultaneously sprang from their scabbards. Both witchers simultaneously took two quick, soft steps; one to the front, the other to the side. Both of them simultaneously raised their swords and swung them in a short, hissing moulinet.

Simultaneously, they both stopped dead, frozen in position.

'You cannot defeat me,' the doppler snarled. 'Because I am you, Geralt.'

'You are mistaken, Tellico,' the Witcher said softly. 'Drop your sword and resume Biberveldt's form. Otherwise you'll regret it, I warn you.'

'I am you,' the doppler repeated. 'You will not gain an advantage over me. You cannot defeat me, because I am you!'

'You cannot have any idea what it means to be me, mimic.'

Tellico lowered the hand gripping the sword.

'I am you,' he repeated.

'No,' the Witcher countered, 'you are not. And do you know why? Because you're a poor, little, good-natured doppler. A doppler who, after all, could have killed Biberveldt and buried his body in the undergrowth, by so doing gaining total safety and utter certainty that he would not be unmasked, ever, by anybody, including the

halfling's spouse, the famous Gardenia Biberveldt. But you didn't kill him, Tellico, because you didn't have the courage. Because you're a poor, little, good-natured doppler, whose close friends call him Dudu. And whoever you might change into you'll always be the same. You only know how to copy what is good in us, because you don't understand the bad in us. That's what you are, doppler.'

Tellico moved backwards, pressing his back against the tent's canvas.

'Which is why,' Geralt continued, 'you will now turn back into Biberveldt and hold your hands out nicely to be tied up. You aren't capable of defying me, because I am what you are unable of copying. You are absolutely aware of this, Dudu. Because you took over my thoughts for a moment.'

Tellico straightened up abruptly. His face's features, still those of the Witcher, blurred and spread out, and his white hair curled and began to darken.

'You're right, Geralt,' he said indistinctly, because his lips had begun to change shape. 'I took over your thoughts. Only briefly, but it was sufficient. Do you know what I'm going to do now?'

The leather witcher jacket took on a glossy, cornflower blue colour. The doppler smiled, straightened his plum bonnet with its egret's feather, and tightened the strap of the lute slung over his shoulder. The lute which had been a sword a moment ago.

'I'll tell you what I'm going to do, Witcher,' he said, with the rippling laughter characteristic of Dandelion. 'I'll go on my way, squeeze my way into the crowd and change quietly into any-old-body, even a beggar. Because I prefer being a beggar in Novigrad to being a doppler in the wilds. Novigrad owes me something, Geralt. The building of a city here tainted a land we could have lived in; lived in in our natural form. We have been exterminated, hunted down like rabid dogs. I'm one of the few to survive. I want to survive and I will survive. Long ago, when wolves pursued me in the winter, I turned into a wolf and ran with the pack for several weeks. And survived. Now I'll do that again, because I don't want to roam about through wildernesses and be forced to winter beneath fallen trees. I don't want to be forever hungry, I don't want to serve as target practice all the time. Here, in Novigrad, it's warm, there's grub, I can make money and very seldom do people shoot arrows at each other. Novigrad is a pack of wolves. I'll join that pack and survive. Understand?'

Geralt nodded reluctantly.

‘You gave dwarves, halflings, gnomes and even elves,’ the doppler continued, twisting his mouth in an insolent, Dandelion smile, ‘the modest possibility of assimilation. Why should I be any worse off? Why am I denied that right? What do I have to do to be able to live in this city? Turn into a she-elf with doe eyes, silky hair and long legs? Well? In what way is a she-elf better than me? Only that at the sight of the she-elf you pick up speed, and at the sight of me you want to puke? You know where you can stuff an argument like that. I’ll survive anyway. I know how to. As a wolf I ran, I howled and I fought without others over a she-wolf. As a resident of Novigrad I’ll trade, weave wicker baskets, beg or steal; as one of you I’ll do what one of you usually does. Who knows, perhaps I’ll even take a wife.’

The Witcher said nothing.

‘Yes, as I said,’ Tellico continued calmly. ‘I’m going. And you, Geralt, will not even try to stop me. Because I, Geralt, knew your thoughts for a moment. Including the ones you don’t want to admit to, the ones you even hide from yourself. Because to stop me you’d have to kill me. And the thought of killing me in cold blood fills you with disgust. Doesn’t it?’

The Witcher said nothing.

Tellico adjusted the strap of the lute again, turned away and walked towards the exit. He walked confidently, but Geralt saw him hunch his neck and shoulders in expectation of the whistle of a sword blade. He put his sword in its scabbard. The doppler stopped in mid-step, and looked around.

‘Farewell, Geralt,’ he said. ‘Thank you.’

‘Farewell, Dudu,’ the Witcher replied. ‘Good luck.’

The doppler turned away and headed towards the crowded bazaar, with Dandelion’s sprightly, cheerful, swinging gait. Like Dandelion, he swung his left arm vigorously and just like Dandelion he grinned at the wenches as he passed them. Geralt set off slowly after him. Slowly.

Tellico seized his lute in full stride; after slowing his pace he played two chords, and then dextrously played a tune Geralt knew. Turning away slightly, he sang.

Exactly like Dandelion.

Spring will return, on the road the rain will fall

Hearts will be warmed by the heat of the sun

It must be thus, for fire still smoulders in us all

An eternal fire, hope for each one.

‘Pass that on to Dandelion, if you remember,’ he called, ‘and tell him that *Winter* is a lousy title. The ballad should be called *The Eternal Fire*. Farewell, Witcher!’

‘Hey!’ suddenly resounded. ‘You, pheasant!’

Tellico turned around in astonishment. From behind a stall emerged Vespula, her breast heaving violently, raking him up with a foreboding gaze.

‘Eyeing up tarts, you cad?’ she hissed, breast heaving more and more enticingly. ‘Singing your little songs, are you, you knave?’

Tellico took off his bonnet and bowed, broadly smiling Dandelion’s characteristic smile.

‘Vespula, my dear,’ he said ingratiatingly, ‘how glad I am to see you. Forgive me, my sweet. I owe you—’

‘Oh, you do, you do,’ Vespula interrupted loudly. ‘And what you owe me you will now pay me! Take that!’

An enormous copper frying pan flashed in the sun and with a deep, loud clang smacked into the doppler’s head. Tellico staggered and fell with an indescribably stupid expression frozen on his face, arms spread out, and his physiognomy suddenly began to change, melt and lose its similarity to anything at all. Seeing it, the Witcher leaped towards him, in full flight snatching a large kilim from a stall. Having unfurled the kilim on the ground, he sent the doppler onto it with two kicks and rolled it up in it quickly but tightly.

Sitting down on the bundle, he wiped his forehead with a sleeve. Vespula, gripping the frying pan, looked at him malevolently, and the crowd closed in all around.

‘He’s sick,’ the Witcher said and smiled affectedly. ‘It’s for his own good. Don’t crowd, good people, the poor thing needs air.’

‘Did you hear?’ Chappelle asked calmly but resonantly, suddenly pushing his way through the throng. ‘Please do not form a public gathering here! Please disperse! Public gatherings are forbidden. Punishable by a fine!’

In the blink of an eye the crowd scattered to the sides, only to

reveal Dandelion, approaching swiftly, to the sounds of his lute. On seeing him, Vespula let out an ear-splitting scream, dropped the frying pan and fled across the square.

'What happened?' Dandelion asked. 'Did she see the Devil?'

Geralt stood up, holding the bundle, which had begun to move weakly. Chappelle slowly approached. He was alone and his personal guard was nowhere to be seen.

'I wouldn't come any closer,' Geralt said quietly. 'If I were you, Lord Chappelle, sir, I wouldn't come any closer.'

'You wouldn't?' Chappelle tightened his thin lips, looking at him coldly.

'If I were you, Lord Chappelle, I would pretend I never saw anything.'

'Yes, no doubt,' Chappelle said. 'But you are not me.'

Dainty Biberveldt ran up from behind the tent, out of breath and sweaty. On seeing Chappelle he stopped, began to whistle, held his hands behind his back and pretended to be admiring the roof of the granary.

Chappelle went over and stood by Geralt, very close. The Witcher did not move, but only narrowed his eyes. For a moment they looked at each other and then Chappelle leaned over the bundle.

'Dudu,' he said to Dandelion's strangely deformed cordovan boots sticking out of the rolled-up kilim. 'Copy Biberveldt, and quickly.'

'What?' Dainty yelled, stopping staring at the granary. 'What's that?'

'Be quiet,' Chappelle said. 'Well, Dudu, are things coming along?'

'I'm just,' a muffled grunting issued from the kilim. 'I'm . . . Just a moment . . .'

The cordovan boots sticking out of the kilim stretched, became blurred and changed into the halfling's bare, hairy feet.

'Get out, Dudu,' Chappelle said. 'And you, Dainty, be quiet. All halflings look the same, don't they?'

Dainty mumbled something indistinctly. Geralt, eyes still narrowed, looked at Chappelle suspiciously. The minister, however, straightened up and looked all around, and all that remained of any gawkers who were still in the vicinity was the clacking of wooden clogs dying away in the distance.

The second Dainty Biberveldt scrambled and rolled out of the bundle, sneezed, sat up and rubbed his eyes and nose. Dandelion perched himself on a trunk lying alongside, and strummed away on his lute with an expression of moderate interest on his face.

'Who do you think that is, Dainty?' Chappelle asked mildly. 'Very similar to you, don't you think?'

'He's my cousin,' the halfling shot back and grinned. 'A close relative. Dudu Biberveldt of Knotgrass Meadow, an astute businessman. I've actually just decided . . .'

'Yes, Dainty?'

'I've decided to appoint him my factor in Novigrad. What do you say to that, cousin?'

'Oh, thank you, cousin,' his close relative, the pride of the Biberveldt clan, and an astute businessman, smiled broadly. Chappelle also smiled.

'Has your dream about life in the city come true?' Geralt muttered. 'What do you see in this city, Dudu . . . and you, Chappelle?'

'Had you lived on the moors,' Chappelle muttered back, 'and eaten roots, got soaked and frozen, you'd know. We also deserve something from life, Geralt. We aren't inferior to you.'

'Very true,' Geralt nodded. 'You aren't. Perhaps it even happens that you're better. What happened to the real Chappelle?'

'Popped his clogs,' the second Chappelle whispered. 'Two months ago now. Apoplexy. May the earth lie lightly on him, and may the Eternal Fire light his way. I happened to be in the vicinity . . . No one noticed . . . Geralt? You aren't going to—'

'What didn't anyone notice?' the Witcher asked, with an inscrutable expression.

'Thank you,' Chappelle muttered.

'Are there more of you?'

'Is it important?'

'No,' agreed the Witcher, 'it isn't.'

A two-cubit-tall figure in a green cap and spotted coney fur coat dashed out from behind the wagons and stalls and trotted over.

'Mr Biberveldt,' the gnome panted and stammered, looking around and sweeping his eyes from one halfling to the other.

‘I presume, shorty,’ Dainty said, ‘that you have a matter for my cousin, Dudu Biberveldt, to deal with. Speak. Speak. That is him.’

‘Sorrel reports that everything has gone,’ the gnome said and smiled broadly, showing small, pointed teeth, ‘for four crowns apiece.’

‘I think I know what it’s about,’ Dainty said. ‘Pity Vivaldi’s not here, he would have calculated the profit in no time.’

‘If I may, cousin,’ Tellico Lunngrevink Letorte, Penstock for short, Dudu to his close friends, and for the whole of Novigrad a member of the large Biberveldt family, spoke up. ‘If I may, I’ll calculate it. I have an infallible memory for figures. As well as for other things.’

‘By all means,’ Dainty gave a bow. ‘By all means, cousin.’

‘The costs,’ the doppler frowned, ‘were low. Eighteen for the oil, eight-fifty for the cod liver oil, hmm . . . Altogether, including the string, forty-five crowns. Takings: six hundred at four crowns, makes two thousand four hundred. No commission, because there weren’t any middlemen . . .’

‘Please do not forget about the tax,’ the second Chappelle reminded him. ‘Please do not forget that standing before you is a representative of the city authorities and the temple, who treats his duties gravely and conscientiously.’

‘It’s exempt from tax,’ Dudu Biberveldt declared. ‘Because it was sold in a sacred cause.’

‘Hey?’

‘The cod liver oil, wax and oil dyed with a little cochineal,’ the doppler explained, ‘need only be poured into earthenware bowls with a piece of string dipped into it. The string, when lit, gives a beautiful, red flame, which burns for a long time and doesn’t smell. The Eternal Fire. The priests needed vigil lights for the altars of the Eternal Fire. Now they don’t need them.’

‘Bloody hell . . .’ Chappelle muttered. ‘You’re right. They needed vigil lights . . . Dudu, you’re brilliant.’

‘I take after my mother,’ Tellico said modestly.

‘Yes, indeed, the spitting image of his mother,’ Dainty agreed. ‘Just look into those intelligent eyes. Begonia Biberveldt, my darling aunt, as I live and breathe.’

‘Geralt,’ Dandelion groaned. ‘He’s earned more in three days than I’ve earned in my whole life by singing!’

‘In your place,’ the Witcher said gravely, ‘I’d quit singing and take up commerce. Ask him, he may take you on as an apprentice.’

‘Witcher,’ Tellico said, tugging him by the sleeve. ‘Tell me how I could . . . repay you . . . ?’

‘Twenty-two crowns.’

‘What?’

‘For a new jacket. Look what’s left of mine.’

‘Do you know what?’ Dandelion suddenly yelled. ‘Let’s all go to the house of ill repute! To Passiflora! The Biberveldts are paying!’

‘Do they admit halflings?’ Dainty asked with concern.

‘Just let them try not to,’ Chappelle put on a menacing expression. ‘Just let them try and I’ll accuse their entire bordello of heresy.’

‘Right,’ Dandelion called. ‘Very satisfactory. Geralt? Are you coming?’

The Witcher laughed softly.

‘Do you know what, Dandelion?’ he said. ‘I’ll come with pleasure.’

A LITTLE SACRIFICE

I

The mermaid emerged to waist-height from the water and splashed her hands violently and hard against the surface. Geralt saw that she had gorgeous, utterly perfect breasts. Only the colour spoiled the effect; the nipples were dark green and the areolae around them were only a little lighter. Nimbly aligning herself with an approaching wave, the mermaid arched gracefully, shook her wet, willow-green hair and sang melodiously.

‘What?’ The duke leaned over the side of the cog. ‘What is she saying?’

‘She’s declining,’ Geralt said. ‘She says she doesn’t want to.’

‘Have you explained that I love her? That I can’t imagine life without her? That I want to wed her? Only her, no other?’

‘Yes, I have.’

‘And?’

‘And nothing.’

‘Say it again.’

The Witcher touched his lips and produced a quavering warble. Struggling to find the words and the intonation, he began to translate the duke’s avowal.

The mermaid, lying back on the water, interrupted.

‘Don’t translate, don’t tire yourself,’ she sang. ‘I understand. When he says he loves me he always puts on such a foolish expression. Did he say anything definite?’

‘Not really.’

‘Pity,’ the mermaid said, before she flapped in the water and dived under, flexing her tail powerfully and making the sea foam with her notched flukes, which resembled the tail of a mullet.

‘What? What did she say?’ the duke asked.

‘That it’s a shame.’

‘What’s a shame? What does she mean, “shame”?’

‘I’d say she turned you down.’

‘Nobody refuses me!’ the duke roared, denying the obvious facts.

‘My Lord,’ the skipper of the cog muttered, walking over to them. ‘The nets are ready, all we need do is cast them and she will be yours . . .’

‘I wouldn’t advise it,’ Geralt said softly. ‘She’s not alone. There are more of them beneath the waves, and there may be a kraken deeper down there.’

The skipper quaked, blanched and seized his backside with both hands, in a nonsensical gesture.

‘A kra— kraken?’

‘Yes, a kraken,’ the Witcher repeated. ‘I don’t advise fooling around with nets. All she need do is scream, and all that’ll be left of this tub will be a few floating planks. They’d drown us like kittens. Besides, Agloval, you should decide whether you want to wed her or catch her in a net and keep her in a barrel.’

‘I love her,’ Agloval said firmly. ‘I want her for my wife. But for that she must have legs and not a scaly tail. And it’s feasible, since I bought a magical elixir with a full guarantee, for two pounds of exquisite pearls. After drinking it she’ll grow legs. She’ll just suffer a little, for three days, no more. Call her, Witcher, tell her again.’

‘I’ve already told her twice. She said absolutely no, she doesn’t consent. But she added that she knows a witch, a sea witch, who is prepared to cast a spell to turn your legs into a handsome tail. Painlessly.’

‘She must be insane! She thinks I would have a fishy tail? Not a chance! Call her, Geralt!’

The Witcher leaned far out over the side. The water in the boat’s shadow was green and seemed as thick as jelly. He did not have to call. The mermaid suddenly shot out above the surface in a fountain of water. For a moment she literally stood on her tail, then dived down into the waves and turned on her back, revealing her attributes in all their glory. Geralt swallowed.

‘Hey!’ she sang. ‘Will this take much longer? My skin’s getting chapped from the sun! White Hair, ask him if he consents.’

‘He does not,’ the Witcher sang back. ‘Sh’eenaz, understand, he cannot have a tail, cannot live beneath the water. You can breathe air, but he cannot breathe underwater!’

‘I knew it!’ the mermaid screamed shrilly. ‘I knew it! Excuses, foolish, naive excuses, not a bit of sacrifice! Whoever loves makes

sacrifices! I made sacrifices for him, every day I hauled myself out onto the rocks for him, I wore out the scales on my bottom, frayed my fins; I caught colds for him! And he will not sacrifice those two hideous pegs for me? Love doesn't just mean taking, one also has to be able to give up things, to make sacrifices! Tell him that!'

'Sh'eenaz!' Geralt called. 'Don't you understand? He cannot survive in the water!'

'I don't accept stupid excuses! I . . . I like him too and want to have his fry, but how can I, if he doesn't want to be a spawner? Where should I deposit my eggs, hey? In his cap?'

'What is she saying?' the duke yelled. 'Geralt! I didn't bring you here to chat with her—'

'She's digging her heels in. She's angry.'

'Cast those nets!' Agloval roared. 'I'll keep her in a pool for a month and then she'll—'

'Shove it!' the skipper yelled back, demonstrating what he was to shove with his middle finger. 'There might be a kraken beneath us! Ever seen a kraken, My Lord? Hop into the water, if that is your will, and catch her with your hands! I'm not getting involved. I make my living by fishing from this cog!'

'You make your living by my goodwill, you scoundrel! Cast your net or I'll order you strung up!'

'Kiss a dog's arse! I'm in charge on this cog!'

'Be quiet, both of you!' Geralt shouted irately. 'She's saying something, it's a difficult dialect, I need to concentrate!'

'I've had enough!' Sh'eenaz yelled melodiously. 'I'm hungry! Well, White Hair, he must decide, decide at once. Tell him just one thing: I will not be made a laughing stock of any longer or associate with him if he's going to look like a four-armed starfish. Tell him I have girlfriends who are much better at those frolics he was suggesting on the rocks! But I consider them immature games, fit for children before they shed their scales. I'm a normal, healthy mermaid—'

'Sh'eenaz—'

'Don't interrupt! I haven't finished yet! I'm healthy, normal and ripe for spawning, and if he really desires me, he must have a tail, fins and everything a normal merman has. Otherwise I don't want to know him!'

Geralt translated quickly, trying not to be vulgar. He was not very

successful. The duke flushed and swore foully.

‘The brazen hussy!’ he yelled. ‘The frigid mackerel! Let her find herself a cod!’

‘What did he say?’ Sh’eenaz asked curiously, swimming over.

‘That he doesn’t want a tail!’

‘Then tell him . . . Tell him to dry up!’

‘What did she say?’

‘She told you,’ the Witcher translated, ‘to go drown yourself.’

II

‘Ah well,’ Dandelion said. ‘Pity I couldn’t sail with you, but what could I do? Sailing makes me puke like nobody’s business. But you know what, I’ve never spoken to a mermaid. It’s a shame, dammit.’

‘I know you,’ Geralt said, fastening his saddle bags. ‘You’ll write a ballad anyway.’

‘Never fear. I already have the first stanzas. In my ballad the mermaid will sacrifice herself for the duke, she’ll exchange her fishtail for slender legs, but will pay for it by losing her voice. The duke will betray her, abandon her, and then she’ll perish from grief, and turn into foam, when the first rays of sunshine . . .’

‘Who’d believe such rot?’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ Dandelion snorted. ‘Ballads aren’t written to be believed. They are written to move their audience. But why am I talking to you about this, when you know bugger all about it? You’d better tell me how much Agloval paid you.’

‘He didn’t pay me anything. He claimed I had failed to carry out the task. That he had expected something else, and he pays for results, not good intentions.’

Dandelion shook his head, took off his bonnet and looked at the Witcher with a forlorn grimace on his mouth.

‘You mean we still don’t have any money?’

‘So it would seem.’

Dandelion made an even more forlorn face.

‘It’s all my fault,’ he moaned. ‘I’m to blame for it all. Geralt, are you angry at me?’

No, the Witcher wasn’t angry at Dandelion. Not at all.

There was no doubt Dandelion was to blame for what had befallen them. He had insisted they went to the fair at Four Maples. Organising festivities, the poet argued, satisfied people’s profound and natural needs. From time to time, the bard maintained, a chap has to meet other people in a place where he can have a laugh and a singsong, gorge himself on kebabs and pierogis, drink beer, listen to music and squeeze a girl as he swung her around in the dance. If every chap wanted to satisfy those needs, Dandelion argued, individually, periodically and randomly, an indescribable mess

would arise. For that reason holidays and festivities were invented. And since holidays and festivities exist, a chap ought to frequent them.

Geralt did not challenge this, although taking part in festivities occupied a very low position on the list of his own profound and natural needs. Nonetheless, he agreed to accompany Dandelion, for he was counting on obtaining information from the gathered concentration of people about a possible mission or job; he'd had no work for a long time and his cash reserves had shrunk alarmingly.

The Witcher did not bear Dandelion a grudge for provoking the Rangers of the Forest. He was not innocent either; for he could have intervened and held the bard back. He did not, however, for he could not stand the infamous Guardians of the Forest, known as the Rangers, a volunteer force whose mission was to eradicate non-humans. It had annoyed him to hear their boasts about elves, spriggans and eerie wives bristling with arrows, butchered or hanged. Dandelion, though, who after travelling for some time with the Witcher had become convinced of his impunity from retaliation, had surpassed himself. Initially, the Rangers had not reacted to his mockery, taunts or filthy suggestions, which aroused the thunderous laughter of the watching villagers. When, however, Dandelion sang a hastily-composed obscene and abusive couplet, ending with the words: 'If you want to be a nothing, be a Ranger,' an argument and then a fierce, mass punch-up broke out. The shed serving as the dancehall went up in smoke. Intervention came in the form of a squad of men belonging to Castellan Budibog, also known as the Emptyheaded, on whose estates lay Four Maples. The Rangers, Dandelion and Geralt were found jointly guilty of all the damage and offences, which included the seduction of a red-headed and mute girl, who was found in the bushes behind the barn following the incident, blushing and grinning foolishly, with her shift torn up to her armpits. Fortunately, Castellan Budibog knew Dandelion, so it ended with a fine being paid, which nonetheless ate up all the money they had. They also had to flee from Four Maples as fast as they could ride, because the Rangers, who had been chased out of the village, were threatening revenge, and an entire squad of them, numbering over forty men, was hunting rusalkas in the neighbouring forests. Geralt did not have the slightest desire to be hit by one of the Rangers' arrows, whose heads were barbed like harpoons and inflicted dreadful injuries.

So they had to abandon their original plan, which had involved doing the rounds of the villages on the edge of the forest, where the

Witcher had reasonable prospects of work. Instead they rode to Bremervoord, on the coast. Unfortunately, apart from the love affair between Duke Agloval and the mermaid Sh'eenaz, which offered small chances of success, the Witcher had failed to find a job. They had already sold Geralt's gold signet for food, and an alexandrite brooch the troubadour had once been given as a souvenir by one of his numerous paramours. Things were tight. But no, the Witcher was not angry with Dandelion.

'No, Dandelion,' he said. 'I'm not angry with you.'

Dandelion did not believe him, which was quite apparent by the fact that he kept quiet. Dandelion was seldom quiet. He patted his horse's neck, and fished around in his saddlebags for the umpteenth time. Geralt knew he would not find anything there they could sell. The smell of food, borne on a breeze from a nearby tavern, was becoming unbearable.

'Master?' somebody shouted. 'Hey, master!'

'Yes?' Geralt said, turning around. A big-bellied, well-built man in felt boots and a heavy fur-lined, wolf-skin coat clambered out of a cart pulled by a pair of onagers which had just stopped alongside.

'Erm . . . that is,' the paunchy man said, embarrassed, walking over, 'I didn't mean you, sir, I meant . . . I meant Master Dandelion . . .'

'It is I.' The poet proudly sat up straight, adjusting his bonnet bearing an egret feather. 'What is your need, my good man?'

'Begging your pardon,' the paunchy man said. 'I am Teleri Drouhard, spice merchant and dean of our local Guild. My son, Gaspard, has just plighted his troth to Dalia, the daughter of Mestvin, the cog skipper.'

'Ha,' Dandelion said, maintaining a haughty air. 'I offer my congratulations and extend my wishes of happiness to the betrothed couple. How may I be of help? Does it concern *jus primae noctis*? I never decline that.'

'Hey? No . . . that is . . . You see, the betrothal banquet and ball are this evening. Since it got out that you, master, have come to Bremervoord, my wife won't let up – just like a woman. Listen, she says, Teleri, we'll show everybody we aren't churls like them, that we stand for culture and art. That when we have a feast, it's refined, and not an excuse to get pissed and throw up. I says to her, silly moo, but we've already hired one bard, won't that suffice? And she says one is too few, ho-ho, Master Dandelion, well, I never, such

a celebrity, that'll be one in the eye for our neighbours. Master? Do us the honour . . . I'm prepared to give five-and-twenty talars, as a gesture, naturally – to show my support for the arts—'

'Do my ears deceive me?' Dandelion drawled. 'I, I am to be the second bard? An appendix to some other musician? I? I have not sunk so low, my dear sir, as to *accompany* somebody!'

Drouhard blushed.

'Forgive me, master,' he gibbered. 'That isn't what I meant . . . It was my wife . . . Forgive me . . . Do us the honour . . .'

'Dandelion,' Geralt hissed softly, 'don't put on airs. We need those few pennies.'

'Don't try to teach me!' the poet yelled. 'Me, putting on airs? Me? Look at him! What should I say about you, who rejects a lucrative proposition every other day? You won't kill hirikkas, because they're an endangered species, or mecopterans, because they're harmless, or night spirits, because they're sweet, or dragons, because your code forbids it. I, just imagine it, also have my self-respect! I also have a code!'

'Dandelion, please, do it for me. A little sacrifice, friend, nothing more. I swear, I won't turn my nose up at the next job that comes along. Come on, Dandelion . . .'

The troubadour looked down at the ground and scratched his chin, which was covered in soft, fair bristles. Drouhard, mouth gaping, moved closer.

'Master . . . Do us this honour. My wife won't forgive me if I don't invite you. Now then . . . I'll make it thirty.'

'Thirty-five,' Dandelion said firmly.

Geralt smiled and hopefully breathed in the scent of food wafting from the tavern.

'Agreed, master, agreed,' Teleri Drouhard said quickly, so quickly it was evident he would have given forty, had the need arisen. 'And now . . . My home, if you desire to groom yourself and rest, is your home. And you, sir . . . What do they call you?'

'Geralt of Rivia.'

'And I invite you too, sir, of course. For a bite to eat and something to drink . . .'

'Certainly, with pleasure,' Dandelion said. 'Show us the way, my dear sir. And just between us, who is the other bard?'

‘The honourable Miss Essi Daven.’

III

Geralt rubbed a sleeve over the silver studs of his jacket and his belt buckle one more time, smoothed down his hair, which was held down with a clean headband, and polished his boots by rubbing one leg against the other.

'Dandelion?'

'Mm?' The bard smoothed the egret feather pinned to his bonnet, and straightened and pulled down his jerkin. The two of them had spent half the day cleaning their garments and tidying them up. 'What, Geralt?'

'Behave in such a way as they throw us out after supper and not before.'

'You must be joking,' the poet said indignantly. 'Watch your manners yourself. Shall we go in?'

'We shall. Do you hear? Somebody's singing. A woman.'

'Have you only just noticed? That's Essi Daven, known as Little Eye. What, have you never met a female troubadour? True, I forgot you steer clear of places where art flourishes. Little Eye is a gifted poet and singer, though not without her flaws, among which impertinence, so I hear, is not the least. What she is singing now happens to be one of my ballads. She will soon hear a piece of my mind which will make that little eye of hers water.'

'Dandelion, have mercy. They'll throw us out.'

'Don't interfere. These are professional issues. Let's go in.'

'Dandelion?'

'Hey?'

'Why Little Eye?'

'You'll see.'

The banquet was being held in a huge storeroom, emptied of barrels of herrings and cod liver oil. The smell had been killed – though not entirely – by hanging up bunches of mistletoe and heather decorated with coloured ribbons wherever possible. Here and there, as is customary, were also hung plaits of garlic meant to frighten off vampires.

The tables and benches, which had been pushed towards the

walls, had been covered with white linen, and in a corner there was a large makeshift hearth and spit. It was crowded but not noisy. More than four dozen people of various estates and professions, not to mention the pimply youth and his snub-nosed fiancée, with her eyes fixed on her husband-to-be, were listening reverentially to a sonorous and melodious ballad sung by a young woman in a demure blue frock, sitting on a platform with a lute resting on her knee. The woman could not have been older than eighteen, and was very slim. Her long, luxuriant hair was the colour of dark gold. They entered as the girl finished the song and thanked the audience for the thunderous applause with a nod of her head, which shook her hair gently.

'Greetings, master, greetings,' Drouhard, dressed in his best clothes, leapt briskly over to them and pulled them towards the centre of the storeroom. 'Greetings to you, too, Gerard, sir . . . I am honoured . . . Yes . . . Come here . . . Noble ladies, noble gentlemen! Here is our honoured guest, who gave us this honour and honoured us . . . Master Dandelion, the celebrated singer and poetast . . . poet, I mean, has honoured us with this great honour . . . Thus honoured, we . . .'

Cheers and applause resounded, and just in time, for it was looking as though Drouhard would honour and stammer himself to death. Dandelion, blushing with pride, assumed a superior air and bowed carelessly, then waved a hand at a row of girls sitting on a long bench, like hens on a roost, being chaperoned by older matrons. The girls were sitting stiffly, giving the impression they had been stuck to the bench with carpenter's glue or some other powerful adhesive. Without exception they were holding their hands on tightly-clenched knees and their mouths were half-open.

'And presently,' Drouhard called. 'Come forth, help yourself to beer, fellows, and to the vittles! Prithee, prithee! Avail yourselves . . .'

The girl in the blue dress forced her way through the crowd, which had crashed onto the food-laden tables like a sea wave.

'Greetings, Dandelion,' she said.

Geralt considered the expression 'eyes like stars' banal and hackneyed, particularly since he had begun travelling with Dandelion, as the troubadour was inclined to throw that compliment about freely, usually, indeed, undeservedly. However, with regard to Essi Daven, even somebody as little susceptible to poetry as the Witcher had to concede the aptness of her nickname.

For in her agreeable and pretty, but otherwise unremarkable, little face shone a huge, beautiful, shining, dark blue eye, which riveted the gaze. Essi Daven's other eye was largely covered and obscured by a golden curl, which fell onto her cheek. From time to time Essi flung the curl away with a toss of her head or a puff, at which point it turned out that Little Eye's other little eye was in every way the equal of the first.

'Greetings, Little Eye,' Dandelion said, grimacing. 'That was a pretty ballad you just sang. You've improved your repertoire considerably. I've always maintained that if one is incapable of writing poetry oneself one should borrow other people's. Have you borrowed many of them?'

'A few,' Essi Daven retorted at once and smiled, revealing little white teeth. 'Two or three. I wanted to use more, but it wasn't possible. Dreadful gibberish, and the tunes, though pleasant and unpretentious in their simplicity – not to say primitivism – are not what my audiences expect. Have you written anything new, Dandelion? I don't seem to be aware of it.'

'Small wonder,' the bard sighed. 'I sing my ballads in places to which only the gifted and renowned are invited, and you don't frequent such locations, after all.'

Essi blushed slightly and blew the lock of hair aside.

'Very true,' she said. 'I don't frequent bordellos, as the atmosphere depresses me. I sympathise with you that you have to sing in places like that. But well, that's the way it is. If one has no talent, one can't choose one's audiences.'

Now Dandelion visibly blushed. Little Eye, however, laughed joyously, flung an arm around his neck all of a sudden and kissed him on the cheek. The Witcher was taken aback, but not too greatly. A professional colleague of Dandelion's could not, indeed, differ much from him in terms of predictability.

'Dandelion, you old bugger,' Essi said, still hugging the bard's neck. 'I'm glad to see you again, in good health and in full possession of your mental faculties.'

'Pshaw, Poppet.' Dandelion seized the girl around the waist, picked her up and spun her around so that her dress billowed around her. 'You were magnificent, by the Gods, I haven't heard such marvellous spitefulness for ages. You bicker even more captivatingly than you sing! And you look simply stunning!'

'I've asked you so many times,' Essi said, blowing her lock of hair

away and glancing at Geralt, ‘not to call me Poppet, Dandelion. Besides, I think it’s high time you introduced me to your companion. I see he doesn’t belong to our guild.’

‘Save us, O Gods,’ the troubadour laughed. ‘He, Poppet, has no voice or ear, and can only rhyme “rear” with “beer”. This is Geralt of Rivia, a member of the guild of witchers. Come closer, Geralt, and kiss Little Eye’s hand.’

The Witcher approached, not really knowing what to do. One usually only kissed ladies of the rank of duchess and higher on the hand, or the ring, and one was supposed to kneel. Regarding women of lower standing that gesture, here, in the South, was considered erotically unambiguous and as such tended to be reserved only for close couples.

Little Eye dispelled his doubts, however, by willingly holding her hand out high with the fingers facing downwards. He grasped it clumsily and feigned a kiss. Essi, her beautiful eye still popping out of her head, blushed.

‘Geralt of Rivia,’ she said. ‘What company you keep, Dandelion.’

‘It is an honour for me,’ the Witcher muttered, aware he was rivalling Drouhard in eloquence. ‘Madam—’

‘Damn it,’ Dandelion snorted. ‘Don’t abash Little Eye with all that stammering and titling. She’s Essi, he’s Geralt. End of introductions. Let’s get to the point, Poppet.’

‘If you call me Poppet once more you’ll get a slap. What point do we have to get to?’

‘We have to agree on how we’re going to sing. I suggest one after the other, a few ballads each. For the effect. Of course, singing our own ballads.’

‘Suits me.’

‘How much is Drouhard paying you?’

‘None of your business. Who goes first?’

‘You.’

‘Agreed. Hey, look who’s joined us. The Most Noble Duke of Agloval. He’s just coming in, look.’

‘Well, well,’ Dandelion said gleefully. ‘The audience is going up-market. Although, on the other hand, we oughtn’t to count on him. He’s a skinflint. Geralt can confirm it. The local duke bloody hates paying. He hires, admittedly. But he’s not so good at paying.’

‘I’ve heard a few things about him.’ Essi, looking at Geralt, tossed the lock of hair back from her cheek. ‘They were talking about it in the harbour and by the jetty. The famous Sh’eenaz, right?’

Agloval responded to the deep bows of the two rows by the door with a brief nod, and then almost immediately went over to Drouhard and drew him away into a corner, giving a sign that he was not expecting deference or ceremony in the centre of the storehouse. Geralt watched them out of the corner of his eye. They spoke softly, but it was apparent that they were both agitated. Drouhard kept wiping his forehead with a sleeve, shaking his head, and scratching his neck. He was asking questions which the duke, surly and dour, was responding to by shrugging.

‘His Grace,’ Essi said quietly, moving closer to Geralt, ‘looks preoccupied. Affairs of the heart again? The misunderstanding from earlier today with his famous mermaid? Hey, Witcher?’

‘Perhaps,’ Geralt answered, looking askance at the poet, astonished and strangely annoyed by her question. ‘Well, everybody has some personal problems. However, not everybody likes them to be sung about from the rooftops.’

Little Eye blanched slightly, blew away her lock of hair and looked at him defiantly.

‘By saying that did you mean to offend or only tease me?’

‘Neither one nor the other. I merely wanted to forestall further questions about the problems between Agloval and the mermaid. Questions I do not feel entitled to answer.’

‘I understand.’ Essi Daven’s gorgeous eye narrowed slightly. ‘I won’t burden you with a similar dilemma. I shall not ask you any of the questions I meant to ask, and which, if I’m to be frank, I treated only as a prelude and invitation to a pleasant conversation. Very well, that conversation will not come to pass, then, and you need fear not that the content will be sung from some rooftop. It has been my pleasure.’

She turned on her heel and walked off towards the tables, where she was immediately greeted with respect. Dandelion shifted his weight from foot to foot and coughed tellingly.

‘I won’t say that was exquisitely courteous of you, Geralt.’

‘It came out wrongly,’ the Witcher agreed. ‘I hurt her, quite unintentionally. Perhaps I should follow her and apologise?’

‘Drop it,’ the bard said and added aphoristically, ‘There is never a

second opportunity to make a first impression. Come on, let's have a beer instead.'

They did not make it to the beer. Drouhard pushed his way through a garrulous group of merchants.

'Gerard, sir,' he said. 'Please step this way. His Grace would like to talk to you.'

'Very well.'

'Geralt,' Dandelion seized him by the sleeve. 'Don't forget.'

'Forget what?'

'You promised to agree to any task, without complaint. I shall hold you to it. What was it you said? A little sacrifice?'

'Very well, Dandelion.'

He went off with Drouhard into the corner of the storeroom, away from the guests. Agloval was sitting at a low table. He was accompanied by a colourfully dressed, weather-beaten man with a short, black beard whom Geralt had not noticed earlier.

'We meet again, Witcher,' the duke said. 'Although this morning I swore I didn't want to see you again. But I do not have another witcher to hand, so you will have to do. Meet Zelest, my bailiff and pearl diving steward. Speak, Zelest.'

'This morning,' said the weather-beaten individual in a low voice, 'we planned to go diving outside the usual grounds. One boat went further westwards, beyond the headland, towards the Dragons Fangs.'

'The Dragons Fangs,' Agloval cut in, 'are two volcanic reefs at the end of the headland. They can be seen from our coast.'

'Aye,' Zelest confirmed. 'People don't usually sail there, for there are whirlpools and rocks, it's dangerous to dive there. But there's fewer and fewer pearls by the coast. Aye, one boat went there. A crew of seven souls, two sailors and five divers, including one woman. When they hadn't returned by the eventide we began to fret, although the sea was calm, as if oil had been poured on it. I sent a few swift skiffs there and we soon found the boat drifting on the sea. There was no one in it, not a living soul. Vanished into thin air. We know not what happened. But there must have been fighting there, a veritable massacre. There were signs . . .'

'What signs?' the Witcher squinted.

'Well, the whole deck was spattered in blood.'

Drouhard hissed and looked around anxiously. Zelest lowered his voice.

'It was as I said,' he repeated, clenching his jaw. 'The boat was spattered in gore, length and breadth. No question but a veritable massacre took place on board. Something killed those people. They say it was a sea monster. No doubt, a sea monster.'

'Not pirates?' asked Geralt softly. 'Or pearl diving competition? Do you rule out a normal knife fight?'

'We do,' said the duke. 'There are no pirates here, no competition. And knife fights don't result in everybody – to the last man – disappearing. No, Geralt. Zelest is right. It was a sea monster, and nothing else. Listen, now no one dares go to sea, not even to the nearby and familiar fishing grounds. The people are scared stiff and the harbour is paralysed. Even the cogs and galleys aren't setting out. Do you see, Witcher?'

'I see,' Geralt nodded. 'Who will show me this place?'

'Ha,' Agloval placed a hand on the table and drummed his fingers. 'I like that. That's witcher talk. Getting to the point at once, without unnecessary chatter. Yes, I like that. Do you see, Drouhard? I told you, a hungry witcher is a good witcher. Well, Geralt? After all, were it not for your musical companion you would have gone to bed without your supper again. My information is correct, is it not?'

Drouhard lowered his head. Zelest stared vacantly ahead.

'Who'll show me the place?' Geralt repeated, looking coldly at Agloval.

'Zelest,' said the duke, his smile fading. 'Zelest will show you the Dragons Fangs and the route to them. When will you start work?'

'First thing tomorrow morning. Be at the harbour, Mr Zelest.'

'Very well, Master Witcher.'

'Excellent.' The duke rubbed his hands and smiled mockingly again. 'Geralt, I'm relying on you to do better with this monster than you did with the Sh'eenaz situation. I really am. Aha, one more thing. I forbid any gossiping about this incident; I don't want any more panic than we already have on our hands. Do you understand, Drouhard? I'll order your tongue torn out if you breathe a word.'

'I understand, Your Grace.'

'Good,' Agloval said, getting up. 'Then I shall go, I shall not

interfere with the ball, nor provoke any rumours. Farewell, Drouhard. Wish the betrothed couple happiness on my behalf.'

'My thanks, Duke.'

Essi Daven, who was sitting on a low stool surrounded by a dense crowd of listeners, was singing a melodious and wistful ballad about the woeful fate of a betrayed lover. Dandelion, leaning against a post, was muttering something under his breath and counting bars and syllables on his fingers.

'Well?' he asked. 'Do you have a job, Geralt?'

'Yes,' the Witcher answered, not going into details, which in any case did not concern the bard.

'I told you I smelt a rat – and money. Good, very good. I'll make some money, you will too, we'll be able to afford to revel. We'll go to Cidaris, in time for the grape harvest festival. And now, if you'll excuse me, I've spotted something interesting on the bench over there.'

Geralt followed the poet's gaze, but aside from about a dozen girls with half-open mouths he saw nothing interesting. Dandelion pulled down his jerkin, set his bonnet over his right ear and approached the bench in long swinging strides. Having passed the matrons guarding the maidens with a deft flanking manoeuvre, he began his customary ritual of flashing a broad smile.

Essi Daven finished her ballad, and was rewarded with applause, a small purse and a large bouquet of pretty – though somewhat withered – chrysanthemums.

The Witcher circulated among the guests, looking for an opportunity to finally occupy a seat at the table, which was laden with vittles. He gazed longingly at the rapidly vanishing pickled herrings, stuffed cabbage leaves, boiled cod heads and mutton chops, at the rings of sausage and capons being torn into pieces, and the smoked salmon and hams being chopped up with knives. The problem was that there were no vacant seats at the table.

The maidens and matrons, somewhat livened up, surrounded Dandelion, calling squeakily for a performance. Dandelion smiled falsely and made excuses, ineffectually feigning modesty.

Geralt, overcoming his embarrassment, virtually forced his way to the table. An elderly gentleman, smelling strongly of vinegar, moved aside surprisingly courteously and willingly, almost knocking off several guests sitting alongside him. Geralt got down

to eating without delay and in a flash had cleared the only dish he could reach. The gentleman smelling of vinegar passed him another. In gratitude, the Witcher listened attentively to the elderly gentleman's long tirade concerning the present times and the youth of today. The elderly gentleman stubbornly described sexual freedom as 'laxity', so Geralt had some difficulty keeping a straight face.

Essi stood by the wall, beneath bunches of mistletoe, alone, tuning her lute. The Witcher saw a young man in a brocaded waisted kaftan approaching and saying something to the poet, smiling wanly the while. Essi looked at the young man, her pretty mouth sneering slightly, and said several quick words. The young man cowered and walked hurriedly away, and his ears, as red as beetroots, glowed in the semi-darkness for a long time afterwards.

'. . . abomination, shame and disgrace,' the elderly gentleman smelling of vinegar continued. 'One enormous laxity, sir.'

'Indeed,' Geralt nodded tentatively, wiping his plate with a hunk of bread.

'May I request silence, noble ladies, noble lords,' Drouhard called, walking into the middle of the room. 'The celebrated Master Dandelion, in spite of being a little bodily indisposed and weary, shall now sing for us his celebrated ballad about Queen Marienn and the Black Raven! He shall do it at the urgent plea of Miss Veverka, the miller's daughter, whom, he said, he may not refuse.'

Miss Veverka, one of the less comely girls on the bench, became beautified in the blink of an eye. Uproar and applause erupted, drowning out further laxity from the elderly gentleman smelling of vinegar. Dandelion waited for total silence, played a striking prelude on his lute, after which he began to sing, without taking his eyes off Miss Veverka, who was growing more beautiful with each verse. Indeed, Geralt thought, that whoreson is more effective than all the magical oils and creams Yennefer sells in her little shop in Vengerberg.

He saw Essi steal behind the crowded semicircle of Dandelion's audience and cautiously vanish through the door to the terrace. Driven by a strange impulse, he slipped nimbly out from behind the table and followed her.

She stood, leaning forward, resting her elbows on the railing of the jetty, head drawn into her delicate, upraised shoulders. She was gazing at the rippling sea, glistening from the light of the moon and the fires burning in the harbour. A board creaked beneath Geralt's

foot. Essi straightened up.

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to disturb you,’ he said, stiffly, searching for that sudden grimace on her lips to which she had treated the young man in brocade a moment earlier.

‘You aren’t disturbing me,’ she replied, smiling and tossing back her lock of hair. ‘I’m not seeking solitude here, but fresh air. Was all that smoke and airlessness bothering you too?’

‘A little. But I’m more bothered by knowing that I offended you. I came here to apologise, Essi, to try to regain the chance of a pleasant conversation.’

‘You deserve my apology,’ she said, pressing her hands down on the railing. ‘I reacted too impetuously. I always react too impetuously, I don’t know how to control myself. Excuse me and give me another chance. For a conversation.’

He approached and leaned on the railing beside her. He felt the warmth emanating from her, and the faint scent of verbena. He liked the scent of verbena, although the scent of verbena was not the scent of lilac and gooseberry.

‘What do you connect with the sea, Geralt?’ she asked suddenly.

‘Unease,’ he answered, almost without thinking.

‘Interesting. And you seem so calm and composed.’

‘I didn’t say I feel unease. You asked for associations.’

‘Associations are the image of the soul. I know what I’m talking about, I’m a poet.’

‘And what do you associate with the sea, Essi?’ he asked quickly, to put an end to discussions about the unease he was feeling.

‘With constant movement,’ she answered after a pause. ‘With change. And with riddles, with mystery, with something I cannot grasp, which I might be able to describe in a thousand different ways, in a thousand poems, never actually reaching the core, the heart of the matter. Yes, that’s it.’

‘And so,’ he said, feeling the verbena affecting him more and more strongly. ‘What you feel is also unease. And you seem so calm and composed.’

She turned towards him, tossing back her golden curl and fixing her gorgeous eyes on him.

‘I’m not calm or composed, Geralt.’

It happened suddenly, utterly unexpectedly. The movement he made, which was supposed to have been just a touch, a gentle touch of her arms, turned into a powerful grasp of both hands around her very slender waist, into a rapid, though not rough, pulling of her closer, and into a sudden, passionate contact of their bodies. Essi stiffened suddenly, straightened, bent her torso powerfully backwards, pressed her hands down on his, firmly, as though she wanted to pull away and push his hands from her waist, but instead of that she seized them tightly, tipped her head forward, parted her lips and hesitated.

'Why . . . Why this?' she whispered. Her eye was wide open, her golden curl had fallen onto her cheek.

Calmly and slowly he tipped his head forward, brought his face closer and suddenly and quickly pursed his lips into a kiss. Essi, however, even then, did not release his hands grasping her waist and still powerfully arched her back, avoiding bodily contact. Remaining like that they turned around slowly, as though in a dance. She kissed him eagerly, expertly. For a long time.

Then she nimbly and effortlessly freed herself from his embrace, turned away, once again leaned on the railing, and drew her head into her shoulders. Geralt suddenly felt dreadfully, indescribably stupid. The feeling stopped him from approaching her, from putting an arm around her hunched back.

'Why?' she asked coolly, without turning around. 'Why did you do that?'

She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye and the Witcher suddenly understood he had made a mistake. He suddenly knew that insincerity, lies, pretence and bravado would lead him straight into a swamp, where only a springy, matted layer of grass and moss, liable to yield, tear or break at any moment, separated him from the abyss below.

'Why?' she repeated.

He did not answer.

'Are you looking for a woman for the night?'

He did not reply. Essi turned slowly and touched his arm.

'Let's go back in,' she said easily, but he was not deceived by her manner, sensing how tense she was. 'Don't make that face. It was nothing. And the fact that I'm not looking for a man for tonight isn't your fault. Is it?'

‘Essi . . .’

‘Let’s go back, Geralt. Dandelion has played three encores. It’s my turn. Come on, I’ll sing . . .’

She glanced at him strangely and blew her lock of hair away from her eye.

‘I’ll sing for you.’

IV

‘Oho,’ the Witcher said, feigning surprise. ‘So you’re here? I thought you wouldn’t be back tonight.’

Dandelion locked the door with the hasp, hung up his lute and his bonnet with the egret’s feather on a peg, took off his jerkin, brushed it down and laid it on some sacks lying in the corner of the small room. Apart from the sacks, a wooden pail and a huge palliasse stuffed with dried bean stalks there was no furniture in the attic room – even the candle stood on the floor in a hardened pool of wax. Drouhard admired Dandelion, but clearly not enough to give him the run of a chamber or even a boxroom.

‘And why,’ asked Dandelion, removing his boots, ‘did you think I wouldn’t be back tonight?’

‘I thought,’ the Witcher lifted himself up on an elbow, crunching bean straw, ‘you’d go and sing serenades beneath the window of Miss Veverka, at whom your tongue has been hanging out the whole evening like a pointer at the sight of a bitch.’

‘Ha, ha,’ the bard laughed. ‘But you’re so oafishly stupid. You didn’t understand anything. Veverka? I don’t care about Veverka. I simply wanted to stab Miss Akeretta with jealousy, as I shall make a pass at her tomorrow. Move over.’

Dandelion collapsed on the palliasse and pulled the blanket off Geralt. Geralt, feeling a strange anger, turned his head towards the tiny window, through which, had it not been for some industrious spiders, he would have seen the starry sky.

‘Why so huffy?’ the poet asked. ‘Does it bother you that I make advances to girls? Since when? Perhaps you’ve become a druid and taken a vow of chastity? Or perhaps . . .’

‘Don’t go on. I’m tired. Have you not noticed that for the first time in two weeks we have a palliasse and a roof over our heads? Doesn’t it gladden you that the rain won’t be dripping on us in the wee small hours?’

‘For me,’ Dandelion fantasised, ‘a palliasse without a girl isn’t a palliasse. It’s incomplete happiness, and what is incomplete happiness?’

Geralt groaned softly, as usual when Dandelion was assailed by nocturnal talkativeness.

‘Incomplete happiness,’ the bard continued, engrossed in his own voice, ‘is like . . . a kiss interrupted . . . Why are you grinding your teeth, if I may ask?’

‘You’re incredibly boring, Dandelion. Nothing but palliasses, girls, bums, tits, incomplete happiness and kisses interrupted by dogs set on you by your lovers’ parents. Why, you clearly can’t behave any differently. Clearly only easy lewdness, not to say uncritical promiscuity, allows you musicians to compose ballads, write poems and sing. That is clearly – write it down – the dark side of your talent.’

He had said too much and had not cooled his voice sufficiently. And Dandelion saw through him effortlessly and unerringly.

‘Aha,’ he said calmly. ‘Essi Daven, also known as Little Eye. The alluring little eye of Little Eye fixed its gaze on the Witcher and caused confusion in the Witcher. The Witcher behaved like a little schoolboy before a queen. And rather than blame himself he is blaming her and searching for her dark side.’

‘You’re talking rubbish, Dandelion.’

‘No, my dear. Essi made an impression on you, you can’t hide it. I don’t see anything wrong with that, actually. But beware, and don’t make a mistake. She is not what you think. If her talent has its dark sides, they certainly aren’t what you imagine.’

‘I conjecture,’ said the Witcher, trying to control his voice, ‘that you know her very well.’

‘Quite well. But not in the way you think. Not like that.’

‘Quite original for you, you’ll admit.’

‘You’re stupid,’ the bard said, stretching and placing both hands under his neck. ‘I’ve known Poppet almost since she was a child. To me she’s like . . . well . . . like a younger sister. So I repeat, don’t make any silly mistakes about her. You’d be harming her greatly, because you also made an impression on her. Admit it, you desire her?’

‘Even if I did, unlike you I’m not accustomed to talking about it,’ Geralt said sharply. ‘Or writing songs about it. I thank you for your words about her, because perhaps you have indeed saved me from a stupid mistake. But let that be an end to it. I regard the subject as exhausted.’

Dandelion lay motionless for a moment, saying nothing, but Geralt knew him too well.

‘I know,’ the poet said at last. ‘Now I know everything.’

‘You know fuck all, Dandelion.’

‘Do you know what your problem is, Geralt? You think you’re different. You flaunt your otherness, what you consider abnormal. You aggressively impose that abnormality on others, not understanding that for people who think clear-headedly you’re the most normal man under the sun, and they all wish that everybody was so normal. What of it that you have quicker reflexes than most and vertical pupils in sunlight? That you can see in the dark like a cat? That you know a few spells? Big deal. I, my dear, once knew an innkeeper who could fart for ten minutes without stopping, playing the tune to the psalm *Greet us, greet us, O, Morning Star*. Heedless of his – let’s face it – unusual talent, that innkeeper was the most normal among the normal; he had a wife, children and a grandmother afflicted by palsy—’

‘What does that have to do with Essi Daven? Could you explain?’

‘Of course. You wrongfully thought, Geralt, that Little Eye was interested in you out of morbid, downright perverted curiosity, that she looks at you as though you were a queer fish, a two-headed calf or a salamander in a menagerie. And you immediately became annoyed, gave her a rude, undeserved reprimand at the first opportunity, struck back at a blow she hadn’t dealt. I witnessed it, after all. I didn’t witness the further course of events, of course, but I noticed your flight from the room and saw her glowing cheeks when you returned. Yes, Geralt. I’m alerting you to a mistake, and you have already made it. You wanted to take revenge on her for – in your opinion – her morbid curiosity. You decided to exploit that curiosity.’

‘You’re talking rubbish.’

‘You tried,’ the bard continued, unmoved, ‘to learn if it was possible to bed her in the hay, if she was curious to find out what it’s like to make love with a misfit, with a witcher. Fortunately, Essi turned out to be smarter than you and generously took pity on your stupidity, having understood its cause. I conclude this from the fact you did not return from the jetty with a fat lip.’

‘Have you finished?’

‘Yes, I have.’

‘Goodnight, then.’

‘I know why you’re furious and gnashing your teeth.’

‘No doubt. You know everything.’

‘I know who warped you like that, who left you unable to understand a normal woman. Oh, but that Yennefer of yours was a troublemaker; I’m damned if I know what you see in her.’

‘Drop it, Dandelion.’

‘Do you really not prefer normal girls like Essi? What do sorceresses have that Essi doesn’t? Age, perhaps? Little Eye may not be the youngest, but she’s as old as she looks. And do you know what Yennefer once confessed to me after a few stiff drinks? Ha, ha . . . she told me that the first time she did it with a man it was exactly a year after the invention of the two-furrow plough.’

‘You’re lying. Yennefer loathes you like the plague and would never confide in you.’

‘All right, I was lying, I confess.’

‘You don’t have to. I know you.’

‘You only think you know me. Don’t forget: I’m complicated by nature.’

‘Dandelion,’ the Witcher sighed, now genuinely tired. ‘You’re a cynic, a lecher, a womaniser and a liar. And there’s nothing, believe me, nothing complicated about that. Goodnight.’

‘Goodnight, Geralt.’

V

‘You rise early, Essi.’

The poet smiled, holding down her hair, which was being blown around by the wind. She stepped gingerly onto the jetty, avoiding the holes and rotten planks.

‘I couldn’t miss the chance of watching the Witcher at work. Will you think me nosey again, Geralt? Why, I don’t deny it, I really am nosey. How goes it?’

‘How goes what?’

‘Oh, Geralt,’ she said. ‘You underestimate my curiosity, and my talent for gathering and interpreting information. I know everything about the case of the pearl divers, I know the details of your agreement with Agloval. I know you’re looking for a sailor willing to sail there, towards the Dragons Fangs. Did you find one?’

He looked at her searchingly for a moment, and then suddenly decided.

‘No,’ he replied, ‘I didn’t. Not one.’

‘Are they afraid?’

‘Yes, they are.’

‘How, then, do you intend to carry out an exploration if you can’t go to sea? How, without sailing, do you plan to get at the monster that killed the pearl divers?’

He took her by the hand and led her from the jetty. They walked slowly along the edge of the sea, across the pebbly beach, beside the launches pulled up on the shore, among the rows of nets hung up on stilts, among the curtains of split, drying fish being blown by the wind. Geralt unexpectedly found that the poet’s company did not bother him at all, that it was not wearisome or intrusive. Apart from that, he hoped that a calm and matter-of-fact conversation would erase the results of that stupid kiss on the terrace. The fact that Essi had come to the jetty filled him with the hope that she did not bear him a grudge. He was content.

‘“Get at the monster”,’ he muttered, repeating her words. ‘If only I knew how. I know very little about sea monsters.’

‘Interesting. From what I know, there are many more monsters in the sea than there are on land, both in terms of number and variety

of species. It would seem, thus, that the sea ought to be a great opportunity for witchers to show what they can do.'

'Well, it isn't.'

'Why?'

'The expansion of people onto the sea,' he said, clearing his throat and turning his face away, 'hasn't lasted very long. Witchers were needed long ago, on the land, during the first phase of colonisation. We aren't cut out to fight sea-dwelling creatures, although you are right, the sea is full of all sorts of aggressive filth. But our witcher abilities are insufficient against sea monsters. Those creatures are either too big for us, or are too well armoured, or are too sure in their element. Or all three.'

'And the monster that killed the pearl divers? You have no idea what it was?'

'A kraken, perhaps?'

'No. A kraken would have wrecked the boat, but it was intact. And, as they said, totally full of blood,' Little Eye swallowed and visibly paled. 'Don't think I'm being a know-all. I grew up by the sea, and I've seen a few things.'

'In that case what could it have been? A giant squid? It might have dragged those people from the deck . . .'

'There wouldn't have been any blood. It wasn't a squid, Geralt, or a killer whale, or a dracoturtle, because whatever it was didn't destroy or capsize the boat. Whatever it was went on board and carried out the slaughter there. Perhaps you're making a mistake looking for it in the sea?'

The Witcher pondered.

'I'm beginning to admire you, Essi,' he said. The poet blushed. 'You're right. It may have attacked from the air. It may have been an ornithodracon, a gryphon, a wyvern, a flying drake or a forktail. Possibly even a roc—'

'Excuse me,' Essi said, 'Look who's coming.'

Agloval was approaching along the shore, alone, his clothes sopping wet. He was visibly angry, and flushed with rage on seeing them.

Essi curtseyed slightly, Geralt bent his head, pressing his fist to his chest. Agloval spat.

'I sat on the rocks for three hours, almost from daybreak,' he

snarled. ‘She didn’t even make an appearance. Three hours, like an ass, on rocks swept by the waves.’

‘I’m sorry . . .’ the Witcher muttered.

‘You’re sorry?’ the duke exploded. ‘Sorry? It’s your fault. You fouled everything up. You spoiled everything.’

‘What did I spoil? I was only working as an interpreter—’

‘To hell with work like that,’ Agloval interrupted angrily, showing off his profile. His profile was indeed kingly, worthy of being struck on coinage. ‘Verily, it would have been better not to hire you. It sounds paradoxical, but while we didn’t have an interpreter we understood each other better, Sh’eenaz and I, if you know what I mean. But now – do you know what they’re saying in town? Rumours are spreading that the pearl divers perished because I enraged the mermaid. That it’s her revenge.’

‘Nonsense,’ the Witcher commented coldly.

‘How am I to know that it’s nonsense?’ the duke growled. ‘How do I know you didn’t tell her something? Do I really know what she’s capable of? What monsters she chums around with down in the depths? By all means prove to me that it’s nonsense. Bring me the head of the beast that killed the pearl divers. Get to work, instead of flirting on the beach—’

‘To work?’ Geralt reacted angrily. ‘How? Am I to go out to sea straddling a barrel? Your Zelest threatened the sailors with torture and the noose, but in spite of that no one wants to sail out with me. Zelest himself isn’t too keen either. So how—?’

‘What does it bother me how?’ Agloval yelled, interrupting. ‘That’s your problem! What are witchers for if not so that decent folk don’t have to wrack their brains about how to rid themselves of monsters? I’ve hired you to do the job and I demand you carry it out. If not, get out of here before I drive you to the borders of my realm with my whip!’

‘Calm down, Your Grace,’ Little Eye said softly, but her paleness and trembling hands betrayed her irritation. ‘And please don’t threaten Geralt. It so happens that Dandelion and I have several friends. King Ethain of Cidaris, to mention but one, likes us and our ballads very much. King Ethain is an enlightened monarch and always says that our ballads aren’t just lively music and rhymes, but a way of spreading news, that they are a chronicle of humankind. Do you wish, Your Grace, to be written into the chronicle of humankind? I can have it arranged.’

Agloval looked at her for a while with a cold, contemptuous gaze.

‘The pearl divers who died had wives and children,’ he finally said, much more quietly and calmly. ‘When hunger afflicts the remaining ones they will put to sea again. Pearl, sponge and oyster divers, lobster fishers, fishermen; all of them. Now they are afraid, but hunger will overcome their fear. They will go to sea. But will they return? What do you say to that, Geralt? Miss Daven? I’d be interested to hear the ballad which will sing of that. A ballad about a witcher standing idly on the shore looking at the blood-spattered decks of boats and weeping children.’

Essi blanched even more, but raised her head proudly, blew away the lock of hair and was just preparing a riposte, when Geralt seized her hand and squeezed it, stopping her words.

‘That is enough,’ he said. ‘In this entire flood of words only one has true significance. You hired me, Agloval. I accepted the task and shall accomplish it, if it is feasible.’

‘I’m relying on it,’ the duke said curtly. ‘Then goodbye. My respects, Miss Daven.’

Essi did not curtsey, she only tilted her head. Agloval hauled up his wet trousers and headed off towards the harbour, walking unsteadily over the pebbles. Only then did Geralt notice he was still holding the poet’s hand, but she was not trying to free herself at all. He released her hand. Essi, slowly returning to her normal colours, turned her face towards his.

‘It’s easy to make you take a risk,’ she said. ‘All it takes is a few words about women and children. And so much is said about how unfeeling you witchers are. Geralt, Agloval doesn’t give a hoot about women, children or the elderly. He wants the pearl fishing to begin again because he’s losing money every day they don’t come back with a catch. He’s taking you for a ride with those starving children, and you’re ready to risk your life—’

‘Essi,’ he interrupted. ‘I’m a witcher. It’s my trade to risk my life. Children have nothing to do with it.’

‘You can’t fool me.’

‘Why the assumption that I mean to?’

‘Perhaps because if you were the heartless professional you pretend to be, you would have tried to push up the price. But you didn’t say a word about your fee. Oh, never mind, enough of all that. Are we going back?’

‘Let’s walk on a little.’

‘Gladly. Geralt?’

‘Yes.’

‘I told you I grew up by the sea. I know how to steer a boat and —’

‘Put that out of your head.’

‘Why?’

‘Put that out of your head,’ he repeated sharply.

‘You might,’ she said, ‘have phrased that more politely.’

‘I might have. But you would have taken it as . . . the Devil only knows what. And I *am* an unfeeling witcher and heartless professional. I risk my life. Not other people’s.’

Essi fell silent. He saw her purse her lips and toss her head. A gust of wind ruffled her hair again, and her face was covered for a moment by a confusion of golden curls.

‘I only wanted to help you,’ she said.

‘I know. Thank you.’

‘Geralt?’

‘Yes.’

‘What if there is something behind the rumours Agloval was talking about? You know well that mermaids aren’t always friendly. There have been cases—’

‘I don’t believe them.’

‘Sea witches,’ Little Eye continued, pensively. ‘Nereids, mermen, sea nymphs. Who knows what they’re capable of. And Sh’eenaz . . . she had reason—’

‘I don’t believe it,’ he interrupted.

‘You don’t believe or you don’t want to believe?’

He did not reply.

‘And you want to appear the cold professional?’ she asked with a strange smile. ‘Someone who thinks with his sword hilt? If you want, I’ll tell you what you really are.’

‘I know what I really am.’

‘You’re sensitive,’ she said softly. ‘Deep in your angst-filled soul.

Your stony face and cold voice don't deceive me. You are sensitive, and your sensitivity makes you fear that whatever you are going to face with sword in hand may have its own arguments, may have the moral advantage over you . . .'

'No, Essi,' he said slowly. 'Don't try to make me the subject of a moving ballad, a ballad about a witcher with inner conflicts. Perhaps I'd like it to be the case, but it isn't. My moral dilemmas are resolved for me by my code and education. By my training.'

'Don't talk like that,' she said in annoyance. 'I don't understand why you try to—'

'Essi,' he interrupted her again. 'I don't want you to pick up false notions about me. I'm not a knight errant.'

'You aren't a cold and unthinking killer either.'

'No,' he agreed calmly. 'I'm not, although there are some who think differently. For it isn't my sensitivity and personal qualities that place me higher, but the vain and arrogant pride of a professional convinced of his value. A specialist, in whom it was instilled that the code of his profession and cold routine is more legitimate than emotion, that they protect him against making a mistake, which could be made should he become entangled in the dilemmas of Good and Evil, of Order and Chaos. No, Essi. It's not *I* that am sensitive, but you. After all, your profession demands that, doesn't it? It's you who became alarmed by the thought that an apparently pleasant mermaid attacked the pearl divers in an act of desperate revenge after being insulted. You immediately look for an excuse for the mermaid, extenuating circumstances; you balk at the thought that a witcher, hired by the duke, will murder an exquisite mermaid just because she dared to yield to emotion. But the Witcher, Essi, is free of such dilemmas. And of emotion. Even if it turns out that it *was* the mermaid, the Witcher won't kill the mermaid, because the code forbids him. The code solves the dilemma for the Witcher.'

Little Eye looked at him, abruptly lifting up her head.

'All dilemmas?' she asked quickly.

She knows about Yennefer, he thought. She knows. Dandelion, you bloody gossip . . .

They looked at one another.

What is concealed in your deep blue eyes, Essi? Curiosity? Fascination with otherness? What are the dark sides of your talent,

Little Eye?

‘I apologise,’ she said. ‘The question was foolish. And naive. It hinted that I believed what you were saying. Let’s go back. That wind chills to the marrow. Look how rough the sea is.’

‘It is. Do you know what’s fascinating, Essi?’

‘What?’

‘I was certain the rock where Agloval met his mermaid was nearer the shore and bigger. And now it’s not visible.’

‘It’s the tide,’ Essi said shortly. ‘The water will soon reach all the way to the cliff.’

‘All that way?’

‘Yes. The water rises and falls here considerably, well over ten cubits, because here in the strait and the mouth of the river there are so-called tidal echoes, as the sailors call them.’

Geralt looked towards the headland, at the Dragons Fangs, biting into a roaring, foaming breaker.

‘Essi,’ he asked. ‘And when the tide starts going out?’

‘What?’

‘How far back does the sea go?’

‘But what . . . ? Ah, I get it. Yes, you’re right. It goes back to the line of the shelf.’

‘The line of the what?’

‘Well, it’s like a shelf – flat shallows – forming the seabed, which ends with a lip at the edge of the deep waters.’

‘And the Dragons Fangs . . .’

‘Are right on that lip.’

‘And they are reachable by wading? How long would I have?’

‘I don’t know,’ Little Eye frowned. ‘You’d have to ask the locals. But I don’t think it would be a good idea. Look, there are rocks between the land and the Fangs, the entire shore is scored with bays and fjords. When the tide starts going out, gorges and basins full of water are formed there. I don’t know if—’

From the direction of the sea and the barely visible rocks came a splash. And a loud, melodic cry.

‘White Hair!’ the mermaid called, gracefully leaping over the

crest of a wave, threshing the water with short, elegant strokes of her tail.

‘Sh’eenaz!’ he called back, waving a hand.

The mermaid swam over to the rocks, stood erect in the foaming, green water and used both hands to fling back her hair, at the same time revealing her torso with all its charms. Geralt glanced at Essi. The girl blushed slightly and with an expression of regret and embarrassment on her face looked for a moment at her own charms, which barely protruded beneath her dress.

‘Where is my man?’ Sh’eenaz sang, swimming closer. ‘He was meant to have come.’

‘He did. He waited for three hours and then left.’

‘He left?’ the mermaid said in a high trill of astonishment. ‘He didn’t wait? He could not endure three meagre hours? Just as I thought. Not a scrap of sacrifice! Not a scrap! Despicable, despicable, despicable! And what are you doing here, White Hair? Did you come here for a walk with your beloved? You’d make a pretty couple, were you not marred by your legs.’

‘She is not my beloved. We barely know each other.’

‘Yes?’ Sh’eenaz said in astonishment. ‘Pity. You suit each other, you look lovely together. Who is it?’

‘I’m Essi Daven, poet,’ Little Eye sang with an accent and melody beside which the Witcher’s voice sounded like the cawing of a crow. ‘Nice to meet you, Sh’eenaz.’

The mermaid slapped her hands on the water and laughed brightly.

‘How gorgeous!’ she cried. ‘You know our tongue! Upon my word, you astonish me, you humans. Verily, not nearly as much divides us as people say.’

The Witcher was no less astonished than the mermaid, although he might have guessed that the educated and well-read Essi would know the Elder Speech better than him. It was the language of the elves, a euphonious version of which was used by mermaids, sea witches and nereids. It also ought to have been clear to him that the melodiousness and complicated intonation pattern of the mermaids’ speech, which for him was a handicap, made it easier for Little Eye.

‘Sh’eenaz!’ he called. ‘A few things divide us, nevertheless, and what occasionally divides us is spilled blood! Who . . . who killed the pearl divers, over there, by the two rocks? Tell me!’

The mermaid dived down, churning the water. A moment later she spurted back out onto the surface again, and her pretty little face was contracted and drawn into an ugly grimace.

‘Don’t you dare!’ she screamed, piercingly shrilly. ‘Don’t you dare go near the steps! It is not for you! Don’t fall foul of them! It is not for you!’

‘What? What isn’t for us?’

‘Not for you!’ Sh’eenaz yelled, falling onto her back on the waves.

Splashes of water shot high up. For just a moment longer they saw her forked, finned tail flapping over the waves. Then she vanished under the water.

Little Eye tidied her hair, which had been ruffled by the wind. She stood motionless with her head bowed.

‘I didn’t know,’ Geralt said, clearing his throat, ‘that you knew the Elder Speech so well, Essi.’

‘You couldn’t have known,’ she said with a distinct bitterness in her voice. ‘After all . . . after all, you barely know me.’

VI

‘Geralt,’ Dandelion said, looking around and sniffing like a hound. ‘It stinks terribly here, don’t you think?’

‘Does it?’ the Witcher sniffed. ‘I’ve been in places where it smelled worse. It’s only the smell of the sea.’

The bard turned his head away and spat between two rocks. The water bubbled in the rocky clefts, foaming and soughing, exposing gorges full of sea-worn pebbles.

‘Look how nicely it’s dried out, Geralt. Where has the water gone? What is it with those bloody tides? Where do they come from? Haven’t you ever thought about it?’

‘No. I’ve had other concerns.’

‘I think,’ Dandelion said, trembling slightly, ‘that down there in the depths, at the very bottom of this bloody ocean, crouches a huge monster, a fat, scaly beast, a toad with horns on its vile head. And from time to time it draws water into its belly, and with the water everything that lives and can be eaten: fish, seals, turtles – everything. And then, having devoured its prey, it pukes up the water and we have the tide. What do you think about that?’

‘I think you’re a fool. Yennefer once told me that the moon causes the tides.’

Dandelion cackled.

‘What bloody rubbish! What does the moon have to do with the sea? Only dogs howl at the moon. She was having you on, Geralt, that little liar of yours, she put one over on you. Not for the first time either, I’d say.’

The Witcher did not comment. He looked at the boulders glistening with water in the ravines exposed by the tide. The water was still exploding and foaming in them, but it looked as though they would get through.

‘Very well, let’s get to work,’ he said, standing and adjusting his sword on his back. ‘We can’t wait any longer, or we won’t make it back before the tide comes in. Do you still insist on coming with me?’

‘Yes. Subjects for ballads aren’t fir cones, you don’t find them under a tree. Aside from that, it’s Poppet’s birthday tomorrow.’

‘I don’t see the link.’

‘Pity. There exists the custom among we – normal – people of giving one another presents on birthdays. I can’t afford to buy her anything. So I shall find something for her on the seabed.’

‘A herring? Or a cuttlefish?’

‘Dolt. I’ll find some amber, perhaps a seahorse, or maybe a pretty conch. The point is it’s a symbol, a sign of concern and affection. I like Little Eye and I want to please her. Don’t you understand? I thought not. Let’s go. You first, because there might be a monster down there.’

‘Right.’ The Witcher slid down from the cliff onto the slippery rocks, covered with algae. ‘I’ll go first, in order to protect you if needs be. As a sign of my concern and affection. Just remember, if I shout, run like hell and don’t get tangled up in my sword. We aren’t going to gather seahorses. We’re going to deal with a monster that murders people.’

They set off downwards, into the rifts of the exposed seabed, in some places wading through the water still swirling in the rocky vents. They splashed around in hollows lined with sand and bladder wrack. To make matters worse it began to rain, so they were soon soaked from head to foot. Dandelion kept stopping and digging around in the pebbles and tangles of seaweed.

‘Oh, look, Geralt, a little fish. It’s all red, by the Devil. And here, look, a little eel. And this? What is it? It looks like a great big, transparent flea. And this . . . Oh, mother! Geraaalt!’

The Witcher turned around at once, with his hand on his sword.

It was a human skull, white, worn smooth by the rocks, jammed into a rocky crevice, full of sand. But not only sand. Dandelion, seeing a lugworm writhing in the eye socket, shuddered and made an unpleasant noise. The Witcher shrugged and headed towards the rocky plain exposed by the sea, in the direction of the two jagged reefs, known as the Dragons Fangs, which now looked like mountains. He moved cautiously. The seabed was strewn with sea cucumbers, shells and piles of bladder wrack. Large jellyfish swayed and brittle stars whirled in the rock pools and hollows. Small crabs, as colourful as hummingbirds, fled from them, creeping sideways, their legs scurrying busily.

Geralt noticed a corpse some way off, wedged between the rocks. The drowned man’s chest could be seen moving beneath his shirt and the seaweed, though in principle there was no longer anything

to move it. It was teeming with crabs, outside and inside. The body could not have been in the water longer than a day, but the crabs had picked it so clean it was pointless examining it closer. The Witcher changed direction without a word, giving the corpse a wide berth. Dandelion did not notice anything.

'Why, but it stinks of rot here,' he swore, trying to catch up with Geralt. He spat and shook water from his bonnet. 'And it's tipping down and I'm cold. I'll catch a chill and lose my bloody voice . . .'

'Stop moaning. If you want to go back you know the way.'

Right beyond the base of the Dragons Fangs stretched out a flat, rocky shelf, and beyond it was deep water, the calmly rippling sea. The limit of the tide.

'Ha, Geralt,' Dandelion said, looking around. 'I think that monster of yours had enough sense to withdraw to the high sea with the tide. And I guess you thought it'd be lazing about here somewhere, waiting for you to hack it to pieces?'

'Be quiet.'

The Witcher approached the edge of the shelf and knelt down, cautiously resting his hands on the sharp shells clinging to the rocks. He could not see anything. The water was dark, and the surface was cloudy, dulled by the drizzle.

Dandelion searched the recesses of the reefs, kicking the more aggressive crabs from his legs, examining and feeling the dripping rocks bearded with sagging seaweed and specked with coarse colonies of crustaceans and molluscs.

'Hey, Geralt!'

'What?'

'Look at those shells. They're pearl oysters, aren't they?'

'No.'

'Know anything about them?'

'No.'

'So keep your opinions to yourself until you do know something. They are pearl oysters, I'm certain. I'll start collecting pearls, at least there'll be some profit from this expedition, not just a cold. Shall I begin, Geralt?'

'Go ahead. The monster attacks pearl divers. Pearl collectors probably fall into the same category.'

‘Am I to be bait?’

‘Start collecting. Take the bigger ones, because if you don’t find any pearls we can make soup out of them.’

‘Forget it. I’ll just collect pearls; fuck the shells. Dammit . . . Bitch . . . How do you . . . bloody . . . open it? Do you have a knife, Geralt?’

‘Haven’t you even brought a knife?’

‘I’m a poet, not some knifer. Oh, to hell with it, I’ll put them in a bag and we’ll get the pearls out later. Hey, you! Scram!’

He kicked off a crab, which flew over Geralt’s head and splashed into the water. The Witcher walked slowly along the edge of the shelf, eyes fixed on the black, impenetrable water. He heard the rhythmic tapping of the stone Dandelion was using to dislodge the shells from the rock.

‘Dandelion! Come and look!’

The jagged, cracked shelf suddenly ended in a level, sharp edge, which fell downwards at an acute angle. Immense, angular, regular blocks of white marble, overgrown with seaweed, molluscs and sea anemones swaying in the water like flowers in the breeze, could clearly be seen beneath the surface of the water.

‘What is it? They look like – like steps.’

‘Because they *are* steps,’ Dandelion whispered in awe. ‘Ooo, they’re steps leading to an underwater city. To the legendary Ys, which was swallowed up by the sea. Have you heard the legend of the city of the chasm, about Ys-Beneath-The-Waves? I shall write such a ballad the competition won’t know what’s hit them. I have to see it up close . . . Look, there’s some kind of mosaic, something is engraved or carved there . . . Some kind of writing? Move away, Geralt.’

‘Dandelion! That’s a trench! You’ll slip off . . .’

‘Never mind. I’m wet anyway. See, it’s shallow here, barely waist-deep on this first step. And as wide as a ballroom. Oh, bloody hell . . .’

Geralt jumped very quickly into the water and grabbed the bard, who had fallen in up to his neck.

‘I tripped on that shit,’ Dandelion said, gasping for air, recovering himself and lifting a large, flat mollusc dripping water from its cobalt blue shell, overgrown with threads of algae. ‘There’s loads of

these on the steps. It's a pretty colour, don't you think? Grab it and shove it into your bag, mine's already full.'

'Get out of there,' the Witcher snapped, annoyed. 'Get back on the shelf this minute, Dandelion. This isn't a game.'

'Quiet. Did you hear that? What was it?'

Geralt heard it. The sound was coming from below, from under the water. Dull and deep, although simultaneously faint, soft, brief, broken off. The sound of a bell.

'It's a bloody bell,' Dandelion whispered, clambering out onto the shelf. 'I was right, Geralt. It's the bell of the sunken Ys, the bell of the city of monsters muffled by the weight of the depths. It's the damned reminding us . . .'

'Will you shut up?'

The sound repeated. Considerably closer.

'. . . reminding us,' the bard continued, squeezing out the soaking tail of his jerkin, 'of its dreadful fate. That bell is a warning . . .'

The Witcher stopped paying attention to Dandelion's voice and concentrated on his other senses. He sensed. He sensed something.

'It's a warning,' Dandelion said, sticking the tip of his tongue out, as was his custom when he was concentrating. 'A warning, because . . . hmm . . . So we would not forget . . . hmm . . . hmmm . . . I've got it!

'The heart of the bell sounds softly, it sings a song of death

Of death, which can be born more easily than oblivion . . .'

The water right next to the Witcher exploded. Dandelion screamed. The goggle-eyed monster emerging from the foam aimed a broad, serrated, scythe-like blade at Geralt. Geralt's sword was already in his hand, from the moment the water had begun to swell, so now he merely twisted confidently at the hips and slashed the monster across its drooping, scaly dewlap. He immediately turned the other way, where another creature was churning up the water. It was wearing a bizarre helmet and something resembling a suit of armour made of tarnished copper. The Witcher parried the blade of the short spear being thrust towards him with a broad sweep of his sword and with the momentum the parry gave him struck across the ichthyoid-reptilian toothy muzzle. He leapt aside towards the edge of the shelf, splashing water.

'Fly, Dandelion!'

‘Give me your hand!’

‘Fly, dammit!’

Another creature emerged from the water, the curved sword whistling in its rough green hands. The Witcher thrust his back against the edge of the shellfish-covered rock, assumed a fighting position, but the fish-eyed creature did not approach. It was the same height as Geralt. The water also reached to its waist, but the impressively puffed-up comb on its head and its dilated gills gave the impression of greater size. The grimace distorting the broad maw armed with teeth was deceptively similar to a cruel smile.

The creature, paying no attention to the two twitching bodies floating in the red water, raised its sword, gripping the long hilt without a cross guard in both hands. Puffing up its comb and gills even more, it deftly spun the blade in the air. Geralt heard the light blade hiss and whirr.

The creature took a pace forward, sending a wave towards the Witcher. Geralt took a swing and whirled his sword in response. And also took a step, taking up the challenge.

The fish-eyed creature deftly twisted its long clawed fingers on the hilt and slowly lowered its arms, which were protected by tortoiseshell and copper, and plunged them up to its elbows, concealing the weapon beneath the water. The Witcher grasped his sword in both hands; his right hand just below the cross guard, his left by the pommel, and lifted the weapon up and a little to the side, above his right shoulder. He looked into the monster’s eyes, but they were the iridescent eyes of a fish, eyes with spherical irises, glistening coldly and metallically. Eyes which neither expressed nor betrayed anything. Nothing that might warn of an attack.

From the depths at the bottom of the steps, disappearing into the black chasm, came the sound of a bell. Closer and closer, more and more distinct.

The fish-eyed creature lunged forward, pulling its blade from under the water, attacking as swiftly as a thought, with a montante thrust. Geralt was simply lucky; he had expected the blow to be dealt from the right. He parried with his blade directed downwards, powerfully twisting his body, and rotated his sword, meeting the monster’s sword flat. Now everything depended on which of them would twist their fingers more quickly on the hilt, who would be first to move from the flat, static impasse of the blades to a blow, a blow whose force was now being generated by both of them, by

shifting their bodyweight to the appropriate leg. Geralt already knew they were as fast as each other.

But the fish-eyed creature had longer fingers.

The Witcher struck it in the side, above the hips, twisted into a half-turn, smote, pressing down on the blade, and easily dodged a wide, chaotic, desperate and clumsy blow. The monster, noiselessly opening its ichthyoid mouth, disappeared beneath the water, which was pulsating with crimson clouds.

‘Give me your hand! Quickly!’ Dandelion yelled. ‘They’re coming, a whole gang of them! I can see them!’

The Witcher seized the bard’s right hand and hauled him out of the water onto the rocky shelf. A broad wave splashed behind him.

The tide had turned.

They fled swiftly, pursued by the swelling wave. Geralt looked back and saw numerous other fish-like creatures bursting from the water, saw them giving chase, leaping nimbly on their muscular legs. Without a word he speeded up.

Dandelion was panting, running heavily and splashing around the now knee-high water. He suddenly stumbled and fell, sloshing among the bladder wrack, supporting himself on trembling arms. Geralt caught him by the belt and hauled him out of the foam, now seething all around them.

‘Run!’ he cried. ‘I’ll hold them back!’

‘Geralt—’

‘Run, Dandelion! The water’s about to fill the rift and then we won’t get out of here! Run for your life!’

Dandelion groaned and ran. The Witcher ran after him, hoping the monsters would become strung out in the chase. He knew he had no chance taking on the entire group.

They chased him just beside the rift, because the water there was deep enough for them to swim, while he was clambering the slippery rocks with difficulty, wallowing in the foam. In the rift, however, it was too tight for them to assail him from all sides. He stopped in the basin where Dandelion had found the skull.

He stopped and turned around. And calmed down.

He struck the first with the very tip of his sword, where the temple would have been on a man. He split open the belly of the next one, which was armed with something resembling a short

battle-axe. A third fled.

The Witcher rushed up the gorge, but at the same time a surging wave boomed, erupting in foam, seethed in an eddy in the vent, tore him off the rocks and dragged him downwards, into the boiling water. He collided with a fishy creature flapping about in the eddy, and thrust it away with a kick. Something caught him by his legs and pulled him down, towards the seafloor. He hit the rock on his back, opened his eyes just in time to see the dark shapes of the creatures, two swift blurs. He parried the first blur with his sword, and instinctively protected himself from the second by raising his left arm. He felt a blow, pain, and immediately afterwards the sharp sting of salt. He pushed off from the bottom with his feet, splashed upwards towards the surface, formed his fingers together and released a Sign. The explosion was dull and stabbed his ears with a brief paroxysm of pain. If I get out of this, he thought, beating the water with his arms and legs, if I get out of this, I'll ride to Yen in Vengerberg and I'll try again . . . If I get out of this . . .

He thought he could hear the booming of a trumpet. Or a horn.

The tidal wave, exploding again in the chimney, lifted him up and tossed him out on his belly onto a large rock. Now he could clearly hear a booming horn and Dandelion's cries, seemingly coming from all sides at once. He snorted the saltwater from his nose and looked around, tossing his wet hair from his face.

He was on the shore, right where they had set out from. He was lying belly-down on the rocks, and a breaker was seething white foam around him.

Behind him, in the gorge – now a narrow bay – a large grey dolphin danced on the waves. On its back, tossing her wet, willow-green hair, sat the mermaid. She still had beautiful breasts.

'White Hair!' she sang, waving a hand which was holding a large, conical, spirally twisting conch. 'Are you in one piece?'

'Yes,' the Witcher said in amazement. The foam around him had become pink. His left arm had stiffened and was stinging from the salt. His jacket sleeve was cut, straight and evenly, and blood was gushing from the cut. I got out of it, he thought, I pulled it off again. But no, I'm not going anywhere.

He saw Dandelion, who was running towards him, stumbling over the wet pebbles.

'I've held them back!' the mermaid sang, and sounded the conch again. 'But not for long! Flee and return here no more, White Hair!

The sea . . . is not for you!'

'I know!' he shouted back. 'I know. Thank you, Sh'eenaz!'

VII

‘Dandelion,’ Little Eye said, tearing the end of the bandage with her teeth and tying a knot on Geralt’s wrist. ‘Explain to me how a pile of snail shells ended up at the bottom of the stairs? Drouhard’s wife is clearing them up right now and is making it clear what she thinks of you two.’

‘Shells?’ Dandelion asked. ‘What shells? I have no idea. Perhaps some passing ducks dropped them?’

Geralt smiled, turning his head toward the shadow. He smiled at the memory of Dandelion’s curses; he had spent the entire afternoon opening shells and rummaging around in the slippery flesh, during which process he had nicked himself and soiled his shirt, but hadn’t found a single pearl. And no small wonder, as they weren’t pearl oysters at all, but ordinary scallops and mussels. They abandoned the idea of making soup from the shellfish when Dandelion opened the first shell; the mollusc looked unappealing and stank to high heaven.

Little Eye finished bandaging him and sat down on an upturned tub. The Witcher thanked her, examining his neatly bandaged arm. The wound was deep and quite long, extending as far as the elbow, and intensely painful when he moved it. She had put on a makeshift dressing by the seashore, but before they had got back it had begun to bleed again. Just before the girl arrived, Geralt had poured a coagulating elixir onto his mutilated forearm, and boosted it with an anaesthetic elixir, and Essi had caught them just as he and Dandelion were suturing the wound using a fishing line tied to a hook. Little Eye swore at them and got down to making a dressing herself, while Dandelion regaled her with a colourful tale of the fight, several times reserving himself the exclusive right to compose a ballad about the whole incident. Essi, naturally, flooded Geralt with an avalanche of questions, which he was unable to answer. She took that badly, and evidently had the impression he was concealing something from her. She became sullen and ceased her questioning.

‘Agloval already knows,’ she said. ‘You were seen returning, and Mrs Drouhard ran off to spread the word when she saw the blood on the stairs. The people dashed towards the rocks, hoping the sea would toss something out. They’re still hanging around there, but haven’t found anything, from what I know.’

‘Nor will they,’ the Witcher said. ‘I shall visit Agloval tomorrow, but ask him, if you would, to forbid people from hanging around the Dragons Fangs. Just not a word, please, about those steps or Dandelion’s fantasies about the city of Ys. Treasure and sensation hunters would immediately go, and there’ll be further deaths—’

‘I’m not a gossip,’ Essi said sulkily, sharply tossing her lock from her forehead. ‘If I ask you something it isn’t in order to dash off to the well at once and blab it to the washerwomen.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘I must go,’ Dandelion suddenly said. ‘I’ve got a rendezvous with Akeretta. Geralt, I’m taking your jerkin, because mine is incredibly filthy and wet.’

‘Everything here is wet,’ Little Eye said sneeringly, nudging the articles of clothing strewn around with the tip of her shoe in disgust. ‘How can you? They need to be hung up and properly dried . . . You’re dreadful.’

‘It’ll dry off by itself,’ Dandelion pulled on Geralt’s damp jacket and examined the silver studs on the sleeves with delight.

‘Don’t talk rubbish. And what’s this? Oh, no, that bag is still full of sludge and seaweed! And this – what’s this? Yuck!’

Geralt and Dandelion silently observed the cobalt blue shell Essi was holding between two fingers. They had forgotten. The mollusc was slightly open and clearly reeked.

‘It’s a present,’ the troubadour said, moving back towards the door. ‘It’s your birthday tomorrow, isn’t it, Poppet? Well, that’s a present for you.’

‘This?’

‘Pretty, isn’t it?’ Dandelion sniffed it and added quickly. ‘It’s from Geralt. He chose it for you. Oh, is that the time? Farewell . . .’

Little Eye was quiet for a moment after he had gone. The Witcher looked at the stinking shellfish and felt ashamed. Of Dandelion and of himself.

‘Did you remember my birthday?’ Essi asked slowly, holding the shell at arm’s length. ‘Really?’

‘Give it to me,’ he said sharply. He got up from the palliasse, protecting his bandaged arm. ‘I apologise for that idiot . . .’

‘No,’ she protested, removing a small knife from a sheath at her belt. ‘It really is a pretty shell, I’ll keep it as a memento. It only

needs cleaning, after I've got rid of the . . . contents. I'll throw them out of the window, the cats can eat them.'

Something clattered on the floor and rolled away. Geralt widened his pupils and saw what it was long before Essi.

It was a pearl. An exquisitely iridescent and shimmering pearl of faintly blue colour, as big as a swollen pea.

'By the Gods.' Little Eye had also caught sight of it. 'Geralt . . . A pearl!'

'A pearl,' he laughed. 'And so you did get a present, Essi. I'm glad.'

'Geralt, I can't accept it. That pearl is worth . . .'

'It's yours,' he interrupted. 'Dandelion, though he plays the fool, really did remember your birthday. He really wanted to please you. He talked about it, talked aloud about it. Well, fate heard him and did what had to be done.'

'And you, Geralt?'

'Me?'

'Did you . . . also want to please me? That pearl is so beautiful . . . It must be hugely valuable – don't you regret it?'

'I'm pleased you like it. And if I regret anything, it's that there was only one. And that . . .'

'Yes?'

'That I haven't known you as long as Dandelion, long enough to be able to know and remember your birthday. To be able to give you presents and please you. To be able to call you Poppet.'

She moved closer and suddenly threw her arms around his neck. He nimbly and swiftly anticipated her movement, dodged her lips and kissed her coldly on the cheek, embracing her with his uninjured arm, clumsily, with reserve, gently. He felt the girl stiffen and slowly move back, but only to the length of her arms, which were still resting on his shoulders. He knew what she was waiting for, but did not do it. He did not draw her towards him.

Essi let him go and turned towards the open, dirty little window.

'Of course,' she said suddenly. 'You barely know me. I forgot that you barely know me.'

'Essi,' he said after a moment's silence. 'I—'

'I barely know you either,' she blurted, interrupting him. 'What of

it? I love you. I can't help it. Not at all.'

'Essi!'

'Yes. I love you, Geralt. I don't care what you think. I've loved you from the moment I saw you at that engagement party . . .'

She broke off, lowering her head.

She stood before him and Geralt regretted it was her and not the fish-eyed creature with a sword who had been hidden beneath the water. He had stood a chance against that creature. But against her he had none.

'You aren't saying anything,' she said. 'Nothing, not a word.'

I'm tired, he thought, and bloody weak. I need to sit down, I'm feeling dizzy, I've lost some blood and haven't eaten anything . . . I have to sit down. Damned little attic, he thought, I hope it gets struck by lightning and burns down during the next storm. And there's no bloody furniture, not even two stupid chairs and a table, which divides you, across which you can so easily and safely talk; you can even hold hands. But I have to sit down on the palliasse, have to ask her to sit down beside me. And the palliasse stuffed with bean stalks is dangerous, you can't escape from it, take evasive action.

'Sit beside me, Essi.'

She sat down. Reluctantly. Tactfully. Far away. Too close.

'When I found out,' she whispered, interrupting the long silence, 'when I heard that Dandelion had dragged you onto the beach, bleeding, I ran out of the house like a mad thing, rushed blindly, paying no attention to anything. And then . . . Do you know what I thought? That it was magic, that you had cast a spell on me, that you had secretly, treacherously bewitched me, spellbound me, with your wolfish medallion, with the evil eye. That's what I thought, but I didn't stop, kept running, because I understood that I desire . . . I desire to fall under your spell. And the reality turned out to be more awful. You didn't cast any spell on me, you didn't use any charms. Why, Geralt? Why didn't you bewitch me?'

He was silent.

'If it had been magic,' she said, 'it would all be so simple and easy. I would have succumbed to your power and I'd be happy. But this . . . I must . . . I don't know what's happening to me . . .'

Dammit, he thought, if Yennefer feels like I do now when she's with me, I feel sorry for her. And I shall never be astonished again. I

will never hate her again . . . Never again.

Because perhaps Yennefer feels what I'm feeling now, feels a profound certainty that I ought to fulfil what it is impossible to fulfil, even more impossible to fulfil than the relationship between Agloval and Sh'eenaz. Certainty that a little sacrifice isn't enough here; you'd have to sacrifice everything, and there'd still be no way of knowing if that would be enough. No, I won't continue to hate Yennefer for not being able and not wanting to give me more than a little sacrifice. Now I know that a little sacrifice is a hell of a lot.

'Geralt,' Little Eye moaned, drawing her head into her shoulders. 'I'm so ashamed. I'm ashamed of what I'm feeling, it's like an accursed infirmity, like malaria, like being unable to breathe . . .'

He was silent.

'I always thought it was a beautiful and noble state of mind, noble and dignified, even if it makes one unhappy. After all, I've composed so many ballads about it. And it is organic, Geralt, meanly and heartbreakingly organic. Someone who is ill or who has drunk poison might feel like this. Because like someone who has drunk poison, one is prepared to do anything in exchange for an antidote. Anything. Even be humiliated.'

'Essi. Please . . .'

'Yes. I feel humiliated, humiliated by having confessed everything to you, disregarding the dignity that demands one suffers in silence. By the fact that my confession caused you embarrassment. I feel humiliated by the fact that you're embarrassed. But I couldn't have behaved any differently. I'm powerless. At your mercy, like someone who's bedridden. I've always been afraid of illness, of being weak, helpless, hopeless and alone. I've always been afraid of sickness, always believing it the worst thing that could befall me . . .'

He was silent.

'I know,' she groaned again. 'I know I ought to be grateful to you for . . . for not taking advantage of the situation. But I'm not grateful to you. And I'm ashamed of it. For I hate your silence, your terrified eyes. I hate you. For staying silent. For not lying, for not . . . And I hate her, that sorceress of yours, I'd happily stab her for . . . I hate her. Make me go, Geralt. Order me to leave here. For of my own free will I cannot, but I want to get out of here, go to the city, to a tavern . . . I want to have my revenge on you for my shame, for the humiliation, I'll go to the first man I find . . .'

Dammit, he thought, hearing her voice dropping like a rag ball rolling down the stairs. She'll burst into tears, he thought, there's no doubt, she'll burst into tears. What to do, what to bloody do?

Essi's hunched up shoulders were trembling hard. The girl turned her head away and began to weep, crying softly, dreadfully calmly and unrelentingly.

I don't feel anything, he noticed with horror, nothing, not the smallest emotion. That fact that I will embrace her is a deliberate, measured response, not a spontaneous one. I'll hug her, for I feel as though I ought to, not because I want to. I feel nothing.

When he embraced her, she stopped crying immediately, wiped away her tears, shaking her head forcefully and turning away so that he could not see her face. And then she pressed herself to him firmly, burying her head in his chest.

A little sacrifice, he thought, just a little sacrifice. For this will calm her, a hug, a kiss, calm caresses. She doesn't want anything more. And even if she did, what of it? For a little sacrifice, a very little sacrifice, is beautiful and worth . . . Were she to want more . . . It would calm her. A quiet, calm, gentle act of love. And I . . . Why, it doesn't matter, because Essi smells of verbena, not lilac and gooseberry, doesn't have cool, electrifying skin. Essi's hair is not a black tornado of gleaming curls, Essi's eyes are gorgeous, soft, warm and cornflower blue; they don't blaze with a cold, unemotional, deep violet. Essi will fall asleep afterwards, turn her head away, open her mouth slightly, Essi will not smile in triumph. For Essi . . .

Essi is not Yennefer.

And that is why I cannot. I cannot find that little sacrifice inside myself.

'Please, Essi, don't cry.'

'I won't,' she said, moving very slowly away from him. 'I won't. I understand. It cannot be any other way.'

They said nothing, sitting beside each other on the palliasse stuffed with bean stalks. Evening was approaching.

'Geralt,' she suddenly said, and her voice trembled. 'But perhaps . . . Perhaps it would be like it was with that shell, with that curious gift? Perhaps we could find a pearl? Later? When some time has passed?'

'I can see that pearl,' he said with effort, 'set in silver, in a little

silver flower with intricate petals. I see it around your neck, on a delicate silver chain, worn like I wear my medallion. That will be your talisman, Essi. A talisman, which will protect you from all evil.'

'My talisman,' she repeated, lowering her head. 'My pearl, which I shall set in silver, and from which I shall never part. My jewel, which I was given instead of . . . Can a talisman like that bring me luck?'

'Yes, Essi. Be sure of it.'

'Can I stay here a little longer? With you?'

'You may.'

Twilight was approaching and dusk falling, and they were sitting on a palliasse stuffed with bean stalks, in the garret, where there was no furniture, where there was only a wooden tub and an unlit candle on the floor, in a puddle of hardened wax.

They sat in utter silence for a very long time. And then Dandelion came. They heard him approaching, strumming his lute and humming to himself. Dandelion entered, saw them and did not say anything, not a word. Essi also said nothing, stood up and went out without looking at them.

Dandelion did not say a word. But the Witcher saw in his eyes the words that remained unsaid.

VIII

‘An intelligent race,’ Agloval repeated pensively, resting an elbow on the armrest, and his fist on his chin. ‘An underwater civilisation. Fishlike people living on the seabed. Steps leading to the depths. Geralt, you take me for a bloody gullible duke.’

Little Eye, standing beside Dandelion, snarled angrily. Dandelion shook his head in disbelief. Geralt was not in the least bothered.

‘It makes no difference to me,’ he said quietly, ‘if you believe me or not. It is, however, my duty to warn you. Any boat that sails towards the Dragons Fangs, or people who appear there when the tide is out, are in danger. Mortal danger. If you want to find out if it’s true, if you want to risk it, that’s your business. I’m simply warning you.’

‘Ha,’ the steward Zelest, who was sitting in a window seat behind Agloval, suddenly said. ‘If they are monsters the like of elves or other goblins, we don’t need to worry. We feared it was something worse, or, God save us, something magical. From what the Witcher says, they are some kind of sea drowners or other sea monsters. There are ways of dealing with drowners. I heard tell that one sorcerer gave some drowners short shrift in Lake Mokva. He poured a small barrel of magical philtre into the water and did for the fuckers. Didn’t leave a trace.’

‘That’s true,’ Drouhard said, who up to then had been silent. ‘There wasn’t a trace. Nor a trace of bream, pike, crayfish or mussels. Even the waterweed on the lake floor rotted away and the alders on the bank withered.’

‘Capital,’ Agloval said derisively. ‘Thank you for that excellent suggestion, Zelest. Do you have any more?’

‘Aye, fair enough,’ the steward said, blushing. ‘The wizard overdid it a mite with his wand, waved it about a jot too much. But we ought to manage without wizards too, Your Grace. The Witcher says that one can fight those monsters and also kill ’em. That’s war, sire. Like the old days. Nothing new there, eh? Werelynxes lived in the mountains, and where are they now? Wild elves and eerie wives still roam the forests, but there’ll soon be an end to that. We’ll secure what is ours. As our granddaddies . . .’

‘And only my grandchildren will see the pearls?’ The duke grimaced. ‘It is too long to wait, Zelest.’

‘Well, it won’t be that bad. Seems to me it’s like this: two boats of archers to each boat of divers. We’ll soon learn those monsters some sense. Learn them some fear. Am I right, Witcher, sir?’

Geralt looked coldly at him, but did not respond.

Agloval turned his head away, showing his noble profile, and bit his lip. Then he looked at the Witcher, narrowing his eyes and frowning.

‘You didn’t complete your task, Geralt,’ he said. ‘You fouled things up again. You had good intentions, I can’t deny that. But I don’t pay for good intentions. I pay for results. For the effect. And the effect, excuse the expression, is shitty. So you earn shit.’

‘Marvellous, Your Grace,’ Dandelion jibed. ‘Pity you weren’t with us at the Dragons Fangs. The Witcher and I might have given you the opportunity for an encounter with one of those from the sea, sword in hand. Perhaps then you would understand what this is about, and stop bickering about payment—’

‘Like a fishwife,’ Little Eye interjected.

‘I am not accustomed to bickering, bargaining or discussing,’ Agloval said calmly. ‘I said I shall not pay you a penny, Geralt. The agreement ran: remove the danger, remove the threat, enable the fishing of pearls without any risk to people. But you? You come and tell me about an intelligent race from the seabed. You advise me to stay away from the place which brings me profit. What did you do? You reputedly killed . . . How many?’

‘It matters not how many,’ Geralt said, blanching slightly. ‘At least, not to you, Agloval.’

‘Precisely. Particularly since there is no proof. If you had at least brought the right hands of those fish-toads, who knows, perhaps I would have splashed out on the normal fee my forester takes for a pair of wolf’s ears.’

‘Well,’ the Witcher said coldly. ‘I’m left with no choice but to say farewell.’

‘You are mistaken,’ the duke said. ‘Something does remain. Permanent work for quite decent coin and lodgings. The position and ticket of skipper of my armed guard, which from now on will accompany the divers. It does not have to be forever, but only until your reputed intelligent race gains enough good sense to keep well away from my boats, to avoid them like the plague. What do you say?’

‘No thank you, I decline,’ the Witcher grimaced. ‘A job like that doesn’t suit me. I consider waging war against other races idiocy. Perhaps it’s excellent sport for bored and jaded dukes. But not for me.’

‘Oh, how proud,’ Agloval smiled. ‘How haughty. You reject offers in a way some kings wouldn’t be ashamed of. You give up decent money with the air of a wealthy man after a lavish dinner. Geralt? Did you have lunch today? No? And tomorrow? And the day after? I see little chance, Witcher, very little. It’s difficult for you to find work normally and now, with your arm in a sling—’

‘How dare you!’ Little Eye cried shrilly. ‘How dare you speak like that to him, Agloval! The arm he now carries in a sling was cut carrying out your mission! How can you be so base—’

‘Stop it,’ Geralt said. ‘Stop, Essi. There’s no point.’

‘Not true,’ she said angrily. ‘There *is* a point. Someone has to tell it straight to this self-appointed duke, who took advantage of the fact that no one was challenging him for the title deed to rule this scrap of rocky coastline, and who now thinks he has the right to insult other people.’

Agloval flushed and tightened his lips, but said nothing and did not move.

‘Yes, Agloval,’ Essi continued, clenching her shaking hands into fists. ‘The opportunity to insult other people amuses and pleases you. You delight in the contempt you can show the Witcher, who is prepared to risk his neck for your money. You should know the Witcher mocks your contempt and slights, that they do not make the faintest impression on him. He doesn’t even notice them. No, the Witcher does not even feel what your servants and subjects, Zelest and Drouhard, feel, and they feel shame, deep, burning shame. The Witcher doesn’t feel what Dandelion and I feel, and we feel revulsion. Do you know why that is, Agloval? I’ll tell you. The Witcher knows he is superior. He is worthier than you. And that gives him his strength.’

Essi fell silent and lowered her head, but not quickly enough for Geralt not to see the tear which sparkled in the corner of her gorgeous eye. The girl touched the little flower with silver petals hanging around her neck, the flower in the centre of which nestled a large, sky blue pearl. The little flower had intricate, plaited petals, executed in masterly fashion. Drouhard, the Witcher thought, had come up trumps. The craftsman he had recommended did a good job. And had not taken a penny from them. Drouhard had paid for

everything.

‘So, Your Grace,’ Little Eye continued, raising her head, ‘don’t make a fool of yourself by offering the Witcher the role of a mercenary in an army you plan to field against the ocean. Don’t expose yourself to ridicule, for your suggestion could only prompt mirth. Don’t you understand yet? You can pay the Witcher for carrying out a task, you can hire him to protect people from evil, to remove the danger that threatens them. But you cannot buy the Witcher, you cannot use him to your own ends. Because the Witcher – even wounded and hungry – is better than you. Has more worth. That is why he scorns your meagre offer. Do you understand?’

‘No, Miss Daven,’ Agloval said coldly. ‘I do not understand. On the contrary, I understand less and less. And the fundamental thing I indeed do not understand is why I have not yet ordered your entire trio hanged, after having you thrashed with a scourge and scorched with red-hot irons. You, Miss Daven, are endeavouring to give the impression of somebody who knows everything. Tell me, then, why I do not do that.’

‘As you please,’ the poet shot back at once. ‘You do not do that, Agloval, because somewhere, deep inside, glimmers in you a little spark of decency, a scrap of honour, not yet stifled by the vainglory of a nouveau riche and petty trader. Inside, Agloval. At the bottom of your heart. A heart which, after all, is capable of loving a mermaid.’

Agloval went as white as a sheet and gripped the armrests of his chair. Bravo, the Witcher thought, bravo, Essi, wonderful. He was proud of her. But at the same time he felt sorrow, tremendous sorrow.

‘Go away,’ Agloval said softly. ‘Go away. Wherever you wish. Leave me in peace.’

‘Farewell, duke,’ Essi said. ‘And on parting accept some good advice. Advice which the Witcher ought to be giving you; but I don’t want him to stoop to giving you advice. So I’ll do it for him.’

‘Very well.’

‘The ocean is immense, Agloval. No one has explored what lies beyond the horizon, if anything is there at all. The ocean is bigger than any wilderness, deep into which you have driven the elves. It is less accessible than any mountains or ravines where you have massacred werelynxes. And on the floor of the ocean dwells a race which uses weapons and knows the arcana of metalworking.

Beware, Agloval. If archers begin to sail with the pearl divers, you will begin a war with something you don't understand. What you mean to disturb may turn out to be a hornets' nest. I advise you, leave them the sea, for the sea is not for you. You don't know and will never know whither lead those steps, which go down to the bottom of the Dragons Fangs.'

'You are mistaken, Miss Daven,' Agloval said calmly. 'We shall learn whither lead those steps. Further, we shall descend those steps. We shall find out what is on that side of the ocean, if there is anything there at all. And we shall draw from the ocean everything we can. And if not we, then our grandsons will do it, or our grandsons' grandsons. It is just a matter of time. Yes, we shall do it, though the ocean will run red with blood. And you know it, Essi, O wise Essi, who writes the chronicles of humanity in your ballads. Life is not a ballad, O poor, little gorgeous-eyed poet, lost among her fine words. Life is a battle. And we were taught that struggle by these witchers, whose worth is greater than ours. It was they who showed us the way, who paved the way for us. They strewed the path with the corpses of those who stood in the way of humans, and defended that world from us. We, Essi, are only continuing that battle. It is we, not your ballads, who create the chronicles of humanity. And we no longer need witchers, and now nothing will stop us. Nothing.'

Essi blanched, blew her lock away and tossed her head.

'Nothing, Agloval?'

'Nothing, Essi.'

The poet smiled.

A sudden noise, shouts and stamping, came from the anterooms. Pages and guards rushed into the chamber. They knelt or bowed by the door in two rows. Sh'eenaz stood in the doorway.

Her willow-green hair was elaborately coiffured, pinned up with a marvellous circlet encrusted with coral and pearls. She was in a gown the colour of seawater, with frills as white as foam. The gown had a plunging neckline, so that the mermaid's charms, though partly concealed and decorated with a necklace of nephrite and lapis lazuli, still earned the highest admiration.

'Sh'eenaz . . .' Agloval groaned, dropping to his knees. 'My . . . Sh'eenaz . . .'

The mermaid slowly came closer and her gait was soft and graceful, as fluid as an approaching wave.

She stopped in front of the duke, flashed her delicate, white, little teeth in a smile, then quickly gathered her gown in her small hands and lifted it, quite high, high enough for everyone to be able to judge the quality of the marine sorceress, the sea witch. Geralt swallowed. There was no doubt: the sea witch knew what shapely legs were and how to make them.

'Ha!' Dandelion cried. 'My ballad . . . It is just like in my ballad . . . She has gained legs for him, but has lost her voice!'

'I have lost nothing,' Sh'eenaz said melodiously in the purest Common Speech. 'For the moment. I am as good as new after the operation.'

'You speak our tongue?'

'What, mayn't I? How are you, White Hair? Oh, and your beloved one, Essi Daven, if I recall, is here. Do you know her better or still barely?'

'Sh'eenaz . . .' Agloval groaned heartrendingly, moving towards her on his knees. 'My love! My beloved . . . my only . . . And so, at last. At last, Sh'eenaz!'

With a graceful movement the mermaid proffered her hand to be kissed.

'Indeed. Because I love you too, you loon. And what kind of love would it be if the one who loves were not capable of a little sacrifice?'

IX

They left Bremervoord early on a cool morning, among fog which dulled the intensity of the red sun rolling out from below the horizon. They rode as a threesome, as they had agreed. They did not talk about it, they were making no plans – they simply wanted to be together. For some time.

They left the rocky headland, bade farewell to the precipitous, jagged cliffs above the beaches, the fantastic limestone formations carved out by the sea and gales. But as they rode into the green, flower-strewn valley of Dol Adalatte, they still had the scent of the sea in their nostrils, and in their ears the roar of breakers and the piercing, urgent cries of seagulls.

Dandelion talked ceaselessly, hopping from one subject to another and virtually not finishing any. He talked about the Land of Barsa, where a stupid custom required girls to guard their chastity until marriage; about the iron birds of the island of Inis Porhoet; about living water and dead water; about the taste and curious properties of the sapphire wine called ‘cill’; and about the royal quadruplets of Ebbing – dreadful, exasperating brats called Putzi, Gritzi, Mitzi and Juan Pablo Vassermiller. He talked about new trends in poetry promoted by his rivals, which were, in Dandelion’s opinion, phantoms simulating the movements of the living.

Geralt remained silent. Essi also said nothing or replied in monosyllables. The Witcher felt her gaze on him. He avoided her eyes.

They crossed the River Adalatte on the ferry, having to pull the ropes themselves, since the ferryman happened to be in a pathetic drunken state of deathly white, rigid-trembling, gazing-into-the-abyss pallor, unable to let go of the pillar in his porch, which he was clinging to with both hands, and answering every question they asked him with a single word, which sounded like ‘voorg’.

The Witcher had taken a liking to the country on the far side of the Adalatte; the riverside villages were mainly surrounded by palisades, which portended a certain likelihood of finding work.

Little Eye walked over to him while they were watering the horses in the early afternoon, taking advantage of the fact that Dandelion had wandered off. The Witcher was not quick enough. She surprised him.

‘Geralt,’ she said softly. ‘I can’t . . . I can’t bear this. I don’t have the strength.’

He tried to avoid the necessity of looking her in the eye, but she would not let him. She stood in front of him, toying with the sky blue pearl set in a small, silver flower hanging around her neck. She stood like that and he wished again that it was the fish-eyed creature with its sword hidden beneath the water in front of him.

‘Geralt . . . We have to do something about this, don’t we?’

She waited for his answer. For some words. For a little sacrifice. But the Witcher had nothing he could sacrifice and he knew it. He did not want to lie. And he truly did not have it in him, because he could not find the courage to cause her pain.

The situation was saved by the sudden appearance of Dandelion, dependable Dandelion. Dandelion with his dependable tact.

‘Of course!’ he yelled and heaved into the water the stick he had been using to part the rushes and the huge, riverside nettles. ‘And of course you have to do something about it, it’s high time! I have no wish to watch what is going on between you any longer! What do you expect from him, Poppet? The impossible? And you, Geralt, what are you hoping for? That Little Eye will read your thoughts like . . . like the other one? And she will settle for that, and you will conveniently stay quiet, not having to explain, declare or deny anything? And not have to reveal yourself? How much time, how many facts do you both need, to understand? And when you’ll want to recall it in a few years, in your memories? I mean we have to part tomorrow, dammit!

‘I’ve had enough, by the Gods, I’m up to here with you, up to here! Very well, listen: I’m going to break myself off a hazel rod and go fishing, and you will have some time to yourselves, you’ll be able to tell each other everything. Tell each other everything, try to understand each other. It is not as difficult as you think. And after that, by the Gods, do it. Do it with him, Poppet. Do it with her, Geralt, and be good to her. And then, you’ll either bloody get over it, or . . .’

Dandelion turned around rapidly and walked away, breaking reeds and cursing. He made a rod from a hazel branch and horsehair and fished until dusk fell.

After he had walked off, Geralt and Essi stood for a long time, leaning against a misshapen willow tree bent over the water. They stood, holding hands. Then the Witcher spoke, spoke softly for a

long time, and Little Eye's little eye was full of tears.

And then, by the Gods, they did it, she and he.

And everything was all right.

X

The next day they organised something of a ceremonial supper. Essi and Geralt bought a dressed lamb in a village they passed through. While they were haggling, Dandelion surreptitiously stole some garlic, onions and carrots from the vegetable patch behind the cottage. As they were riding away they also swiped a pot from the fence behind the smithy. The pot was a little leaky, but the Witcher soldered it using the Igni Sign.

The supper took place in a clearing deep in the forest. The fire crackled merrily and the pot bubbled. Geralt carefully stirred the stew with a star-shaped stirrer made from the top of a spruce tree stripped of bark. Dandelion peeled the onions and carrots. Little Eye, who had no idea about cooking, made the time more pleasant by playing the lute and singing racy couplets.

It was a ceremonial supper. For they were going to part in the morning. In the morning each of them was going to go their own way; in search of something they already had. But they did not know they had it, they could not even imagine it. They could not imagine where the roads they were meant to set off on the next morning would lead. Each of them travelling separately.

After they had eaten, and drunk the beer Drouhard had given them, they gossiped and laughed, and Dandelion and Essi held a singing contest. Geralt lay on a makeshift bed of spruce branches with his hands under his head and thought he had never heard such beautiful voices or such beautiful ballads. He thought about Yennefer. He thought about Essi, too. He had a presentiment that . . .

At the end, Little Eye and Dandelion sang the celebrated duet of Cynthia and Vertvern, a wonderful song of love, beginning with the words: '*Many tears have I shed . . .*' It seemed to Geralt that even the trees bent down to listen to the two of them.

Then Little Eye, smelling of verbena, lay down beside him, squeezed in under his arm, wriggled her head onto his chest, sighed maybe once or twice and fell peacefully asleep. The Witcher fell asleep, much, much later.

Dandelion, staring into the dying embers, sat much longer, alone, quietly strumming his lute.

It began with a few bars, from which an elegant, soothing melody

emerged. The lyric suited the melody, and came into being simultaneously with it, the words blending into the music, becoming set in it like insects in translucent, golden lumps of amber.

The ballad told of a certain witcher and a certain poet. About how the witcher and the poet met on the seashore, among the crying of seagulls, and how they fell in love at first sight. About how beautiful and powerful was their love. About how nothing – not even death – was able to destroy that love and part them.

Dandelion knew that few would believe the story told by the ballad, but he was not concerned. He knew ballads were not written to be believed, but to move their audience.

Several years later, Dandelion could have changed the contents of the ballad and written about what had really occurred. He did not. For the true story would not have moved anyone. Who would have wanted to hear that the Witcher and Little Eye parted and never, ever, saw each other again? About how four years later Little Eye died of the smallpox during an epidemic raging in Vizima? About how he, Dandelion, had carried her out in his arms between corpses being cremated on funeral pyres and had buried her far from the city, in the forest, alone and peaceful, and, as she had asked, buried two things with her: her lute and her sky blue pearl. The pearl from which she was never parted.

No, Dandelion stuck with his first version. And he never sang it. Never. To no one.

Right before the dawn, while it was still dark, a hungry, vicious werewolf crept up to their camp, but saw that it was Dandelion, so he listened for a moment and then went on his way.

THE SWORD OF DESTINY

I

He found the first body around noon.

The sight of victims of violent death seldom shocked the Witcher; much more often he looked at corpses with total indifference. This time he was not indifferent.

The boy was around fifteen. He was lying on his back, legs sprawled, his face frozen in a grimace of terror. In spite of that Geralt knew the boy had died at once, had not suffered, and probably had not even known he was dying. The arrow had struck him in the eye and was driven deep into the skull, through the occipital bone. The arrow was fletched with striped, pheasant flight feathers dyed yellow. The shaft stuck up above the tufts of grass.

Geralt looked around, and quickly and easily found what he was hunting for. A second, identical arrow, lodged in the trunk of a pine tree, around six paces behind the corpse. He knew what had happened. The boy had not understood the warning, and hearing the whistle and thud of the arrow had panicked and begun to run the wrong way. Towards the one who had ordered him to stop and withdraw at once. The hissing, venomous, feathered whistle and the short thud of the arrowhead cutting into the wood. *Not a step further, man*, said that whistle and that thud. *Begone, man, get out of Brokilon at once. You have captured the whole world, man, you are everywhere. Everywhere you introduce what you call modernity, the era of change, what you call progress. But we want neither you nor your progress here. We do not desire the changes you bring. We do not desire anything you bring.* A whistle and a thud. *Get out of Brokilon!*

Get out of Brokilon, thought Geralt. *Man*. No matter that you are fifteen and struggling through the forest, insane with fear, unable to find your way home. No matter that you are seventy and have to gather brushwood, because otherwise they will drive you from the cottage for being useless, they will stop giving you food. No matter that you are six and you were lured by a carpet of little blue flowers in a sunny clearing. *Get out of Brokilon!* A whistle and a thud.

Long ago, thought Geralt, before they shot to kill, they gave two warnings. Even three.

Long ago, he thought, continuing on his way. Long ago.

Well, that's progress.

The forest did not seem to deserve the dreadful notoriety it enjoyed. It was terribly wild and arduous to march through, but it was the commonplace arduousness of a dense forest, where every gap, every patch of sunlight filtered by the boughs and leafy branches of huge trees, was immediately exploited by dozens of young birches, alders and hornbeams, by brambles, junipers and ferns, their tangle of shoots covering the crumbly mire of rotten wood, dry branches and decayed trunks of the oldest trees, the ones that had lost the fight, the ones that had lived out their lifespan. The thicket, however, did not generate the ominous, weighty silence which would have suited the place more. No, Brokilon was alive. Insects buzzed, lizards rustled the grass underfoot, iridescent beetles scuttled, thousands of spiders tugged webs glistening with drops of water, woodpeckers thumped tree trunks with sharp series of raps and jays screeched.

Brokilon was alive.

But the Witcher did not let himself be deceived. He knew where he was. He remembered the boy with the arrow in his eye. He had occasionally seen white bones with red ants crawling over them among the moss and pine needles.

He walked on, cautiously but swiftly. The trail was fresh. He hoped to reach and send back the men walking in front of him. He deluded himself that it was not too late.

But it was.

He would not have noticed the next corpse had it not been for the sunlight reflecting on the blade of the short sword it was gripping. It was a grown man. His simple clothing, coloured a practical dun, indicated his lowly status. His garments – not counting the blood stains surrounding the two feathers sticking into his chest – were clean and new, so he could not have been a common servant.

Geralt looked around and saw a third body, dressed in a leather jacket and short, green cape. The ground around the dead man's legs was churned up, the moss and pine needles were furrowed right down to the sand. There was no doubt; this man had taken a long time to die.

He heard a groan.

He quickly parted the juniper bushes and saw the deep tree throw they were concealing. A powerfully built man, with black, curly hair and beard contrasting with the dreadful, downright deathly

pallor of his face, was lying in the hollow on the exposed roots of the pine. His pale, deerskin kaftan was red with blood.

The Witcher jumped into the hollow. The wounded man opened his eyes.

'Geralt . . .' he groaned. 'O, ye Gods . . . I must be dreaming . . .'

'Frexinet?' the Witcher asked in astonishment. 'You, here?'

'Yes, me . . . Ooooow . . .'

'Don't move,' Geralt said, kneeling beside him. 'Where were you hit? I can't see the arrow . . .'

'It passed . . . right through. I broke off the arrowhead and pulled it out . . . Listen Geralt—'

'Be quiet, Frexinet, or you'll choke on your blood. You have a punctured lung. A pox on it, I have to get you out of here. What the bloody hell were you doing in Brokilon? It's dryad territory, their sanctuary, no one gets out of here alive. I can't believe you didn't know that.'

'Later . . .' Frexinet groaned and spat blood. 'I'll tell you later . . . Now get me out. Oh, a pox on it. Have a care . . . Ooooooow . . .'

'I can't do it,' Geralt said, straightening up and looking around. 'You're too heavy.'

'Leave me,' the wounded man grunted. 'Leave me, too bad . . . But save her . . . by the Gods, save her . . .'

'Who?'

'The princess . . . Oh . . . Find her, Geralt.'

'Lie still, dammit! I'll knock something up and haul you out.'

Frexinet coughed hard and spat again; a viscous, stretching thread of blood hung from his chin. The Witcher cursed, vaulted out of the hollow and looked around. He needed two young saplings. He moved quickly towards the edge of the clearing, where he had seen a clump of alders.

A whistle and thud.

Geralt froze to the spot. The arrow, buried in a tree trunk at head height, had hawk feather fletchings. He looked at the angle of the ashen shaft and knew where it had been shot from. About four dozen paces away there was another hollow, a fallen tree, and a tangle of roots sticking up in the air, still tightly gripping a huge lump of sandy earth. There was a dark mass of blackthorn there

amid the lighter stripes of birches. He could not see anyone. He knew he would not.

He raised both hands, very slowly.

‘Ceádmil! Vá an Eithné meáth e Duén Canell! Esseá Gwynbleidd!’

This time he heard the soft twang of the bowstring and saw the arrow, for it had been shot for him to see. Powerfully. He watched it soar upwards, saw it reach its apex and then fall in a curve. He did not move. The arrow plunged into the moss almost vertically, two paces from him. Almost immediately a second lodged next to the first, at exactly the same angle. He was afraid he might not see the next one.

‘Meáth Eithné!’ he called again. ‘Esseá Gwynbleidd!’

‘Gláeddyv vort!’ A voice like a breath of wind. A voice, not an arrow. He was alive. He slowly unfastened his belt buckle, drew his sword well away from himself and threw it down. A second dryad emerged noiselessly from behind a fir trunk wrapped around with juniper bushes, no more than ten paces from him. Although she was small and very slim, the trunk seemed thinner. He had no idea how he had not seen her as he approached. Perhaps her outfit had disguised her; a patchwork which accentuated her shapely form, sewn weirdly from scraps of fabric in numerous shades of green and brown, strewn with leaves and pieces of bark. Her hair, tied with a black scarf around her forehead, was olive green and her face was criss-crossed with stripes painted using walnut-shell dye.

Naturally, her bowstring was taut and she was aiming an arrow at him.

‘Eithné . . .’ he began.

‘Tháess aep!’

He obediently fell silent, standing motionless, holding his arms away from his trunk. The dryad did not lower her bow.

‘Dunca!’ she cried. ‘Braenn! Caemm vort!’

The one who had shot the arrows earlier darted out from the blackthorn and slipped over the upturned trunk, nimbly clearing the depression. Although there was a pile of dry branches in it Geralt did not hear even one snap beneath her feet. He heard a faint murmur close behind, something like the rustling of leaves in the wind. He knew there was a third.

It was that one, dashing out from behind him, who picked up his sword. Her hair was the colour of honey and was tied up with a

band of bulrush fibres. A quiver full of arrows swung on her back.

The furthest one approached the tree throw swiftly. Her outfit was identical to that of her companions. She wore a garland woven from clover and heather on her dull, brick-red hair. She was holding a bow, not bent, but with an arrow nocked.

‘T’en thesse in meáth aep Eithné llev?’ she asked, coming over. Her voice was extremely melodious and her eyes huge and black. ‘Ess’ Gwynbleidd?’

‘Aé . . . aesseá . . .’ he began, but the words in the Brokilon dialect, which sounded like singing in the dryad’s mouth, stuck in his throat and made his lips itchy. ‘Do none of you know the Common Speech? I don’t speak your—’

‘An’ váill. Vort llinge,’ she cut him off.

‘I am Gwynbleidd. White Wolf. Lady Eithné knows me. I am travelling to her as an envoy. I have been in Brokilon before. In Duén Canell.’

‘Gwynbleidd.’ The redhead narrowed her eyes. ‘Vatt’ghern?’

‘Yes,’ he confirmed. ‘The Witcher.’

The olive-haired one snorted angrily, but lowered her bow. The red-haired one looked at him with eyes wide open, but her face – smeared with green stripes – was quite motionless, expressionless, like that of a statue. The immobility meant her face could not be categorised as pretty or ugly. Instead of such classification, a thought came to him about indifference and heartlessness, not to say cruelty. Geralt reproached himself for that judgement, catching himself mistakenly humanising the dryad. He ought to have known, after all, that she was older than the other two. In spite of appearances she was much, much older than them.

They stood in indecisive silence. Geralt heard Frexinet moaning, groaning and coughing. The red-haired one must also have heard, but her face did not even twitch. The Witcher rested his hands on his hips.

‘There’s a wounded man over there in the tree hole,’ he said calmly. ‘He will die if he doesn’t receive aid.’

‘Tháess aep!’ the olive-haired one snapped, bending her bow and aiming the arrowhead straight at his face.

‘Will you let him die like a dog?’ he said, not raising his voice. ‘Will you leave him to drown slowly in his own blood? In that case better to put him out of his misery.’

‘Be silent!’ the dryad barked, switching to the Common Speech. But she lowered her bow and released the tension on the bowstring. She looked at the other questioningly. The red-haired one nodded, indicating the tree hollow. The olive-haired one ran over, quickly and silently.

‘I want to see Lady Eithné,’ Geralt repeated. ‘I’m on a diplomatic mission . . .’

‘She,’ the red-haired one pointed to the honey-haired one, ‘will lead you to Duén Canell. Go.’

‘Frex . . . And the wounded man?’

The dryad looked at him, squinting. She was still fiddling with the nocked arrow.

‘Do not worry,’ she said. ‘Go. She will lead you there.’

‘But . . .’

‘Va’en vort!’ She cut him off, her lips tightening.

He shrugged and turned towards the one with the hair the colour of honey. She seemed the youngest of the three, but he might have been mistaken. He noticed she had blue eyes.

‘Then let us go.’

‘Yes,’ the honey-coloured haired one said softly. After a short moment of hesitation she handed him his sword. ‘Let us go.’

‘What is your name?’ he asked.

‘Be silent.’

She moved very swiftly through the dense forest, not looking back. Geralt had to exert himself to keep up with her. He knew the dryad was doing it deliberately, knew that she wanted the man following her to get stuck, groaning, in the undergrowth, or to fall to the ground exhausted, incapable of going on. She did not know, of course, that she was dealing with a witcher, not a man. She was too young to know what a witcher was.

The young woman – Geralt now knew she was not a pure-blood dryad – suddenly stopped and turned around. He saw her chest heaving powerfully beneath her short, dappled jacket, saw that she was having difficulty stopping herself from breathing through her mouth.

‘Shall we slow down?’ he suggested with a smile.

‘Yeá.’ She looked at him with hostility. ‘Aeén esseáth Sidh?’

‘No, I’m not an elf. What is your name?’

‘Braenn,’ she answered, marching on, but now at a slower pace, not trying to outdistance him. They walked alongside each other, close. He smelled the scent of her sweat, the ordinary sweat of a young woman. The sweat of dryads carried the scent of delicate willow leaves crushed in the hands.

‘And what were you called before?’

She glanced at him and suddenly grimaced; he thought she would become annoyed or order him to be silent. She did not.

‘I don’t remember,’ she said reluctantly. He did not think it was true.

She did not look older than sixteen and she could not have been in Brokilon for more than six or seven years. Had she come earlier, as a very young child or simply a baby, he would not now be able to see the human in her. Blue eyes and naturally fair hair did occur among dryads. Dryad children, conceived in ritual mating with elves or humans, inherited organic traits exclusively from their mothers, and were always girls. Extremely infrequently, as a rule, in a subsequent generation a child would nonetheless occasionally be born with the eyes or hair of its anonymous male progenitor. But Geralt was certain that Braenn did not have a single drop of dryad blood. And anyway, it was not especially important. Blood or not, she was now a dryad.

‘And what,’ she looked askance at him, ‘do they call you?’

‘Gwynbleidd.’

She nodded.

‘Then we shall go . . . Gwynbleidd.’

They walked more slowly than before, but still briskly. Braenn, of course, knew Brokilon; had he been alone, Geralt would have been unable to maintain the pace or the right direction. Braenn stole through the barricade of dense forest using winding, concealed paths, clearing gorges, running nimbly across fallen trees as though they were bridges, confidently splashing through glistening stretches of swamp, green from duckweed, which the Witcher would not have dared to tread on. He would have lost hours, if not days, skirting around.

Braenn’s presence did not only protect him from the savagery of the forest; there were places where the dryad slowed down, walking extremely cautiously, feeling the path with her foot and holding

him by the hand. He knew the reason. Brokilon's traps were legendary; people talked about pits full of sharpened stakes, about booby-trapped bows, about falling trees, about the terrible urchin – a spiked ball on a rope, which, falling suddenly, swept the path clear. There were also places where Braenn would stop and whistle melodiously, and answering whistles would come from the undergrowth. There were other places where she would stop with her hand on the arrows in her quiver, signalling for him to be silent, and wait, tense, until whatever was rustling in the thicket moved away.

In spite of their fast pace, they had to stop for the night. Braenn chose an excellent spot; a hill onto which thermal updrafts carried gusts of warm air. They slept on dried bracken, very close to one another, in dryad custom. In the middle of the night Braenn hugged him close. And nothing more. He hugged her back. And nothing more. She was a dryad. The point was to keep warm.

They set off again at daybreak, while it was still almost dark.

II

They passed through a belt of sparsely forested hills, creeping cautiously across small valleys full of mist, moving through broad, grassy glades, and across clearings of wind-felled trees.

Braenn stopped once again and looked around. She had apparently lost her way, but Geralt knew that was impossible. Taking advantage of a break in the march, however, he sat down on a fallen tree.

And then he heard a scream. Shrill. High-pitched. Desperate.

Braenn knelt down in a flash, at once drawing two arrows from her quiver. She seized one in her teeth and nocked the other, bent her bow, taking aim blindly through the bushes towards the sound of the voice.

‘Don’t shoot!’ he cried.

He leaped over the tree trunk and forced his way through the brush.

A small creature in a short grey jacket was standing in a small clearing, at the foot of a rocky cliff, with its back pressed against the trunk of a withered hornbeam. Something was moving slowly about five paces in front of it, parting the grass. That thing was about twelve feet long and was dark brown. At first Geralt thought it was a snake. But then he noticed the wriggling, yellow, hooked limbs and flat segments of the long thorax and realised it was not a snake. It was something much more sinister.

The creature hugging the tree cried out shrilly. The immense myriapod raised above the grass long, twitching feelers with which it sensed odours and warmth.

‘Don’t move!’ The Witcher yelled and stamped to attract the scolopendromorph’s attention. But the myriapod did not react, for its feelers had already caught the scent of the nearer victim. The monster wriggled its limbs, coiled itself up like an ‘S’ and moved forward. Its bright yellow limbs rippled through grass, evenly, like the oars of a galley.

‘Yghern!’ Braenn yelled.

Geralt hurtled into the clearing in two bounds, jerking his sword from its scabbard on his back as he ran, and in full flight struck the

petrified creature beneath the tree with his hip, shoving it aside into some brambles. The scolopendromorph rustled the grass, wriggled its legs and attacked, raising its anterior segments, its venom-dripping pincers chattering. Geralt danced, leaped over the flat body and slashed it with his sword from a half-turn, aiming at a vulnerable spot between the armoured plates on its body.

The monster was too swift, however, and the sword struck the chitinous shell, without cutting through it; the thick carpet of moss absorbed the blow. Geralt dodged, but not deftly enough. The scolopendromorph wound the posterior part of its body around his legs with enormous strength. The Witcher fell, rolled over and tried to pull himself free. In vain.

The myriapod flexed and turned around to reach him with its pincers, and at the same time fiercely dug its claws into the tree and wrapped itself around it. Right then an arrow hissed above Geralt's head, penetrating the armour with a crack, pinning the creature to the trunk. The scolopendromorph writhed, broke the arrow and freed itself, but was struck at once by two more. The Witcher kicked the thrashing abdomen off and rolled away to the side.

Braenn, kneeling, was shooting at an astonishing rate, sending arrow after arrow into the scolopendromorph. The myriapod was breaking the shafts to free itself, but each successive arrow would pin it to the trunk again. The creature snapped its flat, shiny, dark-red maw and clanged its pincers by the places which had been pierced by the arrows, instinctively trying to reach the enemy which was wounding it.

Geralt leaped at it from the side, took a big swing and hacked with his sword, ending the fight with one blow. The tree acted like an executioner's block.

Braenn approached slowly, an arrow nocked, kicked the body writhing in the grass, its limbs thrashing around, and spat on it.

'Thanks,' the Witcher said, crushing the beast's severed head with blows of his heel.

'Eh?'

'You saved my life.'

The dryad looked at him. There was neither understanding nor emotion in her expression.

'Yghern,' she said, nudging the writhing body with a boot. 'It broke my arrows.'

‘You saved my life and that little dryad’s,’ Geralt repeated. ‘Where the bloody hell is she?’

Braenn deftly brushed aside the bramble thicket and plunged an arm among the thorny shoots.

‘As I thought,’ she said, pulling the little creature in the grey jacket from the thicket. ‘See for yourself, Gwynbleidd.’

It was not a dryad. Neither was it an elf, sylph, puck or halfling. It was a quite ordinary little human girl. In the centre of Brokilon, it was the most extraordinary place to come across an ordinary, human little girl.

She had fair, mousy hair and huge, glaringly green eyes. She could not have been more than ten years old.

‘Who are you?’ he asked. ‘How did you get here?’

She did not reply. Where have I seen her before? he wondered. I’ve seen her before somewhere. Either her or someone very similar to her.

‘Don’t be afraid,’ he said, hesitantly.

‘I’m not afraid,’ she mumbled indistinctly. She clearly had a cold.

‘Let us get out of here,’ Braenn suddenly said, looking all around. ‘Where there is one yghern, you can usually expect another. And I have few arrows now.’

The girl looked at her, opened her mouth and wiped it with the back of her hand, smearing dust over her face.

‘Who the hell are you?’ Geralt asked again, leaning forward. ‘What are you doing . . . in this forest? How did you get here?’

The girl lowered her head and sniffed loudly.

‘Cat got your tongue? Who are you, I said? What’s your name?’

‘Ciri,’ she said, sniffing.

Geralt turned around. Braenn, examining her bow, glanced at him.

‘Listen, Braenn . . .’

‘What?’

‘Is it possible . . . Is it possible she . . . has escaped from Duén Canell?’

‘Eh?’

‘Don’t play dumb,’ he said, annoyed. ‘I know you abduct little girls. And you? What, did you fall from the sky into Brokilon? I’m asking if it’s possible . . .’

‘No,’ the dryad cut him off. ‘I have never seen her before.’

Geralt looked at the little girl. Her ashen-grey hair was dishevelled, full of pine needles and small leaves, but smelled of cleanliness, not smoke, nor the cowshed, nor tallow. Her hands, although incredibly dirty, were small and delicate, without scars or calluses. The boy’s clothes, the jacket with a red hood she had on, did not indicate anything, but her high boots were made of soft, expensive calfskin. No, she was certainly not a village child. Frexinet, the Witcher suddenly thought. This was the one that Frexinet was looking for. He’d followed her into Brokilon.

‘Where are you from? I’m asking you, you scamp.’

‘How dare you talk to me like that!’ The little girl lifted her head haughtily and stamped her foot. The soft moss completely spoiled the effect.

‘Ha,’ the Witcher said, and smiled. ‘A princess, indeed. At least in speech, for your appearance is wretched. You’re from Verden, aren’t you? Do you know you’re being looked for? Don’t worry, I’ll deliver you home. Listen, Braenn . . .’

The moment he looked away the girl turned very quickly on her heel and ran off through the forest, across the gentle hillside.

‘Bloede dungh!’ the dryad yelled, reaching for her quiver. ‘Caemm aere!’

The little girl, stumbling, rushed blindly through the forest, crunching over dry branches.

‘Stop!’ shouted Geralt. ‘Where are you bloody going!?’

Braenn bent her bow in a flash. The arrow hissed venomously, describing a flat parabola, and the arrowhead thudded into the tree trunk, almost brushing the little girl’s hair. The girl cringed and flattened herself to the ground.

‘You bloody fool,’ the Witcher hissed, hurrying over to the dryad. Braenn deftly drew another arrow from her quiver. ‘You might have killed her!’

‘This is Brokilon,’ she said proudly.

‘But she’s only a child!’

‘What of it?’

He looked at the arrow's shaft. It had striped fletchings made from a pheasant's flight feathers dyed yellow in a decoction of tree bark. He did not say a word. He turned around and went quickly into the forest. The little girl was lying beneath the tree, cowering, cautiously raising her head and looking at the arrow stuck into the tree. She heard his steps and leaped to her feet, but he reached her with a single bound and seized her by the red hood of her jacket. She turned her head and looked at him, then at his hand, holding her hood. He released her.

'Why did you run away?'

'None of your business,' she sniffed. 'Leave me alone, you, you—'

'Foolish brat,' he hissed furiously. 'This is Brokilon. Wasn't the myriapod enough? You wouldn't last till morning in this forest. Haven't you got it yet?'

'Don't touch me!' she yelled. 'You peasant! I am a princess, so you'd better be careful!'

'You're a foolish imp.'

'I'm a princess!'

'Princesses don't roam through forests alone. Princesses have clean noses.'

'I'll have you beheaded! And her too!' The girl wiped her nose with her hand and glared at the approaching dryad. Braenn snorted with laughter.

'Alright, enough of this,' the Witcher cut her off. 'Why were you running away, Your Highness? And where to? What were you afraid of?'

She said nothing, and sniffed.

'Very well, as you wish,' he winked at the dryad. '*We're* going. If you want to stay alone in the forest, that's your choice. But the next time a yghern attacks you, don't yell. It doesn't befit a princess. A princess dies without even a squeal, having first wiped her snotty nose. Let's go, Braenn. Farewell, Your Highness.'

'W . . . wait.'

'Aha?'

'I'm coming with you.'

'We are greatly honoured. Aren't we, Braenn?'

'But you won't take me to Kistrin again? Do you swear?'

‘Who is—?’ he began. ‘Oh, dammit. Kistrin. Prince Kistrin? The son of King Ervyll of Verden?’

The little girl pouted her little lips, sniffed and turned away.

‘Enough of these trifles,’ said Braenn grimly. ‘Let us march on.’

‘Hold on, hold on.’ The Witcher straightened up and looked down at the dryad. ‘Our plans are changing somewhat, my comely archer.’

‘Eh?’ Braenn said, raising her eyebrows.

‘Lady Eithné can wait. I have to take the little one home. To Verden.’

The dryad squinted and reached for her quiver.

‘You’re not going anywhere. Nor is she.’

The Witcher smiled hideously.

‘Be careful, Braenn,’ he said. ‘I’m not that pup whose eye you speared with an arrow from the undergrowth. I can look after myself.’

‘Bloede arss!’ she hissed, raising her bow. ‘You’re going to Duén Canell, and so is she! Not to Verden!’

‘No. Not to Verden!’ the mousy-haired girl said, throwing herself at the dryad and pressing herself against her slim thigh. ‘I’m going with you! And he can go to Verden by himself, to silly old Kistrin, if he wants!’

Braenn did not even look at her, did not take her eyes off Geralt. But she lowered her bow.

‘Ess dungh!’ she said, spitting at his feet. ‘Very well! Then go on your way! We’ll see how you fare. You’ll kiss an arrow before you leave Brokilon.’

She’s right, thought Geralt. I don’t have a chance. Without her I won’t get out of Brokilon nor reach Duén Canell. Too bad, we shall see. Perhaps I’ll manage to persuade Eithné . . .

‘Very well, Braenn,’ he said placatingly, and smiled. ‘Don’t be furious, fair one. Very well, have it your way. We shall all go to Duén Canell. To Lady Eithné.’

The dryad muttered something under her breath and unnocked the arrow.

‘To the road, then,’ she said, straightening her hairband. ‘We have tarried too long.’

‘Ooow . . .’ the little girl yelped as she took a step.

‘What’s the matter?’

‘I’ve done something . . . To my leg.’

‘Wait, Braenn! Come here, scamp, I’ll carry you pick-a-back.’

She was warm and smelt like a wet sparrow.

‘What’s your name, princess? I’ve forgotten.’

‘Ciri.’

‘And your estates, where do they lie, if I may ask?’

‘I won’t tell,’ she grunted. ‘I won’t tell, and that’s that.’

‘I’ll get by. Don’t wriggle or sniff right by my ear. What were you doing in Brokilon? Did you get lost? Did you lose your way?’

‘Not a chance! I never get lost.’

‘Don’t wriggle. Did you run away from Kistrin? From Nastrog Castle? Before or after the wedding?’

‘How did you know?’ She sniffed, intent.

‘I’m staggeringly intelligent. Why did you run away to Brokilon, of all places? Weren’t there any safer directions?’

‘I couldn’t control my stupid horse.’

‘You’re lying, princess. Looking at your size, the most you could ride is a cat. And a gentle one at that.’

‘I was riding with Marck. Sir Voymir’s esquire. But the horse fell in the forest and broke its leg. And we lost our way.’

‘You said that never happens to you.’

‘He got lost, not me. It was foggy. And we lost our way.’

You got lost, thought Geralt. Sir Voymir’s poor esquire, who had the misfortune to happen upon Braenn and her companions. A young stripling, who had probably never known a woman, helped the green-eyed scamp escape, because he’d heard a lot of knightly stories about virgins being forced to marry. He helped her escape, to fall to a dryad’s dyed arrow – one who probably hasn’t known a man herself. But already knows how to kill.

‘I asked you if you bolted from Nastrog Castle before or after the wedding?’

‘I just scarpered and it’s none of your business,’ she grunted. ‘Grandmamma told me I had to go there and meet him. That

Kistrin. Just meet him. But that father of his, that big-bellied king . . .'

'Ervyll.'

' . . . kept on: "the wedding, the wedding". But I don't want him. That Kistrin. Grandmamma said—'

'Is Prince Kistrin so revolting?'

'I don't want him,' Ciri proudly declared, sniffing loudly. 'He's fat, stupid and his breath smells. Before I went there they showed me a painting, but he wasn't fat in the painting. I don't want a husband like that. I don't want a husband at all.'

'Ciri,' the Witcher said hesitantly. 'Kistrin is still a child, like you. In a few years he might turn into a handsome young man.'

'Then they can send me another painting, in a few years,' she snorted. 'And him too. Because he told me that I was much prettier in the painting they showed him. And he confessed that he loves Alvina, a lady-in-waiting and he wants to be a knight. See? He doesn't want me and I don't want him. So what use is a wedding?'

'Ciri,' the Witcher muttered, 'he's a prince and you're a princess. Princes and princesses marry like that, that's how it is. That's the custom.'

'You sound like all the rest. You think that just because I'm small you can lie to me.'

'I'm not lying.'

'Yes you are.'

Geralt said nothing. Braenn, walking in front of them, turned around, probably surprised by the silence. She shrugged and set off.

'Which way are we going?' Ciri asked glumly. 'I want to know!'

Geralt said nothing.

'Answer, when I ask a question!' she said menacingly, backing up the order with a loud sniff. 'Do you know . . . who's sitting on you?'

He didn't react.

'I'll bite you in the ear!' she yelled.

The Witcher had had enough. He pulled the girl off his back and put her on the ground.

'Now listen, you brat,' he said harshly, struggling with his belt buckle. 'In a minute I'll put you across my knee, pull down your

britches and tan your backside. No one will stop me doing it, because this isn't the royal court, and I'm not your flunkey or servant. You'll soon regret you didn't stay in Nastrog. You'll soon see it's better being a princess than a snot-nosed kid who got lost in the forest. Because, it's true, a princess is allowed to act obnoxiously. And no one thrashes a princess's backside with a belt. At most her husband, the prince, might with his own hand.'

Ciri cowered and sniffed a few times. Braenn watched dispassionately, leaning against a tree.

'Well?' the Witcher asked, wrapping his belt around his wrist. 'Are we going to behave with dignity and temperance? If not, we shall set about tanning Her Majesty's hide. Well? What's it to be?'

The little girl snivelled and sniffed, then eagerly nodded.

'Are you going to be good, princess?'

'Yes,' she mumbled.

'Gloaming will soon fall,' the dryad said. 'Let us make haste, Gwynbleidd.'

The forest thinned out. They walked through a sandy young forest, across moors, and through fog-cloaked meadows with herds of red deer grazing. It was growing cooler.

'Noble lord . . .' Ciri began after a long, long silence.

'My name is Geralt. What's the matter?'

'I'm awffy, awffy hungry.'

'We'll stop in a moment. It'll be dark soon.'

'I can't go on,' she snivelled. 'I haven't eaten since—'

'Stop whining.' He reached into a saddlebag and took out a piece of fatback, a small round of white cheese and two apples. 'Have that.'

'What's that yellow stuff?'

'Fatback.'

'I won't eat that,' she grunted.

'That's fine,' he said indistinctly, stuffing the fatback into his mouth. 'Eat the cheese. And an apple. Just one.'

'Why only one.'

'Don't wriggle. Have both.'

‘Geralt?’

‘Mhm?’

‘Thank you.’

‘Don’t mention it. Food’ll do you good.’

‘I didn’t . . . Not for that. That too, but . . . You saved me from that centipede . . . Ugh . . . I almost died of fright.’

‘You almost died,’ he confirmed seriously. You almost died in an extremely painful and hideous way, he thought. ‘But you ought to thank Braenn.’

‘What is she?’

‘A dryad.’

‘An eerie wife?’

‘Yes.’

‘So she’s . . . They kidnap children! She’s kidnapped us? Hey, but you aren’t small. But why does she speak so strangely?’

‘That’s just her way, it’s not important. What’s important is how she shoots. Don’t forget to thank her when we stop.’

‘I won’t forget,’ she sniffed.

‘Don’t wriggle, future Princess of Verden, ma’am.’

‘I’m not going to be a princess,’ she muttered.

‘Very well, very well. You won’t be a princess. You’ll become a hamster and live in a burrow.’

‘No I won’t! You don’t know anything!’

‘Don’t squeak in my ear. And don’t forget about the strap!’

‘I’m not going to be a princess. I’m going to be . . .’

‘Yes? What?’

‘It’s a secret.’

‘Oh, yes, a secret. Splendid.’ He raised his head. ‘What is it, Braenn?’

The dryad had stopped. She shrugged and looked at the sky.

‘I cannot go on,’ she said softly. ‘Neither can you, I warrant, with her on your back, Gwynbleidd. We shall stop here. It will darken soon.’

III

‘Ciri?’

‘Mhm?’ the little girl sniffed and rustled the branches she was lying on.

‘Aren’t you cold?’

‘No,’ she sighed. ‘It’s warm today. Yesterday . . . Yesterday I froze awffy, oh my, how I did.’

‘It is a marvel,’ Braenn said, loosening the straps of her long, soft boots. ‘A tiny little moppet, but she has covered a long stride of forest. And she got past the lookouts, through the bog and the thicket. She is robust, healthy and stout. Truly, she would come in useful. To us.’

Geralt glanced quickly at the dryad, at her eyes shining in the semi-darkness. Braenn leaned back against a tree, removed her hairband and let her hair down with a shake of her head.

‘She entered Brokilon,’ she muttered, forestalling his comment. ‘She is ours, Gwynbleidd. We are marching to Duén Canell.’

‘Lady Eithné will decide,’ he responded tartly. But he knew Braenn was right.

Pity, he thought, looking at the little girl wriggling on the green bed. She’s such a determined rascal! Where have I seen her before? Never mind. But it’s a pity. The world is so big and so beautiful. And Brokilon will now be her world, until the end of her days. And there may not be many. Perhaps only until the day she falls in the bracken, amidst cries and the whistles of arrows, fighting in this senseless battle for the forest. On the side of those who will lose. Who have to lose. Sooner or later.

‘Ciri?’

‘Yes?’

‘Where do your parents live?’

‘I don’t have any parents,’ she sniffed. ‘They drowned at sea when I was tiny.’

Yes, he thought, that explains a lot. A princess, the child of a deceased royal couple. Who knows if she isn’t the third daughter following four sons? A title which in practice means less than that

of chamberlain or equerry. A mousy-haired, green-eyed thing hanging around the court, who ought to be shoved out as quickly as possible and married off. As quickly as possible, before she matures and becomes a young woman and brings the threat of scandal, misalliance or incest, which would not be difficult in a shared castle bedchamber.

Her escape did not surprise the Witcher. He had frequently met princesses – and even queens – roaming around with troupes of wandering players, happy to have escaped some decrepit king still desirous of an heir. He had seen princes, preferring the uncertain fate of a soldier of fortune to marriage to a lame or pockmarked princess – chosen by their father – whose withered or doubtful virginity was to be the price of an alliance or dynastic coalition.

He lay down beside the little girl and covered her with his jacket.

'Sleep,' he said. 'Sleep, little orphan.'

'Orphan? Humph!' she growled. 'I'm a princess, not an orphan. And I have a grandmamma. And my grandmamma is a queen, so you'd better be careful. When I tell her you wanted to give me the strap, my grandmamma will order your head chopped off, you'll see.'

'Ghastly! Ciri, have mercy!'

'Not a chance!'

'But you're a good little girl. And beheading hurts awfully. You won't say anything, will you?'

'I will.'

'Ciri.'

'I will, I will, I will! Afraid, are you?'

'Dreadfully. You know, Ciri, you can die from having your head cut off.'

'Are you mocking me?'

'I wouldn't dream of it.'

'She'll put you in your place, you'll see. No one takes liberties with my grandmamma. When she stamps her foot the greatest knights and warriors kneel before her; I've seen it myself. And if one of them is disobedient, then it's "chop" and off with his head.'

'Dreadful. Ciri?'

'Uh-huh?'

‘I think they’ll cut off your head.’

‘*My* head?’

‘Naturally. After all, your grandmamma, the queen, arranged a marriage with Kistrin and sent you to Nastrog Castle in Verden. You were disobedient. As soon as you return . . . it’ll be “chop!” and off with *your* head.’

The little girl fell silent. She even stopped fidgeting. He heard her smacking her lips, biting her lower lip and sniffing.

‘You’re wrong,’ she said. ‘Grandmamma won’t let anyone chop off my head, because . . . Because she’s my grandmamma, isn’t she? Oh, at most I’ll get . . .’

‘Aha,’ Geralt laughed. ‘There’s no taking liberties with grandmamma, is there? The switch has come out, hasn’t it?’

Ciri snorted angrily.

‘Do you know what?’ he said. ‘We’ll tell your grandmamma that I’ve already whipped you, and you can’t be punished twice for the same crime. Is it a deal?’

‘You must be silly!’ Ciri raised herself on her elbows, making the branches rustle. ‘When grandmamma hears that you thrashed me, they’ll chop your head off just like that!’

‘So you are worried for my head then?’

The little girl fell silent and sniffed again.

‘Geralt . . .’

‘What, Ciri?’

‘Grandmamma knows I have to go home. I can’t be a princess or the wife of that stupid Kistrin. I have to go home, and that’s that.’

You do, he thought. Regrettably, it doesn’t depend on you or on your grandmamma. It depends on the mood of old Eithné. And on my persuasive abilities.

‘Grandmamma knows,’ Ciri continued. ‘Because I . . . Geralt, promise you won’t tell anybody. It’s a terrible secret. Dreadful, I’m serious. Swear.’

‘I swear.’

‘Very well, I’ll tell you. My mama was a witch, so you’d better watch your step. And my papa was enchanted, too. It was all told to me by one of my nannies, and when grandmamma found out about it, there was a dreadful to-do. Because I’m destined, you know?’

‘To do what?’

‘I don’t know,’ Ciri said intently. ‘But I’m destined. That’s what my nanny said. And grandmamma said she won’t let anyone . . . that the whole ruddy castle will collapse first. Do you understand? And nanny said that nothing, nothing at all, can help with destiny. Ha! And then nanny wept and grandmamma yelled. Do you see? I’m destined. I won’t be the wife of that silly Kistrin. Geralt?’

‘Go to sleep,’ he yawned, so that his jaw creaked. ‘Go to sleep, Ciri.’

‘Tell me a story.’

‘What?’

‘Tell me a story,’ she snorted. ‘How am I supposed to sleep without a story? I mean, really!’

‘I don’t know any damned stories. Go to sleep.’

‘You’re lying. You do. What, no one told you stories when you were little? What are you laughing about?’

‘Nothing. I just recalled something.’

‘Aha! You see. Go on.’

‘What?’

‘Tell me a story.’

He laughed again, put his hands under his head and looked up at the stars twinkling beyond the branches above their heads.

‘There was once . . . a cat,’ he began. ‘An ordinary, tabby mouser. And one day that cat went off, all by itself, on a long journey to a terrible, dark forest. He walked . . . And he walked . . . And he walked . . .’

‘Don’t think,’ Ciri mumbled, cuddling up to him, ‘that I’ll fall asleep before he gets there.’

‘Keep quiet, rascal. So . . . he walked and he walked until he came across a fox. A red fox.’

Braenn sighed and lay down beside the Witcher, on the other side, and also snuggled up a little.

‘Very well,’ Ciri sniffed. ‘Say what happened next.’

‘The fox looked at the cat. “Who are you?” he asked. “I’m a cat,” said the cat. “Ha,” said the fox. “But aren’t you afraid, cat, to be roaming the forest alone? What will you do if the king comes a-

hunting? With hounds and mounted hunters and beaters? I tell you, cat," said the fox, "the chase is a dreadful hardship to creatures like you and I. You have a pelt, I have a pelt, and hunters never spare creatures like us, because hunters have sweethearts and lovers, and their little hands and necks get cold, so they make muffs and collars for those strumpets to wear".'

'What are muffs?' Ciri asked.

'Don't interrupt. And the fox went on. "I, cat, know how to outwit them; I have one thousand, two hundred and eighty-six ways to outfox those hunters, so cunning am I. And you, cat, how many ways do you have?"'

'Oh, what a fine tale,' Ciri said, cuddling more tightly to the Witcher. 'What did the cat say?'

'Aye,' whispered Braenn from the other side. 'What did the cat say?'

The Witcher turned his head. The dryad's eyes were sparkling, her mouth was half-open and she was running her tongue over her lips. He could understand. Little dryads were hungry for tales. Just like little witchers. Because both of them were seldom told bedtime stories. Little dryads fell asleep listening raptly to the wind blowing in the trees. Little witchers fell asleep listening raptly to their aching arms and legs. Our eyes also shone like Braenn's when we listened to the tales of Vesemir in Kaer Morhen. But that was long ago . . . So long ago . . .

'Well,' Ciri said impatiently. 'What then?'

'The cat said: "I, fox, don't have any ways. I only know one thing; up a tree as quick as can be. That ought to be enough, oughtn't it?" The fox burst out laughing. "Hah," he said. "What a goose you are! Flourish your stripy tail and flee, for you'll perish if the hunters trap you." And suddenly, from nowhere, the horns began to sound! And the hunters leaped out from the bushes. And they saw the cat and the fox. And they were upon them!'

'Oh!' Ciri sniffed, and the dryad shifted suddenly.

'Quiet. And they were upon them, yelling: "Have them, skin them! We'll make muffs out of them, muffs!" And they set the hounds on the fox and the cat. And the cat darted up a tree, like every cat does. Right to the very top. But the hounds seized the fox! And before Reynard had time to use any of his cunning ways, he'd been made into a collar. And the cat meowed from the top of the tree and hissed at the hunters, but they couldn't do anything to him,

because the tree was as high as hell. They stood at the foot of the tree, swearing like troopers, but they had to go away empty-handed. And then the cat climbed down from the tree and slunk calmly home.'

'What happened then?'

'Nothing. That's the end.'

'What about the moral?' Ciri asked. 'Tales always have a moral, don't they?'

'Hey?' Braenn said, hugging Geralt even harder. 'What's a moral?'

'A good story has a moral and a bad one doesn't,' Ciri sniffed with conviction.

'That was a good one,' the dryad yawned. 'So it has what it ought to have. You, moppet, should have scurried up a tree from that yghern, like that canny tomcat. Not pondered, but scurried up the tree without a thought. And that is all the wisdom in it. To survive. Not to be caught.'

The Witcher laughed softly.

'Weren't there any trees in the castle grounds, Ciri? In Nastrog? Instead of coming to Brokilon you could have skinned up a tree and stayed there, at the very top, until Kistrin's desire to wed had waned.'

'Are you mocking me?'

'Uh-huh.'

'Know what? I can't stand you.'

'That's dreadful. Ciri, you've stabbed me in the very heart.'

'I know,' she nodded gravely, sniffing, and then clung tightly to him.

'Sleep well, Ciri,' he muttered, breathing in her pleasant, sparrow scent. 'Sleep well. Goodnight, Braenn.'

'Deárme, Gwynbleidd.'

Above their heads a billion Brokilon branches soughed and hundreds of billions of Brokilon leaves rustled.

IV

The next day they reached the Trees. Braenn knelt down and bent her head. Geralt felt the need to do the same. Ciri heaved a sigh of awe.

The Trees – chiefly oaks, yews and hickories – had girths of over a hundred feet, some much more. It was impossible to say how high their crowns were. The places where the mighty, twisted roots joined the vertical trunks were high above their heads, however. They could have walked more quickly, as the giants grew slowly and no other vegetation could survive in their shadows; there was only a carpet of decaying leaves.

They could have walked more quickly. But they walked slowly. In silence. With bowed heads. Among the Trees they were small, insignificant, irrelevant. Unimportant. Even Ciri kept quiet – she did not speak for almost half an hour.

And after an hour's walk they passed the belt of Trees and once again plunged deep into ravines and wet beechwood forests.

Ciri's cold was troubling her more and more. Geralt did not have a handkerchief, and having had enough of her incessant sniffing, taught her to clear her nose directly onto the ground. The little girl was delighted by it. Looking at her smirk and shining eyes, the Witcher was deeply convinced that she was savouring the thought of showing off her new trick at court, during a ceremonial banquet or an audience with a foreign ambassador.

Braenn suddenly stopped and turned around.

'Gwynbleidd,' she said, unwinding a green scarf wrapped around her elbow. 'Come here. I will blindfold you. I must.'

'I know.'

'I will lead you. Give me your hand.'

'No,' protested Ciri. 'I'll lead him. May I, Braenn?'

'Very well, moppet.'

'Geralt?'

'Uh-huh?'

'What does "Gwyn . . . bleidd" mean?'

'White Wolf. The dryads call me that.'

‘Beware, there’s a root. Don’t trip! Do they call you that because you have white hair?’

‘Yes . . . Blast!’

‘I said there was a root.’

They walked on. Slowly. It was slippery under their feet from fallen leaves. He felt warmth on his face, the sunlight shining through the blindfold.

‘Oh, Geralt,’ he heard Ciri’s voice. ‘How delightful it is here . . . Pity you can’t see. There are so many flowers. And birds. Can you hear them singing? Oh, there’s so many of them. Heaps. Oh, and squirrels. Careful, we’re going to cross a stream, over a stone bridge. Don’t fall in. Oh, so many little fishes! Hundreds. They’re swimming in the water, you know. So many little animals, oh my. There can’t be so many anywhere else.’

‘There can’t,’ he muttered. ‘Nowhere else. This is Brokilon.’

‘What?’

‘Brokilon. The Last Place.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘No one understands. No one wants to understand.’

V

‘You can take off the blindfold now, Gwynbleidd. We have arrived.’

Braenn stood up to her knees in a dense carpet of fog.

‘Duén Canell,’ she said, pointing.

Duén Canell, the Place of the Oak. The Heart of Brokilon.

Geralt had already been there. Twice. But he had never told anyone about it. No one would have believed him.

A basin enclosed by the crowns of mighty green trees. Bathed in fog and mist rising from the earth, the rocks and the hot springs. A basin . . .

The medallion around his neck vibrated slightly.

A basin bathed in magic. Duén Canell. The Heart of Brokilon.

Braenn lifted her head and adjusted the quiver on her back.

‘We must go. Give me your little hand, moppet.’

At first, the valley seemed to be lifeless. Deserted. But not for long. A loud, modulated whistling rang out, and a slender, dark-haired dryad, dressed, like all of them, in dappled, camouflaged attire slid nimbly down barely perceptible steps of bracket mushrooms winding around the nearest trunk.

‘Ceád, Braenn.’

‘Ceád, Sirssa. Va’n vort meáth Eithné á?’

‘Neén, aefder,’ the dark-haired dryad answered, sweeping her gaze up and down the Witcher. ‘Ess’ ae’n Sidh?’

She smiled, flashing white teeth. She was incredibly comely, even according to human standards. Geralt felt uncertain and foolish, aware that the dryad was inspecting him uninhibitedly.

‘Neén,’ Braenn shook her head. ‘Ess’ vatt’ghern, Gwynbleidd, á váen meáth Eithné va, a’ss.’

‘Gwynbleidd?’ the beautiful dryad said, grimacing. ‘Bloede caérme! Aen’ne caen n’wedd vort! T’ess foile!’

Braenn sniggered.

‘What is it?’ the Witcher asked, growing angry.

‘Nothing,’ Braenn sniggered again. ‘Nothing. Let us be moving.’

‘Oh,’ Ciri said in delight. ‘Look at those funny cottages, Geralt!’

Duén Canell really began deep in the valley; the ‘funny cottages’, resembling huge bunches of mistletoe in shape, clung to the trunks and bows at various heights, both low, just above the ground, and high, occasionally very high, right beneath the very crowns. Geralt also saw several larger constructions on the ground, shelters made of woven branches, still covered in leaves. He saw movements in the openings to the shelters, but the dryads themselves could barely be made out. There were far fewer than there had been the last time he was there.

‘Geralt,’ Ciri whispered. ‘Those cottages are living. They’ve got little leaves!’

‘They’re made of living wood,’ the Witcher nodded. ‘That’s how dryads live, that’s how they build their houses. No dryad will ever harm a tree by chopping or sawing it. They love trees. However, they can make the branches grow to form those dwellings.’

‘How sweet. I’d like to have a little house like that on our estate.’

Braenn stopped in front of one of the larger shelters.

‘Enter, Gwynbleidd,’ she said. ‘You will wait here for Lady Eithné. Vá fáill, moppet.’

‘What?’

‘That was a farewell, Ciri. She said “goodbye”.’

‘Oh. Goodbye, Braenn.’

They went inside. The interior of the ‘cottage’ twinkled like a kaleidoscope, from the patches of sunlight filtered and diffused through the roof structure.

‘Geralt!’

‘Frexinet!’

‘You’re alive, by the Devil!’ the wounded man said, flashing his teeth, raising himself up on a makeshift bed of spruce. He saw Ciri clinging to the Witcher’s thigh and his eyes widened, a flush rushing to his face.

‘You little beast!’ he yelled. ‘I almost lost my life thanks to you! Oh, you’re fortunate I cannot stand, for I’d tan your hide!’

Ciri pouted.

‘You’re the second person,’ she said, wrinkling her nose comically, ‘to want to thrash me. I’m a little girl and little girls can’t

be beaten!'

'I'd soon show you . . . what's allowed and what isn't,' Frexinet coughed. 'You little wretch! Ervyll is beside himself . . . He's sending out word, terrified that your grandmother's army is marching on him. Who will believe that you bolted? Everyone knows what Ervyll's like and what his pleasures are. Everyone thinks he . . . did something to you in his cups, and then had you drowned in the fishpond! War with Nilfgaard is looming, and because of you the treaty and the alliance with your grandmother have gone up in smoke! See what you've done?'

'Don't excite yourself,' the Witcher warned, 'for you might open your wounds. How did you get here so swiftly?'

'The Devil only knows, I've been lying half-dead most of the time. They poured something revolting down my throat. By force. They held my nose and . . . What a damned disgrace . . .'

'You're alive thanks to what they poured down your throat. Did they bring you here?'

'They dragged me here on a sledge. I asked after you but they said nothing. I was certain you'd caught an arrow. You vanished so suddenly . . . But you're hale and hearty, not even in fetters, and not only that, prithee, you rescued Princess Cirilla . . . A pox on it, you get by everywhere, Geralt, and you always fall on your feet.'

The Witcher smiled but did not respond. Frexinet hacked, turned his head away and spat out saliva tinged pink.

'Well,' he added. 'And you're sure to be the reason they didn't finish me off. They know you, bloody eerie wives. That's the second time you've got me out of trouble.'

'Oh, come on, baron.'

Frexinet, moaning, tried to sit up, but abandoned the attempt.

'Bollocks to my barony,' he panted. 'I was a baron back in Hamm. Now I'm something like a governor at Ervyll's court in Verden. I mean I was. Even if I get out of this forest somehow, there's no place for me in Verden now, apart from on the scaffold. This little weasel, Cirilla, slipped out of my hands and my protection. Do you think the three of us went to Brokilon for the hell of it? No, Geralt, I was fleeing too, and could only count on Ervyll's mercy if I brought her back. And then I happened on those accursed eerie wives . . . If not for you I'd have expired in that hollow. You've rescued me again. It's destiny, that's as clear as day.'

‘You’re exaggerating.’

Frexinet shook his head.

‘It’s destiny,’ he repeated. ‘It must have been written up there that we’d meet again, Witcher. That you’d save my skin again. Remember, people talked about it in Hamm after you lifted that bird curse from me.’

‘Chance,’ Geralt said coldly. ‘Pure chance, Frexinet.’

‘What chance? Dammit, if it hadn’t been for you, I’d probably still be a cormorant—’

‘You were a cormorant?’ Ciri cried in excitement. ‘A real cormorant? A bird?’

‘I was,’ the baron grinned. ‘I was cursed by . . . by a bitch . . . Damn her . . . for revenge.’

‘I bet you didn’t give her a fur,’ Ciri said, wrinkling up her nose. ‘For a, you know . . . muff.’

‘There was another reason,’ Frexinet blushed slightly, then glowered angrily at the little girl. ‘But what business is it of yours, you tyke!’

Ciri looked offended and turned her head away.

‘Yes,’ Frexinet coughed. ‘Where was I . . . Aha, when I was cursed in Hamm. Were it not for you, Geralt, I would have remained a cormorant till the end of my days, I would be flying around the lake, shitting on tree branches, deluding myself that the shirt made of nettle fibres stubbornly woven by my dear sister would save me. Dammit, when I recall that shirt of hers, I feel like kicking somebody. That idiot—’

‘Don’t say that,’ the Witcher smiled. ‘She had the best of intentions. She was badly informed, that’s all. Lots of nonsensical myths circulate about undoing curses. You were lucky, anyway, Frexinet. She might have ordered you to dive into a barrel of boiling milk. I’ve heard of a case like that. Donning a nettle shirt, if you think about it, isn’t very harmful to the health, even if it doesn’t help much.’

‘Ha, perhaps you’re right. Perhaps I expect too much of her. Eliza was always stupid, from a child she was stupid and lovely, as a matter of fact; splendid material for a king’s wife.’

‘What is lovely material?’ Ciri asked. ‘And why for a wife?’

‘Don’t interfere, you tyke, I said. Yes, Geralt, I was lucky you

turned up in Hamm then. And that my brother-in-law king was ready to spend the few ducats you demanded for lifting the spell.'

'You know, Frexinet,' Geralt said, smiling even more broadly, 'that news of the incident spread far and wide?'

'The true version?'

'I wouldn't say that. To begin with, they gave you ten more brothers.'

'Oh no!' The baron raised himself on an elbow and coughed. 'And so, counting Eliza, there were said to be twelve of us? What bloody idiocy! My mama wasn't a rabbit!'

'That's not all. It was agreed that cormorants aren't romantic enough.'

'Because they aren't! There's nothing romantic about them!' The baron grimaced, feeling his chest, wrapped in bast and sheets of birch bark. 'What was I turned into, according to the tale?'

'A swan. I mean swans. There were eleven of you, don't forget.'

'And how is a swan more romantic than a cormorant?'

'I don't know.'

'I don't either. But I'll bet that in the story Eliza lifted the curse from me with the help of her gruesome nettle blouse?'

'You win. How is Eliza?'

'She has consumption, poor thing. She won't last long.'

'That's sad.'

'It is,' Frexinet agreed dispassionately, looking away.

'Coming back to the curse . . .' Geralt leaned back against a wall made of woven, springy switches. 'You don't have any recurrences? You don't sprout feathers?'

'No, may the Gods be praised,' the baron sighed. 'Everything is in good order. The one thing that I was left with from those times is a taste for fish. There are no better vittles for me, Geralt, than fish. Occasionally I go down to the fishermen on the jetty early in the morning, and before they find me something more refined, I gobble down a handful or two of bleak straight from the holding cage, a few minnows, dace or chub . . . It's pure bliss, not food.'

'He was a cormorant,' Ciri said slowly, looking at Geralt. 'And you lifted the curse from him. You can do magic!'

‘I think it’s obvious,’ Frexinet said, ‘that he can. Every witcher can.’

‘Wi . . . witcher?’

‘Didn’t you know he was a witcher? The famous Geralt Riv? True enough, how is a little tyke like you to know what a witcher is? Things aren’t what they used to be. Now there are very few witchers. You’d have a job finding one. You’ve probably never seen a witcher before?’

Ciri shook her head slowly, not taking her eyes off Geralt.

‘A witcher, little tyke, is a . . .’ Frexinet broke off and paled, seeing Braenn entering the cottage. ‘No, I don’t want it! I won’t let you pour any more of it down my throat, never, never again! Geralt! Tell her—’

‘Calm down.’

Braenn did not grace Frexinet with anything more than a fleeting glance. She walked over to Ciri, who was squatting beside the Witcher.

‘Come,’ she said. ‘Come, moppet.’

‘Where to?’ Ciri grimaced. ‘I’m not going. I want to be with Geralt.’

‘Go,’ the Witcher managed a smile. ‘You can play with Braenn and the young dryads. They’ll show you Duén Canell . . .’

‘She didn’t blindfold me,’ Ciri said very slowly. ‘She didn’t blindfold me while we were walking here. She blindfolded you. So you couldn’t find your way back here when you leave. That means . . .’

Geralt looked at Braenn. The dryad shrugged and then hugged the little girl tightly.

‘That means . . .’ Ciri’s voice suddenly cracked. ‘That means I’m not leaving here. Doesn’t it?’

‘No one can escape their destiny.’

All heads turned at the sound of that voice. Quiet, but sonorous, hard and decisive. A voice demanding obedience, which brooked no argument. Braenn bowed. Geralt went down on one knee.

‘Lady Eithné.’

The ruler of Brokilon was wearing a flowing, gauzy, light-green gown. Like most dryads she was small and slender, but her proudly

raised head, grave, sharp-featured face and resolute mouth made her seem taller and more powerful. Her hair and eyes were the colour of molten silver.

She entered the shelter escorted by two younger dryads armed with bows. Without a word she nodded towards Braenn, who immediately took Ciri by the hand and pulled her towards the door, bowing her head low. Ciri trod stiffly and clumsily, pale and speechless. When they passed Eithné, the silver-haired dryad seized her swiftly beneath the chin, lifted it and looked long in the girl's eyes. Geralt could see that Ciri was trembling.

'Go,' Eithné finally said. 'Go, my child. Fear naught. Nothing is capable of changing your destiny. You are in Brokilon.'

Ciri followed Braenn obediently. In the doorway she turned around. The Witcher noticed that her mouth was quivering, and her green eyes were misty with tears. He didn't say a word.

He continued to kneel, head bowed.

'Get up, Gwynbleidd. Welcome.'

'Greetings, Eithné, Lady of Brokilon.'

'I have the pleasure to host you in my Forest once again. Although you come here without my knowledge or permission. Entering Brokilon without my knowledge or permission is perilous, White Wolf. Even for you.'

'I come on a mission.'

'Ah . . .' the dryad smiled slightly. 'That explains your boldness, which I shall not describe using other, more blunt words. Geralt, the inviolability of envoys is a custom observed by humans. I do not recognise it. I recognise nothing human. This is Brokilon.'

'Eithné—'

'Be silent,' she interrupted, without raising her voice. 'I ordered you to be spared. You will leave Brokilon alive. Not because you are an envoy. For other reasons.'

'Are you not curious whose envoy I am? Where I come from, on whose behalf?'

'Frankly speaking, no. This is Brokilon. You come here from the outside, from a world that concerns me not. Why then would I waste time listening to supplications? What could some kind of proposal, some kind of ultimatum, devised by someone who thinks and feels differently to me, mean to me? What could I care what

King Venzlav thinks?'

Geralt shook his head in astonishment.

'How do you know I come from Venzlav?'

'For it is obvious,' the dryad said with a smile. 'Ekkehard is too stupid. Ervyll and Viraxas detest me too much. No other realms border Brokilon.'

'You know a great deal about what happens beyond Brokilon, Eithné.'

'I know much, White Wolf. It is a privilege of my age. Now, though, if you permit, I would like to deal with a confidential matter. That man with the appearance of a bear,' the dryad stopped smiling and looked at Frexinet. 'Is he your friend?'

'We are acquainted. I once removed a curse from him.'

'The problem is,' Eithné said coldly, 'that I don't know what to do with him. I cannot, after all, order him put to death. I have permitted him to recover his health, but he represents a threat. He does not look like a fanatic. Thus he must be a scalp-hunter. I know that Ervyll pays for every dryad scalp. I do not recall how much. In any case, the price rises as the value of money falls.'

'You are in error. He is not a scalp-hunter.'

'Why then did he enter Brokilon?'

'To seek the girl-child whose care he was entrusted with. He risked his life to find her.'

'Most foolish,' Eithné said coldly. 'Difficult to call it even a risk. He was heading for certain death. The fact that he lives at all he owes entirely to his iron constitution and endurance. As far as the child is concerned, it also survived by chance. My girls did not shoot, for they thought it was a puck or a leprechaun.'

She looked once again at Frexinet, and Geralt saw that her mouth had lost its unpleasant hardness.

'Very well. Let us celebrate this day in some way.'

She walked over to the bed of branches. The two dryads accompanying her also approached. Frexinet blanched and cowered, without becoming any smaller.

Eithné looked at him for a while, narrowing her eyes a little.

'Have you children?' she finally asked. 'I am talking to you, blockhead.'

‘Eh?’

‘I trust I express myself clearly.’

‘I’m not . . .’ Frexinet hemmed and coughed. ‘I’m not married.’

‘Your marital status is of little concern to me. What interests me is whether you are capable of mustering anything from your suety loins. By the Great Tree! Have you ever made a woman with child?’

‘Errr . . . Yes . . . Yes, my lady, but—’

Eithné waved a hand carelessly and turned towards Geralt.

‘He shall stay in Brokilon,’ she said, ‘until he is fully healed and then a little longer. Afterwards . . . He may go whither he so wish.’

‘Thank you, Eithné,’ the Witcher bowed.’ And . . . the little girl? What about her?’

‘Why do you ask?’ The dryad looked at him with a cold glint in her silver eyes. ‘You know.’

‘She is not an ordinary, village child. She is a princess.’

‘That makes no impression on me. Nor makes any difference.’

‘Listen . . .’

‘Not another word, Gwynbleidd.’

He fell silent and bit his lip.

‘What about my petition?’

‘I shall listen to it,’ the dryad sighed. ‘No, not out of curiosity. I shall do it for you, that you might distinguish yourself before Venzlav and collect the fee he probably promised you for reaching me. But not now, now I shall be busy. Come to my Tree this evening.’

When she had gone, Frexinet raised himself on an elbow, groaned, coughed and spat on his hand.

‘What is it all about, Geralt? Why am I to stay here? And what did she mean about those children? What have you got me mixed up in, eh?’

The Witcher sat down.

‘You’ll save your hide, Frexinet,’ he said in a weary voice. ‘You’ll become one of the few to get out of here alive, at least recently. And you’ll become the father of a little dryad. Several, perhaps.’

‘What the . . . ? Am I to be . . . a stud?’

‘Call it what you will. You have limited choices.’

‘I get it,’ the baron winked and grinned lewdly. ‘Why, I’ve seen captives working in mines and digging canals. It could be worse . . . Just as long as my strength suffices. There’s quite a few of them here . . .’

‘Stop smiling foolishly,’ Geralt grimaced, ‘and daydreaming. Don’t imagine adoration, music, wine, fans and swarms of adoring dryads. There’ll be one, perhaps two. And there won’t be any adoration. They will treat the entire matter very practically. And you even more so.’

‘Doesn’t it give them pleasure? It can’t cause them any harm?’

‘Don’t be a child. In this respect they don’t differ in any way from women. Physically, at least.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘It depends on you whether it’ll be agreeable or disagreeable. But that doesn’t change the fact that the only thing that interests her is the result. You are of minor importance. Don’t expect any gratitude. Aha, and under no circumstances try anything on your own initiative.’

‘My own what?’

‘Should you meet her in the morning,’ the Witcher explained patiently, ‘bow, but without any damned smirks or winks. For a dryad it is a deadly serious matter. Should she smile or approach you, you can talk to her. About trees, ideally. If you don’t know much about trees, then about the weather. But should she pretend not to see you, stay well away from her. And stay well away from other dryads, and watch your hands. Those matters do not exist to a dryad who is not ready. If you touch her she’ll stab you, because she won’t understand your intentions.’

‘You’re familiar,’ Frexinet smiled, ‘with their mating habits. Has it ever befallen you?’

The Witcher did not reply. Before his eyes was the beautiful, slender dryad and her impudent smile. *Vatt’ghern, bloede caérme.* A witcher, dammit. Why did you bring him here, Braenn? What use is he to us? No benefit from a witcher . . .

‘Geralt?’

‘What?’

‘And Princess Cirilla?’

‘Forget about her. They’ll turn her into a dryad. In two or three years she’d shoot an arrow in her own brother’s eye, were he to try to enter Brokilon.’

‘Dammit,’ Frexinet swore, scowling. ‘Ervyll will be furious. Geralt? Couldn’t I—?’

‘No,’ the Witcher cut him off. ‘Don’t even try. You wouldn’t get out of Duén Canell alive.’

‘That means the lass is lost.’

‘To you, yes.’

VI

Eithné's Tree was, naturally, an oak, but it was actually three oaks fused together, still green, not betraying any signs of age, although Geralt reckoned they were at least three hundred years old. The trees were hollow inside and the cavity had the dimensions of a large chamber with a high ceiling narrowing into a cone. The interior was lit by a cresset which did not smoke, and it had been modestly – but not crudely – transformed into comfortable living quarters.

Eithné was kneeling inside on something like a fibrous mat. Ciri sat cross-legged before her, erect and motionless, as though petrified. She had been bathed and cured of her cold, and her huge, emerald eyes were wide open. The Witcher noticed that her little face, now that the dirt and the grimace of a spiteful little devil had vanished from it, was quite pretty.

Eithné was combing the little girl's long hair, slowly and tenderly.

'Enter, Gwynbleidd. Be seated.'

He sat down, after first ceremonially going down on one knee.

'Are you rested?' the dryad asked, not looking at him, and continuing to comb. 'When can you embark on your return journey? What would you say to tomorrow morn?'

'When you give the order,' he said coldly. 'O Lady of Brokilon. One word from you will suffice for me to stop vexing you with my presence in Duén Canell.'

'Geralt,' Eithné slowly turned her head. 'Do not misunderstand me. I know and respect you. I know you have never harmed a dryad, rusalka, sylph or nymph; quite the opposite, you have been known to act in their defence, to save their lives. But that changes nothing. Too much divides us. We belong to different worlds. I neither want nor am able to make exceptions. For anybody. I shall not ask if you understand, for I know it is thus. I ask whether you accept it.'

'What does it change?'

'Nothing. But I want to know.'

'I do,' he confirmed. 'But what about her? What about Ciri? She also belongs to another world.'

Ciri glanced at him timidly and then upwards at the dryad. Eithné smiled.

‘But not for long,’ she said.

‘Eithné, please. First think it over.’

‘What for?’

‘Give her to me. Let her return with me. To the world she belongs to.’

‘No, White Wolf,’ the dryad plunged the comb into the little girl’s mousy hair again. ‘I shall not. You of all people ought to understand.’

‘Me?’

‘Yes, you. Certain tidings from the world even reach Brokilon. Tidings about a certain witcher, who for services rendered occasionally demanded curious vows. “You will give me what you do not expect to find at home.” “You will give me what you already have, but about which you do not know.” Does that sound familiar? After all, for some time you witchers have been trying in this way to direct fate, you have been seeking boys designated by fate to be your successors, wishing to protect yourself from extinction and oblivion. From nihilism. Why, then, are you surprised at me? I care for the fate of the dryads. Surely that is just? A young human girl for each dryad killed by humans.’

‘By keeping her here, you will arouse hostility and the desire for vengeance, Eithné. You will arouse a consuming hatred.’

‘Human hatred is nothing new to me. No, Geralt. I shall not give her up. Particularly since she is hale. That has been uncommon recently.’

‘Uncommon?’

The dryad fixed her huge, silver eyes on him.

‘They abandon sick little girls with me. Diphtheria, scarlet fever, croup, recently even smallpox. They think we are not immune, that the epidemic will annihilate or at least decimate us. We disappoint them, Geralt. We have something more than immunity. Brokilon cares for its children.’

She fell silent, leaning over, carefully combing out a lock of Ciri’s tangled hair, using her other hand to help.

‘May I,’ the Witcher cleared his throat, ‘turn to the petition, with which King Venzlav has sent me?’

‘Is it not a waste of time?’ Eithné lifted her head. ‘Why bother? I know perfectly well what King Venzlav wants. For that, I do not need prophetic gifts at all. He wants me to give him Brokilon, probably as far as the River Vda, which, I gather, he considers – or would like to consider – the natural border between Brugge and Verden. In exchange, I presume, he is offering me a small and untamed corner of the forest. And probably gives his kingly word and offers kingly protection that that small, untamed corner, that scrap of forest, will belong to me forever and ever and that no one will dare to disturb the dryads there. That the dryads there will be able to live in peace. So what, Geralt? Venzlav would like to put an end to the war over Brokilon, which has lasted two centuries. And in order to end it, the dryads would have to give up what they have been dying in the defence of for two hundred years? Simply hand it over? Give up Brokilon?’

Geralt was silent. He had nothing to add. The dryad smiled.

‘Did the royal proposal run thus, Gwynbleidd? Or perhaps it was more blunt, saying: “Don’t put on airs, you sylvan monster, beast of the wilderness, relict of the past, but listen to what I, King Venzlav, want. I want cedar, oak and hickory, mahogany and golden birch, yew for bows and pine for masts, because Brokilon is close at hand, and otherwise I have to bring wood from beyond the mountains. I want the iron and copper that are beneath the earth. I want the gold that lies on Craag An. I want to fell and saw, and dig in the earth, without having to listen to the whistling of arrows. And most importantly; I want at last to be a king, one to whom everything bows down in his kingdom. I do not wish for some Brokilon in our kingdom, for a forest I cannot enter. Such a forest affronts me, rouses me to wrath and affords me sleepless nights, for I am a man, we rule over the world. We may, if we wish, tolerate a few elves, dryads or rusalkas in this world. If they are not too insolent. Submit to my will, O Witch of Brokilon. Or perish.”’

‘Eithné, you admitted yourself that Venzlav is not a fool or a fanatic. You know, I am certain, that he is a just and peace-loving king. The blood shed here pains and troubles him . . .’

‘If he stays away from Brokilon not a single drop of blood shall be shed.’

‘You well know . . .’ Geralt raised his head.’ You well know it is not thus. People have been killed in Burnt Stump, in Eight-Mile, in the Owl Hills. People have been killed in Brugge and on the left bank of the Ribbon. Beyond Brokilon.’

‘The places you have mentioned,’ the dryad responded calmly, ‘are Brokilon. I do not recognise human maps or borders.’

‘But the forest was cleared there a hundred summers ago!’

‘What is a hundred summers to Brokilon? Or a hundred winters?’

Geralt fell silent.

The dryad put down the comb and stroked Ciri’s mousy hair.

‘Agree to Venzlav’s proposal, Eithné.’

The dryad looked at him coldly.

‘How shall we profit by that? We, the children of Brokilon?’

‘With the chance of survival. No, Eithné, do not interrupt. I know what you would say. I understand your pride in Brokilon’s sovereignty. Nonetheless, the world is changing. Something is ending. Whether you like it or not, man’s dominion over this world is a fact. Only those who assimilate with humans will survive. The rest will perish. Eithné, there are forests where dryads, rusalkas and elves live peacefully, having come to agreement with humans. We are so close to each other, after all. Men can be the fathers of your children. What will you gain through this war you are waging? The potential fathers of your children are perishing from your arrows. And what is the result? How many of Brokilon’s dryads are pure-blood? How many of them are abducted human girls you have modified? You even have to make use of Frexinet, because you have no choice. I seem to see few tiny dryads, Eithné. I see only her; a little human girl, terrified, dulled by narcotics, paralysed by fear—’

‘I’m not afraid at all!’ Ciri suddenly cried, assuming her little devil face for a moment. ‘And I’m not parrotised! So you’d better watch your step! Nothing can happen to me here. Be sure! I’m not afraid. My grandmamma says that dryads aren’t evil, and my grandmamma is the wisest woman in the world! My grandmamma . . . My grandmamma says there should be more forests like this one . . .’

She fell silent and lowered her head. Eithné laughed.

‘A Child of the Elder Blood,’ she said. ‘Yes, Geralt. There are still being born Children of the Elder Blood, of whom the prophesies speak. And you tell me that something is ending . . . You worry whether we shall survive—’

‘The scamp was supposed to marry Kistrin of Verden,’ Geralt interrupted. ‘It’s a pity it will not be. Kistrin will one day succeed Ervyll, and were he influenced by a wife with such views, perhaps

he would cease raids on Brokilon?'

'I don't want that Kistrin!' the little girl screamed shrilly, and something flashed in her green eyes. 'Kistrin can go and find some gorgeous, stupid material! I'm not material! I won't be a princess!'

'Soft, Child of the Elder Blood,' the dryad said, hugging Ciri. 'Don't shout. Of course you will not be a princess—'

'Of course,' the Witcher interjected caustically. 'You, Eithné, and I well know what she will be. I see it has already been decided. So it goes. What answer should I take to King Venzlav, O Lady of Brokilon?'

'None.'

'What do you mean, "none"?'

'None. He will understand. Long ago, long, long ago, before Venzlav was in the world, heralds rode up to Brokilon's borders. Horns and trumpets blared, armour glinted, and pennants and standards fluttered. "Humble yourself, Brokilon!" they cried. "King Goat Tooth, king of Bald Hillock and Marshy Meadow, orders you to humble yourself, Brokilon!" And Brokilon's answer was always the same. As you are leaving my Forest, Gwynbleidd, turn around and listen. In the rustle of the leaves you will hear Brokilon's answer. Pass it on to Venzlav and add that he will never hear another while the oaks still stand in Duén Canell. Not while a single tree still grows or a single dryad still lives here.'

Geralt was silent.

'You say something is ending,' Eithné slowly went on. 'Not true. There are things that never end. You talk of survival? I am fighting to survive. Brokilon endures thanks to my fight, for trees live longer than men, as long as they are protected from your axes. You talk to me of kings and princes. Who are they? Those whom I know are white skeletons lying in the necropolises of Craag An, deep in the forest. In marble tombs, on piles of yellow metal and shining gems. But Brokilon endures, the trees sough above the ruins of palaces, their roots break up the marble. Does your Venzlav recall those kings? Do you, Gwynbleidd? And if not, how can you claim that something is ending? How do you know whose destiny is destruction and whose eternity? What entitles you to speak of destiny? Do you actually know what it is?'

'No,' the Witcher agreed, 'I do not. But—'

'If you know not,' she interrupted, 'there is no place for any

“but”. You know not. You simply know not.’

She was silent, touched her forehead with her hand and turned her face away.

‘When you came here the first time, years ago,’ she said, ‘you did not know either. And Morénn . . . My daughter . . . Geralt, Morénn is dead. She fell by the Ribbon, defending Brokilon. I did not recognise her when they brought her to me. Her face had been crushed by the hooves of your horses. Destiny? And today, you, Witcher, who could not give Morénn a child, bring her – the Child of the Elder Blood – to me. A little girl who knows what destiny is. No, it is not knowledge which would suit you, knowledge which you could accept. She simply believes. Say it again, Ciri, repeat what you told me before the Witcher, Geralt of Rivia, White Wolf, entered. That witcher who does not know. Say it again, Child of the Elder Blood.’

‘Your Maj . . . Venerable lady,’ Ciri said in a voice that cracked. ‘Do not keep me here. I cannot . . . I want to go . . . home. I want to return home with Geralt. I must go . . . With him . . .’

‘Why with him?’

‘For he . . . is my fate.’

Eithné turned away. She was very pale.

‘What do you say to that, Geralt?’

He did not reply. Eithné clapped her hands. Braenn entered the oak tree, emerging like a ghost from the night outside, holding a large, silver goblet in both hands. The medallion around the Witcher’s neck began vibrating rapidly and rhythmically.

‘What do you say to that?’ repeated the silver-haired dryad, standing up. ‘She does not want to remain in Brokilon! She does not wish to be a dryad! She does not want to replace Morénn, she wants to leave, walk away from her fate! Is that right, Child of the Elder Blood? Is that what you actually want?’

Ciri nodded her bowed head. Her shoulders were trembling. The Witcher had had enough.

‘Why are you bullying the child, Eithné? We both know you will soon give her the Water of Brokilon and what she wants will cease to mean anything. Why are you doing this? Why are you doing it in my presence?’

‘I want to show you what destiny is. I want to prove to you that nothing is ending. That everything is only beginning.’

‘No, Eithné,’ he said, standing up. ‘I’m sorry if I’m spoiling this display for you, but I have no intention of watching it. You have gone too far, Lady of Brokilon, desirous to stress the chasm dividing us. You, the Elder Folk, like to say that hatred is alien to you, that it is a feeling known only to humans. But it is not true. You know what hatred is and are capable of hating, you merely evince it a little differently, more wisely and less savagely. But because of that it may be more cruel. I accept your hatred, Eithné, on behalf of all humankind. I deserve it. I am sorry about Morénn.’

The dryad did not respond.

‘And that is precisely Brokilon’s answer, which I am to communicate to Venzlav of Brugge, isn’t it? A warning and a challenge? Clear proof of the hatred and Power slumbering among these trees, by whose will a human child will soon drink poison which will destroy its memory, taking it from the arms of another human child whose psyche and memory have already been annihilated? And that answer is to be carried to Venzlav by a witcher who knows and feels affection for both children? The witcher who is guilty of your daughter’s death? Very well, Eithné, let it be in accordance with your will. Venzlav will hear your answer, will hear my voice, will see my eyes and read everything in them. But I do not have to look on what is to occur here. And I do not want to.’

Eithné still said nothing.

‘Farewell, Ciri,’ Geralt knelt down and hugged the little girl. Ciri’s shoulders were trembling powerfully.

‘Don’t cry. Nothing evil can happen to you here.’

Ciri sniffed. The Witcher stood up.

‘Farewell, Braenn,’ he said to the younger dryad. ‘Good health and take care. Survive, Braenn; live as long as your tree. Like Brokilon. And one more thing . . .’

‘Yes, Gwynbleidd?’ Braenn lifted her head and something wet glistened in her eyes.

‘It is easy to kill with a bow, girl. How easy it is to release the bowstring and think, it is not I, not I, it is the arrow. The blood of that boy is not on my hands. The arrow killed him, not I. But the arrow does not dream anything in the night. May you dream nothing in the night either, blue-eyed dryad. Farewell, Braenn.’

‘Mona . . .’ Braenn said indistinctly. The goblet she was holding

shuddered and the transparent liquid filling it rippled.

‘What?’

‘Mona!’ she wailed. ‘I am Mona! Lady Eithné! I—’

‘Enough of this,’ Eithné said sharply. ‘Enough. Control yourself, Braenn.’

Geralt laughed drily.

‘There you have your destiny, Lady of the Forest. I respect your doggedness and your fight. But I know that soon you will be fighting alone. The last dryad of Brokilon sending dryads – who nonetheless still remember their real names – to their deaths. In spite of everything I wish you fortune, Eithné. Farewell.’

‘Geralt . . .’ Ciri whispered, still sitting motionless, with her head lowered. ‘Don’t leave me . . . all by myself . . .’

‘White Wolf,’ Eithné said, embracing the little girl’s hunched back. ‘Did you have to wait until she asked you? Not to abandon her? To remain with her until the end? Why do you wish to abandon her at this moment? To leave her all alone? Where do you wish to flee to, Gwynbleidd? And from what?’

Ciri’s head slumped further down. But she did not cry.

‘Until the end,’ the Witcher said, nodding. ‘Very well, Ciri. You will not be alone. I will be with you. Do not fear anything.’

Eithné took the goblet from Braenn’s trembling hands and raised it up.

‘Can you read Old Runes, White Wolf?’

‘Yes, I can.’

‘Read what is engraved on the goblet. It is from Craag An. It was drunk from by kings whom no one now remembers.’

‘Duettaeánn aef cirrán Cáerme Gláeddyv. Yn á esseáth.’

‘Do you know what that means?’

‘The Sword of Destiny has two blades . . . You are one of them.’

‘Stand up, Child of the Elder Blood.’ The dryad’s voice clanged like steel in an order which could not be defied, a will which had to be yielded to. ‘Drink. It is the Water of Brokilon.’

Geralt bit his lips and stared at Eithné’s silver eyes. He did not look at Ciri, who was slowly bringing her lips to the edge of the goblet. He had seen it before, once, long ago. The convulsions, the

tremors; the incredible, horrifying, slowly dwindling cry. And the emptiness, torpor and apathy in the slowly opening eyes. He had seen it before.

Ciri drank. A tear rolled slowly down Braenn's unmoving face.

'That will do,' Eithné took the goblet away, placed it on the ground, and stroked the little girl's hair, which fell onto her shoulders in mousy waves.

'O Child of the Elder Blood,' she said. 'Choose. Do you wish to remain in Brokilon, or do you follow your destiny?'

The Witcher shook his head in disbelief. Ciri was flushed and breathing a little more quickly. And nothing else. Nothing.

'I wish to follow my destiny,' she said brightly, looking the dryad in the eyes.

'Then let it be,' Eithné said, coldly and tersely. Braenn sighed aloud.

'I wish to be alone,' Eithné said, turning her back on them. 'Please leave.'

Braenn took hold of Ciri and touched Geralt's arm, but the Witcher pushed her arm away.

'Thank you, Eithné,' he said. The dryad slowly turned to face him.

'What are you thanking me for?'

'For destiny,' he smiled. 'For your decision. For that was not the Water of Brokilon, was it? It was Ciri's destiny to return home. But you, Eithné, played the role of destiny. And for that I thank you.'

'How little you know of destiny,' the dryad said bitterly. 'How little you know, Witcher. How little you see. How little you understand. You thank me? You thank me for the role I have played? For a vulgar spectacle? For a trick, a deception, a hoax? For the sword of destiny being made, as you judge, of wood dipped in gold paint? Then go further; do not thank, but expose me. Have it your own way. Prove that the arguments are in your favour. Fling your truth in my face, show me the triumph of sober, human truth, thanks to which, in your opinion, you gain mastery of the world. This is the Water of Brokilon. A little still remains. Dare you? O conqueror of the world?'

Geralt, although annoyed by her words, hesitated, but only for a moment. The Water of Brokilon, even if it were authentic, would have no effect on him. He was completely immune to the toxic,

hallucinogenic tannins. But there was no way it could have been the Water of Brokilon; Ciri had drunk it and nothing had happened. He reached for the goblet with both hands and looked into the dryad's silver eyes.

The ground rushed from under his feet all at once and hurled him on his back. The powerful oak tree whirled around and shook. He fumbled all around himself with his numb arms and opened his eyes with difficulty; it was as though he were throwing off a marble tombstone. He saw above him Braenn's tiny face, and beyond her Eithné's eyes, shining like quicksilver. And other eyes; as green as emeralds. No; brighter. Like spring grass. The medallion around his neck was quivering, vibrating.

'Gwynbleidd,' he heard. 'Watch carefully. No, closing your eyes will not help you at all. Look, look at your destiny.'

'Do you remember?'

A sudden explosion of light rending a curtain of smoke, huge candelabras heavy with candles, dripping garlands of wax. Stone walls, a steep staircase. Descending the staircase, a green-eyed, mousy-haired girl in a small circlet with an intricately carved gemstone, in a silver-blue gown with a train held up by a page in a short, scarlet jacket.

'Do you remember?'

His own voice speaking . . . speaking . . .

I shall return in six years . . .

A bower, warmth, the scent of flowers, the intense, monotonous hum of bees. He, alone, on his knees, giving a rose to a woman with mousy locks spilling from beneath a narrow, gold band. Rings set with emeralds – large, green cabochons – on the fingers taking the rose from his hand.

'Return here,' the woman said. 'Return here, should you change your mind. Your destiny will be waiting.'

I shall never return here, he thought. I never . . . went back there. I never returned to . . .

Whither?

Mousy hair. Green eyes.

His voice again in the darkness, in a gloom in which everything was engulfed. There are only fires, fires all the way to the horizon. A cloud of sparks in the purple smoke. Beltane! May Day Eve! Dark,

violet eyes, shining in a pale, triangular face veiled by a black, rippling shock of curls, look out from the clouds of smoke.

Yennefer!

'Too little,' the apparition's thin lips suddenly twist, a tear rolls down the pale cheek, quickly, quicker and quicker, like a drop of wax down a candle.

'Too little. Something more is needed.'

'Yennefer!'

'Nothingness for nothingness,' the apparition says in Eithné's voice.

'The nothingness and void in you, conqueror of the world, who is unable even to win the woman he loves. Who walks away and flees, when his destiny is within reach. The sword of destiny has two blades. You are one of them. But what is the other, White Wolf?'

'There is no destiny,' his own voice. 'There is none. None. It does not exist. The only thing that everyone is destined for is death.'

'That is the truth,' says the woman with the mousy hair and the mysterious smile. 'That is the truth, Geralt.'

The woman is wearing a silvery suit of armour, bloody, dented and punctured by the points of pikes or halberds. Blood drips in a thin stream from the corner of her mysteriously and hideously smiling mouth.

'You sneer at destiny,' she says, still smiling. 'You sneer at it, trifle with it. The sword of destiny has two blades. You are one of them. Is the second . . . death? But it is we who die, die because of you. Death cannot catch up with you, so it must settle for us. Death dogs your footsteps, White Wolf. But others die. Because of you. Do you remember me?'

'Ca . . . Calanthe!'

'You can save him,' the voice of Eithné, from behind the curtain of smoke. 'You can save him, Child of the Elder Blood. Before he plunges into the nothingness which he has come to love. Into the black forest which has no end.'

Eyes, as green as spring grass. A touch. Voices, crying in chorus, incomprehensibly. Faces.

He could no longer see anything. He was plummeting into the chasm, into the void, into darkness. The last thing he heard was Eithné's voice.

‘Let it be so.’

VII

‘Geralt! Wake up! Please wake up!’

He opened his eyes and saw the sun, a golden ducat with distinct edges, high up above the treetops, beyond the turbid veil of the morning mist. He was lying on damp, spongy moss and a hard root was digging into his back.

Ciri was kneeling beside him, tugging at his jacket.

‘Curses . . .’ He cleared his throat and looked around. ‘Where am I? How did I end up here?’

‘I don’t know,’ she answered. ‘I woke up a moment ago, here, beside you, awffy frozen. I can’t remember how . . . Do you know what? It’s magic!’

‘You’re probably right,’ he said, sitting up and pulling pine needles from his collar. ‘You’re probably right, Ciri. Bloody Water of Brokilon . . . Looks like the dryads were enjoying themselves at our expense.’

He stood up, picked up his sword, which was lying alongside him and slung the strap across his back.

‘Ciri?’

‘Uh-huh?’

‘You were also enjoying yourself at my expense.’

‘Me?’

‘You’re the daughter of Pavetta and the granddaughter of Calanthe of Cintra. You knew who I was from the very beginning, didn’t you?’

‘No,’ she blushed. ‘Not from the beginning. You lifted the curse from my daddy, didn’t you?’

‘That’s not true,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘Your mama did. And your grandmamma. I only helped.’

‘But my nanny said . . . She said that I’m destined. Because I’m a Surprise. A Child of Surprise. Geralt?’

‘Ciri,’ he looked at her, shaking his head and smiling. ‘Believe me, you’re the greatest surprise I could have come across.’

‘Ha!’ The little girl’s face brightened up. ‘It’s true! I’m destined.

My nanny said a witcher would come who would have white hair and would take me away. But grandmamma yelled . . . Oh, never mind! Tell me where you're taking me.'

'Back home. To Cintra.'

'Ah . . . But I thought you . . . ?'

'You'll have time to think on the way. Let's go, Ciri, we must leave Brokilon. It isn't a safe place.'

'I'm not afraid!'

'But I am.'

'Grandmamma said that witchers aren't afraid of anything.'

'Grandmamma overstated the facts. Let's go, Ciri. If I only knew where we . . .'

He looked up at the sun.

'Right, let's risk it . . . We'll go this way.'

'No.' Ciri wrinkled her nose and pointed in the opposite direction. 'That way. Over there.'

'And how do you know, may I ask?'

'I just know,' she shrugged and gave him a helpless, surprised, emerald look. 'Somehow . . . Somewhere, over there . . . I don't know . . .'

Pavetta's daughter, he thought. A Child . . . A Child of the Elder Blood? She might have inherited something from her mother.

'Ciri.' He tugged open his shirt and drew out his medallion. 'Touch this.'

'Oh,' she said, opening her mouth. 'What a dreadful wolf. What fangs he has . . .'

'Touch it.'

'Oh, my!'

The Witcher smiled. He had also felt the sudden vibration of the medallion, the sharp wave running through the silver chain.

'It moved!' Ciri sighed. 'It moved!'

'I know. Let's go, Ciri. You lead.'

'It's magic, isn't it!'

'Naturally.'

It was as he had expected. The little girl could sense the direction. How, he did not know. But soon – sooner than he had expected – they came out onto a track, onto a forked, three-way junction. It was the border of Brokilon – according to humans, at least. Eithné did not recognise it, he remembered.

Ciri bit her lip, wrinkled her nose and hesitated, looking at the junction, at the sandy, rutted track, furrowed by hooves and cartwheels. But Geralt now knew where he was and did not want to depend on her uncertain abilities. He set off along the road heading eastwards, towards Brugge. Ciri, still frowning, was looking back towards the west.

'That leads to Nastrog Castle,' he jibed. 'Are you missing Kistrin?'

The little girl grunted and followed him obediently, but looked back several times.

'What is it, Ciri?'

'I don't know,' she whispered. 'But we're going the wrong way, Geralt.'

'Why? We're going to Brugge, to King Venzlav, who lives in a splendid castle. We shall take baths and sleep on a feather bed . . .'

'It's a bad road,' she said. 'A bad road.'

'That's true, I've seen better. Don't be sniffy, Ciri. Let's go. With a will.'

They went around an overgrown bend. And it turned out Ciri had been right.

They were suddenly, quickly, surrounded, from all sides. Men in conical helmets, chainmail and dark-blue tunics with the gold and black chequered pattern of Verden on their chests. They encircled the pair, but none of the men approached or reached for a weapon.

'Whence and whither?' barked a thickset individual in worn-out, green apparel, standing before Geralt with bandy legs set wide apart. His face was as swarthy and wrinkled as a prune. A bow and white-fletched arrows protruded behind him, high above his head.

'We've come from Burnt Stump,' the Witcher lied effortlessly, squeezing Ciri's little hand knowingly. 'And we're going home to Brugge. What's happening?'

'Royal service,' the dark-faced individual said courteously, as though he had only then noticed the sword on Geralt's back. 'We . . .'

‘Bring ’im ’ere, Junghans!’ yelled someone standing further down the road. The mercenaries parted.

‘Don’t look, Ciri,’ Geralt said quickly. ‘Avert your eyes. Don’t look.’

A fallen tree lay on the road, blocking the way with a tangle of boughs. Long white splinters radiated from the partly-hacked and broken trunk standing in the roadside thicket. A loaded wagon covered with a tarpaulin stood before the tree. Two small, shaggy horses, stuck with arrows and exposing yellow teeth, were lying on the ground caught up in the shafts and halters. One was still alive and was snorting heavily and kicking.

There were also people lying in dark patches of blood soaked into the sand, hanging over the side of the wagon and hunched over the wheels.

Two men slowly emerged from among the armed men gathered around the wagon, to be joined by a third. The others – there were around ten of them – stood motionless, holding their horses.

‘What happened?’ the Witcher asked, standing so as to block out Ciri’s view of the massacre.

A beady-eyed man in a short coat of mail and high boots gave him a searching look and audibly rubbed his bristly chin. He had a worn, shiny leather bracer of the kind archers use on his left forearm.

‘Ambush,’ he said curtly. ‘Eerie wives did for these merchants. We’re looking into it.’

‘Eerie wives? Ambushing merchants?’

‘You can see for yourself,’ the beady-eyed man pointed. ‘Stuck with arrows like urchins. On the highway! They’re becoming more and more impudent, those forest hags. You can’t just not venture into the forest now, you can’t even travel the road by the forest.’

‘And you,’ the Witcher asked, squinting. ‘Who are you?’

‘Ervyll’s men. From the Nastrog squads. We were serving under Baron Frexinet. But the baron was lost in Brokilon.’

Ciri opened her mouth, but Geralt squeezed her hand hard, ordering her to stay quiet.

‘Blood for blood, I say!’ roared the beady-eyed man’s companion, a giant in a brass-studded kaftan. ‘Blood for blood! You can’t let that go. First Frexinet and the kidnapped princess from Cintra, and

now merchants. By the Gods, vengeance, vengeance, I say! For if not, you'll see, tomorrow or the next day they'll start killing people on their own thresholds!'

'Brick's right,' the beady-eyed one said. 'Isn't he? And you, fellow, where are you from?'

'From Brugge,' the Witcher lied.

'And the girl? Your daughter?'

'Aye,' Geralt squeezed Ciri's hand again.

'From Brugge,' Brick frowned. 'So I'll tell you, fellow, that your king, Venzlav, is emboldening the monstrosities right now. He doesn't want to join forces with Ervyll, nor with Viraxas of Kerack. But if we marched on Brokilon from three sides, we'd finally destroy that scum . . .'

'How did the slaughter happen?' Geralt asked slowly. 'Does anybody know? Did any of the merchants survive?'

'There aren't any witnesses,' the beady-eyed one said. 'But we know what happened. Junghans, a forester, can read spoors like a book. Tell him, Junghans.'

'Well,' said the one with the wrinkled face, 'it were like this: the merchants were travelling along the highway. And their way were blocked. You see, sir, that fallen pine lying across the road, freshly felled. There are tracks in the thicket, want to see? Well, when the merchants stopped to clear away the tree, they were shot, just like that. Over there, from the bushes by that crooked birch. There are tracks there too. And the arrows, mark you, all dryad work, fletchings stuck on with resin, shafts bound with bast . . .'

'I see,' the Witcher interrupted, looking at the bodies. 'Some of them, I think, survived the arrows and had their throats cut. With knives.'

One more man emerged from behind the group of mercenaries standing in front of him. He was skinny and short, in an elk-hide kaftan. He had black, short hair, and his cheeks were blue from closely-shaved, black beard growth. One glance at the small, narrow hands in short, black, fingerless gloves, at the pale, fish-like eyes, at his sword and at the hafts of the daggers stuck into his belt and down his left boot was all the Witcher needed. Geralt had seen too many murderers not to recognise one more instantly.

'You've a keen eye,' said the black-haired man, extremely slowly. 'Indeed, you see much.'

‘And well he does,’ said the beady-eyed man. ‘Let him tell his king what he saw. Venzlav still swears eerie wives shouldn’t be killed, because they are agreeable and good. I’ll bet he visits them on May Day and ruts them. Perhaps they’re good for that. We’ll find out for ourselves if we take one alive.’

‘Or even half-dead,’ Brick cackled. ‘Hi, where’s that bloody druid? Almost noon, but no sign of him. We must off.’

‘What do you mean to do?’ Geralt asked, without releasing Ciri’s hand.

‘What business is it of yours?’ the black-haired man hissed.

‘Oh, why so sharp right away, Levecque?’ the beady-eyed one asked, smiling foully. ‘We’re honest men, we have no secrets. Ervyll is sending us a druid, a great magician, who can even talk with trees. He’ll guide us into the forest to avenge Frexinet and try and rescue the princess. We aren’t out for a picnic, fellow, but on a punitive ex— ex—’

‘Expedition,’ the black-haired man, Levecque, prompted.

‘Aye. Took the words out of me mouth. So then go on your way, fellow, for it may get hot here anon.’

‘Aaaye,’ Levecque drawled, looking at Ciri. ‘’Twill be dangerous here, particularly with a young ’un. Eerie wives are just desperate for girls like that. Hey, little maid? Is your mama at home waiting?’

Ciri, trembling, nodded.

‘’Twould be disastrous,’ the black-haired one continued, not taking his eye off her, ‘were you not to make it home. She would surely race to King Venzlav and say: “You were lax with the dryads, king, and now you have my daughter and husband on your conscience.” Who knows, perhaps Venzlav would weigh up an alliance with Ervyll once more?’

‘Leave them, Mr Levecque,’ Junghans snarled, and his wrinkled face wrinkled up even more. ‘Let them go.’

‘Farewell, little maid,’ Levecque said and held out his hand to stroke Ciri on the head. Ciri shuddered and withdrew.

‘What is it? Are you afraid?’

‘You have blood on your hand,’ the Witcher said softly.

‘Ah,’ Levecque said, raising his hand. ‘Indeed. It’s their blood. The merchants. I checked to see if any of them had survived. But alas, the eerie wives shoot accurately.’

‘Eerie wives?’ said Ciri in a trembling voice, not reacting to the Witcher’s squeeze of her hand. ‘Oh, noble knights, you are mistaken. It could not be dryads!’

‘What are you squeaking about, little maid?’ The pale eyes of the black-haired man narrowed. Geralt glanced to the right and left, estimating the distances.

‘It wasn’t dryads, sir knight,’ Ciri repeated. ‘It’s obvious!’

‘Ay?’

‘I mean, that tree . . . That tree was chopped down! With an axe! But no dryad would ever chop a tree down, would they?’

‘Indeed,’ Levecque said and glanced at the beady-eyed man. ‘Oh, what a clever little girl, you are. Too clever.’

The Witcher had already seen his thin, gloved hands creeping like a black spider towards the haft of his dagger. Although Levecque had not taken his eyes off Ciri, Geralt knew the blow would be aimed at him. He waited for the moment when Levecque touched his weapon, while the beady-eyed man held his breath.

Three movements. Just three. His silver-studded forearm slammed into the side of the black-haired man’s head. Before he fell, the Witcher was standing between Junghans and the beady-eyed man, and his sword, hissing out of the scabbard, whined in the air, slashing open the temple of Brick, the giant in the brass-studded kaftan.

‘Run, Ciri!’

The beady-eyed man, who was drawing his sword, leaped, but was not fast enough. The Witcher slashed him across his chest, diagonally, downwards, and immediately, taking advantage of the blow’s momentum, upwards, from a kneeling position, cutting the mercenary open in a bloody ‘X’.

‘Men!’ Junghans yelled at the rest, who were frozen in astonishment. ‘Over here!’

Ciri leaped into a crooked beech tree and scampered like a squirrel up the branches, disappearing among the foliage. The forester sent an arrow after her but missed. The remaining men ran over, breaking up into a semi-circle, pulling out bows and arrows from quivers. Geralt, still kneeling, put his fingers together and struck with the Aard Sign, not at the bowmen, for they were too far away, but at the sandy road in front of them, spraying them in a cloud of sand.

Junghans, leaping aside, nimbly drew another arrow from his quiver.

‘No!’ Levecque yelled, springing up from the ground with his sword in his right hand and a dagger in his left. ‘Leave him, Junghans!’

The Witcher spun around smoothly, turning to face him.

‘He’s mine,’ Levecque said, shaking his head and wiping his cheek and mouth with his forearm. ‘Leave him to me!’

Geralt, crouching, started to circle, but Levecque did not, instead attacking at once, leaping forward in two strides.

He’s good, the Witcher thought, working hard to connect with the killer’s blade with a short moulinet, avoiding the dagger’s jab with a half-turn. He intentionally did not reply, but leaped back, counting on Levecque trying to reach him with a long, extended thrust and losing his balance. But the killer was no novice. He dropped into a crouch and also moved around in a semi-circle with soft, feline steps. He unexpectedly bounded forward, swung his sword and whirled, shortening the distance. The Witcher did not meet him halfway, but restricted himself to a swift, high feint which forced the killer to dodge. Levecque stooped over, offered a quarte, hiding the hand with the dagger behind his back. The Witcher did not attack this time either, did not move in, but described a semi-circle again, skirting around him.

‘Aha,’ Levecque drawled, straightening up. ‘Shall we prolong the game? Why not? You can never have too much amusement!’

He leaped, spun, struck, once, twice, thrice, in a rapid rhythm; a cut from above with his sword and immediately from the left with a flat, scything blow of his dagger. The Witcher did not disturb the rhythm; parried, leaped back and once again circled, forcing the killer to move around. Levecque suddenly drew back, circling in the opposite direction.

‘Every game,’ he hissed through clenched teeth, ‘must have its end. What would you say to a single blow, trickster? A single blow and then we’ll shoot your little brat down from the tree. How about that?’

Geralt saw that Levecque was watching his shadow, waiting for it to reach his opponent, indicating that he had the sun in his eyes. Geralt stopped circling to make the killer’s job easier.

And narrowed his pupils into vertical slits, two narrow lines.

In order to maintain the illusion, he screwed his eyes up a little, pretending to be blinded.

Levecque leaped, spun, keeping his balance by extending his dagger hand out sideways, and struck with a simply impossible bend of his wrist, upwards, aiming at the Witcher's crotch. Geralt shot forward, spun, deflected the blow, bending his arm and wrist equally impossibly, throwing the killer backwards with the momentum of the parry and slashing him across his left cheek with the tip of his blade. Levecque staggered, grabbing his face. The Witcher twisted into a half-turn, shifted his bodyweight onto his left leg and cleaved open his opponent's carotid artery with a short blow. Levecque curled up, bleeding profusely, dropped to his knees, bent over and fell headfirst onto the sand.

Geralt slowly turned towards Junghans. Junghans, contorting his wrinkled face in a furious grimace, took aim with his bow. The Witcher crouched, gripping his sword in both hands. The remaining mercenaries also raised their bows, in dead silence.

'What are you waiting for?' the forester roared. 'Shoot! Shoot hi —' He stumbled, staggered, tottered forwards and fell on his face with an arrow sticking out of his back. The arrow's shaft had striped fletchings made from a pheasant's flight feathers, dyed yellow in a concoction of tree bark.

The arrows flew with a whistle and hiss in long, flat parabolas from the black wall of the forest. They flew apparently slowly and calmly, their fletchings sighing, and it seemed as though they picked up speed and force as they struck their targets. And they struck unerringly, scything down the Nastrog mercenaries, knocking them over into the sand, inert and mown down, like sunflowers hit with a stick.

The ones who survived rushed towards the horses, jostling one another. The arrows continued to whistle, catching up with them as they ran, hitting them as they sat in the saddle. Only three managed to rouse their horses to a gallop and ride off, yelling, their spurs bloodying their mounts' flanks. But not even they got far.

The forest closed up, blocking the way. Suddenly the sandy highway, bathed in sunlight, disappeared. It was now a dense, impenetrable wall of black tree trunks.

The mercenaries, terrified and stupefied, spurred their horses, but the arrows flew unceasingly. And hit them, knocking them from their saddles among the hoof-falls and neighing of the horses, and screams.

And afterwards a silence fell.

The wall of trees blocking the highway shimmered, became blurred, shone brightly and vanished. The road could be seen again and on it stood a grey horse and on the grey horse sat a rider – mighty, with a flaxen, fan-shaped beard, in a jerkin of sealskin with a tartan, woollen sash.

The grey horse, turning its head away and champing at the bit, moved forward, lifting its fore hooves high, snorting and becoming agitated by the corpses and the smell of blood. The rider, upright in the saddle, raised a hand and a sudden gust of wind struck the trees' branches.

From the undergrowth on the distant edge of the forest emerged small shapes in tight-fitting garments patched green and brown, with faces streaked with walnut-shell dye.

'Ceádmil, Wedd Brokiloéne!' the rider called. 'Fáill, Aná Woedwedd!'

'Fáill!' replied a voice from the forest like a gust of wind.

The green and brown shapes began to disappear, one after the other, melting into the thicket of the forest. Only one remained, with flowing hair the colour of honey. She took several steps and approached.

'Vá fáill, Gwynbleidd!' she called, coming even closer.

'Farewell, Mona,' the Witcher said. 'I will not forget you.'

'Forget me,' she responded firmly, adjusting her quiver on her back. 'There is no Mona. Mona was a dream. I am Braenn. Braenn of Brokilon!'

She waved at him once more. And disappeared.

The Witcher turned around.

'Mousesack,' he said, looking at the rider on the grey horse.

'Geralt,' the rider nodded, eyeing him up and down coldly. 'An interesting encounter. But let us begin with the most important things. Where is Ciri?'

'Here!' the girl yelled from the foliage. 'Can I come down yet?'

'Yes, you may,' the Witcher said.

'But I don't know how!'

'The same way as you climbed up, just the other way around.'

‘I’m afraid! I’m right at the very top!’

‘Get down, I said! We need to have a serious conversation, young lady!’

‘What about?’

‘About why the bloody hell you climbed up there instead of running into the forest? I would have followed you instead of . . . Oh, blow it. Get down!’

‘I did what the cat in the story did! Whatever I do it’s always wrong! Why, I’d like to know.’

‘I would too,’ the druid said, dismounting. ‘I would also like to know. And your grandmamma, Queen Calanthe, would like to know, too. Come on, climb down, princess.’

Leaves and dry branches fell from the tree. Then there was a sharp crack of tearing material, and finally Ciri appeared, sliding astride the trunk. She had picturesque shreds instead of a hood on her jacket.

‘Uncle Mousesack!’

‘In person.’ The druid embraced and cuddled the little girl.

‘Did grandmamma send you? Uncle? Is she very worried?’

‘Not very,’ Mousesack smiled. ‘She is too busy soaking her switch. The way to Cintra, Ciri, will take us some time. Devote it to thinking up an explanation for your deeds. It ought to be, if you want to benefit from my counsel, a very short and matter-of-fact explanation. One which can be given very, very quickly. For in any case I judge you will be screaming at the end of it, princess. Very, very loudly.’

Ciri grimaced painfully, wrinkled up her nose, snorted softly, and her hands involuntarily went towards the endangered place.

‘Let’s go,’ Geralt said, looking around. ‘Let’s go, Mousesack.’

VIII

‘No,’ the druid said. ‘Calanthe has changed her plans, she does not want the marriage of Ciri and Kistrin to go ahead now. She has her reasons. Additionally, I presume I don’t have to explain that following that dreadful scandal with the sham ambush on the merchants, King Ervyll has gone down a long way in my estimation, and my estimation matters in the kingdom. No, we won’t even stop off at Nastrog. I’ll take the lass straight to Cintra. Ride with us, Geralt.’

‘What for?’ The Witcher glanced at Ciri, who was now slumbering beneath a tree, wrapped in Mousesack’s jerkin.

‘You well know what for. That child, Geralt, is linked to you by destiny. For the third time, yes, the third, your paths have crossed. Metaphorically, of course, particularly as regards the previous two occasions. You surely can’t call it coincidence?’

‘What does it matter what I call it?’ The Witcher smiled wryly. ‘The essence is not in the name, Mousesack. Why ought I to ride to Cintra? I have already been to Cintra; I have already, as you described it, crossed paths. What of it?’

‘Geralt, you demanded a vow from Calanthe, then from Pavetta and her husband. The vow has been kept. Ciri is the Child of Destiny. Destiny demands . . .’

‘That I take the child and turn her into a witcher? A little girl? Take a good look at me, Mousesack. Can you imagine me as a comely lass?’

‘To hell with witchering,’ the druid said, annoyed. ‘What are you talking about? What has the one to do with the other? No, Geralt, I see that you understand nothing, I shall have to use simple words. Listen, any fool, including you, may demand a vow, may exact a promise, and will not become remarkable because of it. It is the child who is extraordinary. And the bond which comes into being when the child is born is extraordinary. Need I be more clear? Very well, Geralt. From the moment Ciri was born, what you wanted and what you planned to do ceased to matter, and what you don’t want and what you mean to give up doesn’t make any difference either. You don’t bloody matter! Don’t you understand?’

‘Don’t shout, you’ll wake her up. Our destiny is asleep. And when she awakes . . . Mousesack, one must occasionally give up . . . Even

the most extraordinary things.'

'But you know,' the druid looked at him coldly, 'you will never have a child of your own.'

'Yes.'

'And you're still giving her up?'

'Yes, I am. I'm surely permitted to, aren't I?'

'You are,' Mousesack said. 'Indeed. But it is risky. There is an old prophecy saying that the sword of destiny . . .'

' . . . has two blades,' Geralt completed the sentence. 'I've heard it.'

'Oh, do as you think fit,' the druid turned his head away and spat. 'Just think, I was prepared to stick my neck out for you . . .'

'You?'

'Me. Unlike you, I believe in destiny. And I knew that it is hazardous to trifle with a two-edged sword. Don't trifle with it, Geralt. Take advantage of the chance which is presenting itself. Turn what connects you to Ciri into the normal, healthy bond of a child with its guardian. For if you do not . . . Then that bond may manifest itself differently. More terribly. In a negative and destructive way. I want to protect you both from that. If you wanted to take her, I would not protest. I would take upon myself the risk of explaining why to Calanthe.'

'How do you know Ciri would want to go with me? Because of some old prophecies?'

'No,' Mousesack said gravely. 'Because she only fell asleep after you cuddled her. Because she mutters your name and searches for your hand in her sleep.'

'Enough,' Geralt got up, 'because I'm liable to get emotional. Farewell, bearded one. My compliments to Calanthe. And think something up . . . For Ciri's sake.'

'You will not escape, Geralt.'

'From destiny?' The Witcher tightened the girth of the captured horse.

'No,' the druid said, looking at the sleeping child. 'From her.'

The Witcher nodded and jumped into the saddle. Mousesack sat motionless, poking a stick into the dying campfire.

He rode slowly away, through heather as high as his stirrups,

across the hillside leading into the valley, towards the black forest.

‘Geraaalt!’

He turned around. Ciri was standing on the brow of the hill, a tiny, grey figure with windblown, mousy hair.

‘Don’t go!’

She waved.

‘Don’t go!’

She yelled shrilly.

‘Don’t goooo!’

I have to, he thought. I have to, Ciri. Because . . . I always do.

‘You won’t get away!’ she cried. ‘Don’t go thinking that! You can’t run away! I’m your destiny, do you hear?’

There is no destiny, he thought. It does not exist. The only thing that everyone is destined for is death. Death is the other blade of the two-edged sword. I am the first blade. And the second is death, which dogs my footsteps. I cannot, I may not expose you to that, Ciri.

‘I am your destiny!’

The words reached his ears from the hilltop, more softly, more despairingly.

He nudged the horse with his heel and rode straight ahead, heading deep into the black, cold and boggy forest, as though into an abyss, into the pleasant, familiar shade, into the gloom which seemed to have no end.

SOMETHING MORE

I

When hooves suddenly rapped on the timbers of the bridge, Yurga did not even raise his head; he just howled softly, released the wheel rim he was grappling with and crawled under the cart as quickly as he could. Flattened, scraping his back against the rough manure and mud caked onto the underside of the vehicle, he whined and trembled with fear.

The horse moved slowly towards the cart. Yurga saw it place its hooves cautiously on the rotted, moss-covered timbers.

'Get out,' the unseen horseman said. Yurga's teeth chattered and he pulled his head into his shoulders. The horse snorted and stamped.

'Easy, Roach,' the horseman said. Yurga heard him pat his mount on the neck. 'Get out from under there, fellow. I won't do you any harm.'

The merchant did not believe the stranger's declaration in the slightest. There was something calming and at the same time intriguing in his voice, however, though it was by no means a voice which could be described as pleasant. Yurga, mumbling prayers to a dozen deities all at once, timidly stuck his head out from under the cart.

The horseman had hair as white as milk, tied back from his forehead with a leather band, and a black, woollen cloak falling over the rump of the chestnut mare. He did not look at Yurga. Leaning from his saddle, he was examining the cartwheel, sunk up to the hub between the bridge's broken beams. He suddenly raised his head, flicked a gaze over the merchant and observed the undergrowth above the banks of the ravine.

Yurga scrambled out, blinked and rubbed his nose with a hand, smearing wood tar from the wheel hub over his face. The horseman fixed dark, narrowed, piercing eyes, as sharp as a spear tip, on him. Yurga was silent.

'The two of us won't be able to pull it out,' said the stranger finally, pointing at the stuck wheel. 'Were you travelling alone?'

'There were three of us,' Yurga stammered. 'Servants, sir. But

they fled, the scoundrels . . .'

'I'm not surprised,' said the horseman, looking under the bridge towards the bottom of the ravine. 'I'm not surprised at all. I think you ought to do the same. Time is short.'

Yurga did not follow the stranger's gaze. He did not want to look at the mass of skulls, ribs and shinbones scattered among the rocks, peeping out from the burdock and nettles covering the bottom of the dried-up stream. He was afraid that with just one more glance, one more glimpse of the black eye sockets, grinning teeth and cracked bones, something would snap in him, the remains of his desperate courage would escape like air from a fish's bladder, and he would dash back up the highway, stifling a scream, just as the carter and his lad had less than an hour before.

'What are you waiting for?' the horseman asked softly, reining his horse around. 'For nightfall? It'll be too late then. They'll come for you as soon as it begins to get dark. Or maybe even sooner. Let's go, jump up behind me. Let's both get out of here as quick as we can.'

'But the cart, sir?' Yurga howled at the top of his voice, not knowing if from fear, despair or rage. 'And my goods? That's a whole year's work! I'd rather drop dead! I'm not leaving it!'

'I think you still don't know where the bloody hell you are, friend,' the stranger said calmly, extending a hand towards the ghastly graveyard beneath the bridge. 'Won't leave your cart, you say? I tell you, when darkness falls not even King Dezmod's treasury will save you, never mind your lousy cart. What the hell came over you to take a shortcut through this wilderness? Don't you know what has infested this place since the war?'

Yurga shook his head.

'You don't know,' nodded the stranger. 'But you've seen what's down there? It'd be difficult not to notice. That's all the other men who took a shortcut through here. And you say you won't leave your cart. And what, I wonder, do you have in your cart?'

Yurga did not reply, but glowered at the horseman, trying to choose between 'oakum' and 'old rags'.

The horseman did not seem particularly interested in the answer. He reassured his chestnut, who was chewing its bit and tossing its head.

'Please, sir . . .' the merchant finally muttered. 'Help me. Save me. My eternal gratitude . . . Don't leave . . . I'll give you whatever you

want, whatever you ask . . . Save me, sir!'

The stranger, resting both hands on the pommel of his saddle, suddenly turned his head towards him.

'What did you say?'

Yurga opened his mouth but said nothing.

'You'll give me whatever I ask for? Say it again.'

Yurga smacked his lips, closed his mouth and wished he was agile enough to kick himself in the arse. His head was spinning with fantastic theories as to the reward that this weird stranger might demand. Most of them, including the privilege of weekly use of his rosy-cheeked young wife, did not seem as awful as the prospect of losing the cart, and certainly not as macabre as the possibility of ending up at the bottom of the canyon as one more bleached skeleton. His merchant's experience forced him into some rapid calculations. The horseman, although he did not resemble a typical ruffian, tramp or marauder – of which there were plenty on the roads after the war – surely wasn't a magnate or governor either, nor one of those proud little knights with a high opinion of themselves who derive pleasure from robbing the shirt off their neighbours' backs. Yurga reckoned him at no more than twenty pieces of gold. However, his commercial instincts stopped him from naming a price. So he limited himself to mumbling something about 'lifelong gratitude'.

'I asked you,' the stranger calmly reminded him, after waiting for the merchant to be quiet, 'if you'll give me whatever I ask for?'

There was no way out. Yurga swallowed, bowed his head and nodded his agreement. The stranger, in spite of Yurga's expectations, did not laugh portentously; quite the opposite, he did not show any sign of being delighted by his victory in the negotiations. Leaning over in the saddle, he spat into the ravine.

'What am I doing?' he said grimly. 'What the fuck am I doing? Well, so be it. I'll try to get you out of this, though I don't know that it won't finish disastrously for us both. But if I succeed, in exchange you will . . .'

Yurga curled up, close to tears.

'You will give me,' the horseman in the black cloak suddenly and quickly recited, 'whatever you come across at home on your return, but did not expect. Do you swear?'

Yurga groaned and nodded quickly.

‘Good,’ the stranger grimaced. ‘And now stand aside. It would be best if you got back under the cart. The sun is about to set.’

He dismounted and took his cloak from his shoulders. Yurga saw that the stranger was carrying a sword on his back, on a belt slung diagonally across his chest. He had a vague sense he had once heard of people with a similar way of carrying a weapon. The black, leather, hip-length jacket with long sleeves sparkling with silver studs might have indicated that the stranger came from Novigrad or the surroundings, but the fashion for such dress had recently become widespread, particularly among youngsters. Although this stranger was no youngster.

After removing his saddlebags from his mount the horseman turned around. A round medallion hung on a silver chain around his neck. He was holding a small, metal-bound chest and an oblong parcel wrapped in skins and fastened with a strap under one arm.

‘Aren’t you under the cart yet?’ he asked, approaching. Yurga saw that a wolf’s head with open jaws and armed with fangs was depicted on the medallion. He suddenly recalled.

‘Would you be . . . a witcher? Sir?’

The stranger shrugged.

‘You guess right. A witcher. Now move away. To the other side of the cart. Don’t come out from there and be silent. I must be alone for a while.’

Yurga obeyed. He hunkered down by the wheel, wrapped in a mantle. He didn’t want to look at what the stranger was doing on the other side of the cart, even less at the bones at the bottom of the ravine. So he looked at his boots and at the green, star-shaped shoots of moss growing on the bridge’s rotten timbers.

A witcher.

The sun was setting.

He heard footsteps.

Slowly, very slowly, the stranger moved out from behind the cart, into the centre of the bridge. He had his back to Yurga, who saw that the sword on his back was not the sword he had seen earlier. Now it was a splendid weapon; the hilt, crossguard and fittings of the scabbard shone like stars. Even in the gathering darkness they reflected light, although there was almost none; not even the golden-purple glow which a short while earlier had been hanging over the forest.

‘Sir—’

The stranger turned his head. Yurga barely stifled a scream.

The stranger’s face was white – white and porous, like cheese drained and unwrapped from a cloth. And his eyes . . . Ye Gods, something howled inside Yurga. His eyes . . .

‘Behind the cart. Now,’ the stranger rasped. It was not the voice Yurga had heard before. The merchant suddenly felt his full bladder troubling him terribly. The stranger turned and walked further along the bridge.

A witcher.

The horse tied to the cart’s rack snorted, neighed, and stamped its hooves dully on the beams.

A mosquito buzzed above Yurga’s ear. The merchant did not even move a hand to shoo it away. A second one joined it. Whole clouds of mosquitoes were buzzing in the thicket on the far side of the ravine. Buzzing.

And howling.

Yurga, clenching his teeth till they hurt, realised they were not mosquitoes.

From the thickening darkness on the overgrown side of the ravine emerged some small, misshapen forms – less than four feet tall, horribly gaunt, like skeletons. They stepped onto the bridge with a peculiar, heron-like gait, feet high, making staccato, jerky movements as they lifted their bony knees. Their eyes, beneath flat, dirty foreheads, shone yellow, and pointed little fangs gleamed white in wide, frog-like maws. They came closer, hissing.

The stranger, as still as a statue in the centre of the bridge, suddenly raised his right hand, making a bizarre shape with his fingers. The monstrous little beasts retreated, hissing loudly, before once again moving forwards, quickly, quicker and quicker, on their long, spindly, taloned forefeet.

Claws scraped on the timbers to the left, as another monster jumped out from under the bridge, and the remaining ones on the bank rushed forwards in bewildering leaps. The stranger spun around on the spot and the sword, which had suddenly appeared in his hand, flashed. The head of the creature scrambling onto the bridge flew two yards up into the air, trailing a ribbon of blood behind it. Then the white-haired man fell on a group of them and whirled, slashing swiftly all around him. The monsters, flailing their

arms and wailing, attacked him from all sides, ignoring the luminous blade cutting them like a razor. Yurga cowered, hugging the cart.

Something fell right at his feet, bespattering him with gore. It was a long, bony hand, four-clawed and scaly, like a chicken's foot.

The merchant screamed.

He sensed something flitting past him. He cowered, intending to dive under the cart, just as something landed on his neck, and a scaly hand seized him by the temple and cheek. He covered his eyes, howling and jerking his head, leaped to his feet and staggered into the middle of the bridge, stumbling over the corpses sprawled across the timbers. A battle was raging there – but Yurga could not see anything apart from a furious swarm, a mass, within which the silver blade kept flashing.

'Help meeeee!' he howled, feeling the sharp fangs penetrating the felt of his hood and digging into the back of his head.

'Duck!'

He pressed his chin down onto his chest, looking out for the flash of the blade. It whined in the air and grazed his hood. Yurga heard a hideous, wet crunching sound and then a hot liquid gushed down his back. He fell to his knees, dragged down by the now inert weight hanging from his neck.

He watched as three more monsters scuttled out from under the bridge. Leaping like bizarre grasshoppers, they latched onto the stranger's thighs. One of them, slashed with a short blow across its toadlike muzzle, took a few steps upright and fell onto the timbers. Another, struck with the very tip of the sword, collapsed in squirming convulsions. The remaining ones swarmed like ants over the white-haired man, pushing him towards the edge of the bridge. One flew out of the swarm bent backwards, spurting blood, quivering and howling, and right then the entire seething mass staggered over the edge and plummeted into the ravine. Yurga fell to the ground, covering his head with his hands.

From below the bridge he heard the monsters' triumphant squeals, suddenly transforming into howls of pain, those howls silenced by the whistling of the blade. Then from the darkness came the rattle of stones and the crunch of skeletons being trodden on and crushed, and then once again came the whistle of a falling sword and a despairing, bloodcurdling shriek which suddenly broke off.

And then there was only silence, interrupted by the sudden cry of a terrified bird, deep in the forest among the towering trees. And then the bird fell silent too.

Yurga swallowed, raised his head and stood up with difficulty. It was still quiet; not even the leaves rustled, the entire forest seemed to be dumbstruck with terror. Ragged clouds obscured the sky.

'Hey . . .'

He turned around, involuntarily protecting himself with raised arms. The Witcher stood before him, motionless, black, with the shining sword in his lowered hand. Yurga noticed he was standing somehow crookedly, leaning over to one side.

'What's the matter, sir?'

The Witcher did not reply. He took a step, clumsily and heavily, limping on his left leg. He held out a hand and grasped the cart. Yurga saw blood, black and shining, dripping onto the timbers.

'You're wounded, sir!'

The Witcher did not reply. Looking straight into the merchant's eyes, he fell against the cart's box and slowly collapsed onto the bridge.

II

‘Careful, easy does it . . . Under his head . . . One of you support his head!’

‘Here, here, onto the cart!’

‘Ye Gods, he’ll bleed to death . . . Mr Yurga, the blood’s seeping through the dressing—’

‘Quiet! Drive on, Pokvit, make haste! Wrap him in a sheepskin, Vell, can’t you see how he shivers?’

‘Shall I pour some vodka down his throat?’

‘Can’t you see he’s unconscious? You astonish me, Vell. But give me that vodka, I need a drink . . . You dogs, you scoundrels, you rotten cowards! Scarpering like that and leaving me all alone!’

‘Mr Yurga! He said something!’

‘What? What’s he saying?’

‘Err, can’t make it out . . . seems to be a name . . .’

‘What name?’

‘Yennefer . . .’

III

‘Where am I?’

‘Lie still, sir, don’t move, or everything will tear open again. Those vile creatures bit your thigh down to the bone, you’ve lost a deal of blood . . . Don’t you know me? It’s Yurga! You saved me on the bridge, do you recall?’

‘Aha . . .’

‘Do you have a thirst?’

‘A hell of one . . .’

‘Drink, sir, drink. You’re burning with fever.’

‘Yurga . . . Where are we?’

‘We’re riding in my cart. Don’t say anything, sir, don’t move. We had to venture out of the forest towards human settlements. We must find someone with healing powers. What we’ve wrapped round your leg may be insufficient. The blood won’t stop coming—’

‘Yurga . . .’

‘Yes, sir?’

‘In my chest . . . A flacon . . . With green sealing wax. Strip off the seal and give it to me . . . In a bowl. Wash the bowl well, don’t let a soul touch the flacon . . . If you value your life . . . Swiftly, Yurga. Dammit, how this cart shakes . . . The flacon, Yurga . . .’

‘I have it . . . Drink, sir.’

‘Thanks . . . Now pay attention. I’ll soon fall asleep. I’ll thrash around and rave, then lie as though dead. It’s nothing, don’t be afeared . . .’

‘Lie still, sir, or the wound will open and you’ll lose blood.’

He fell back onto the skins, turned his head and felt the merchant drape him in a sheepskin and a blanket stinking of horse sweat. The cart shook and with each jolt pangs of fierce pain shot through his thigh and hip. Geralt clenched his teeth. He saw above him billions of stars. So close it seemed he could reach out and touch them. Right above his head, just above the treetops.

As he walked he picked his way in order to stay away from the light, away from the glow of bonfires, in order to remain within the

compass of rippling shadow. It was not easy – pyres of fir logs were burning all around, sending into the sky a red glow shot with the flashes of sparks, marking the darkness with brighter pennants of smoke, crackling, exploding in a blaze among the figures dancing all around.

Geralt stopped to let through a frenzied procession, boisterous and wild, which was barring his way and lurching towards him. Someone tugged him by the arm, trying to shove into his hand a wooden beer mug, dripping with foam. He declined and gently but firmly pushed away the man, who was staggering and splashing beer all around from the small cask he was carrying under one arm. Geralt did not want to drink.

Not on a night like this.

Close by – on a frame of birch poles towering above a huge fire – the fair-haired May King, dressed in a wreath and coarse britches, was kissing the red-haired May Queen, groping her breasts through her thin, sweat-soaked blouse. The monarch was more than a little drunk and tottered, trying to keep his balance, as he hugged the queen, pressing a fist clamped onto a mug of beer against her back. The queen, also far from sober, wearing a wreath which had slipped down over her eyes, hung on the king's neck and leaned close against him in anticipation. The throng was dancing beneath the frame, singing, yelling and shaking poles festooned with garlands of foliage and blossom.

'Beltane!' screamed a short, young woman right in Geralt's ear. Pulling him by the sleeve, she forced him to turn around among the procession encircling them. She cavorted by him, fluttering her skirt and shaking her hair, which was full of flowers. He let her spin him in the dance and whirled around, nimbly avoiding the other couples.

'Beltane! May Day Eve!'

Besides them there was a struggle, a squealing and the nervous laugh of another young woman, feigning a fight and resistance, being carried off by a young man into the darkness, beyond the circle of light. The procession, hooting, snaked between the burning pyres. Someone stumbled and fell, breaking the chain of hands, rending the procession apart into smaller groups.

The young woman, looking at Geralt from under the leaves decorating her brow, came closer and pressed herself urgently against him, encircling him with her arms and panting. He grabbed her more roughly than he had intended and felt the hot dampness

of her body, perceptible on his hands through the thin linen pressing against her back. She raised her head. Her eyes were closed and her teeth flashed from beneath her raised, twisted upper lip. She smelled of sweat and sweet grass, smoke and lust.

Why not? he thought, crumpling her dress and kneading her back with his hands, enjoying the damp, steaming warmth on his fingers. The woman was not his type. She was too small and too plump – under his hand he felt the line where the too-tight bodice of her dress was cutting into her body, dividing her back into two distinctly perceptible curves, where he should not have been able to feel them. Why not? he thought, on a night like this, after all . . . It means nothing.

Beltane . . . Fires as far as the horizon. Beltane, May Day Eve.

The nearest pyre devoured the dry, outstretched pine branches being thrown onto it with a crack, erupted in a golden flash, lighting everything up. The young woman's eyes opened wide, looking up into his face. He heard her suck air in, felt her tense up and violently push her hands against his chest. He released her at once. She hesitated. Tilted her trunk away to the length of her almost straightened arms, but she did not peel her hips away from his thighs. She lowered her head, then withdrew her hands and drew away, looking to the side.

They stood motionless for a moment until the returning procession barged into them, shook and jostled them again. The young woman quickly turned and fled, clumsily trying to join the dancers. She looked back. Just once.

Beltane . . .

What am I doing here?

A star shone in the dark, sparkling, drawing his gaze. The medallion around the Witcher's neck vibrated. Geralt involuntarily dilated his pupils, his vision effortlessly penetrating the obscurity.

She was not a peasant woman. Peasant women did not wear black velvet cloaks. Peasant women – carried or dragged into the bushes by men – screamed, giggled, squirmed and tensed their bodies like trout being pulled out of the water. None of them gave the impression that it was *they* who were leading their tall, fair-haired swains with gaping shirts into the gloom.

Peasant women never wore velvet ribbons or diamond-encrusted stars of obsidian around their necks.

‘Yennefer.’

Wide-open, violet eyes blazing in a pale, triangular face.

‘Geralt . . .’

She released the hand of the fair-haired cherub whose breast was shiny as a sheet of copper with sweat. The lad staggered, tottered, fell to his knees, rolled his head, looked around and blinked. He stood up slowly, glanced at them uncomprehending and embarrassed, and then lurched off towards the bonfires. The sorceress did not even glance at him. She looked intently at the Witcher, and her hand tightly clenched the edge of her cloak.

‘Nice to see you,’ he said easily. He immediately sensed the tension which had formed between them falling away.

‘Indeed,’ she smiled. He seemed to detect something affected in the smile, but he could not be certain. ‘Quite a pleasant surprise, I don’t deny. What are you doing here, Geralt? Oh . . . Excuse me, forgive my indiscretion. Of course, we’re doing the same thing. It’s Beltane, after all. Only you caught me, so to speak, in flagrante delicto.’

‘I interrupted you.’

‘I’ll survive,’ she laughed. ‘The night is young. I’ll enchant another if the fancy takes me.’

‘Pity I’m unable to do that,’ he said trying hard to affect indifference. ‘A moment ago a girl saw my eyes in the light and fled.’

‘At dawn,’ she said, smiling more and more falsely, ‘when they really let themselves go, they won’t pay any attention. You’ll find another, just you wait . . .’

‘Yen—’ The rest of the words stuck in his throat. They looked at one another for a long, long time, and the red reflection of fire flickered on their faces. Yennefer suddenly sighed, veiling her eyes with her eyelashes.

‘Geralt, no. Don’t let’s start—’

‘It’s Beltane,’ he interrupted. ‘Have you forgotten?’

She moved slowly closer, placed her hands on his arms, and slowly and cautiously snuggled against him, touching his chest with her forehead. He stroked her raven-black hair, strewn in locks coiled like snakes.

‘Believe me,’ she whispered, lifting her head. ‘I wouldn’t think

twice, if it were only to be . . . But it's senseless. Everything will start again and finish like last time. It would be senseless if we were to—'

'Does everything have to make sense? It's Beltane.'

'Beltane,' she turned her head. 'What of it? Something drew us to these bonfires, to these people enjoying themselves. We meant to dance, abandon ourselves, get a little intoxicated and take advantage of the annual loosening of morals which is inextricably linked to the celebration of the endless natural cycle. And, prithee, we run right into each other after . . . How long has passed since . . . A year?'

'One year, two months and eighteen days.'

'How touching. Was that deliberate?'

'It was. Yen—'

'Geralt,' she interrupted, suddenly moving away and tossing her head. 'Let me make things perfectly clear. I don't want to.'

He nodded to indicate that was sufficiently clear.

Yennefer threw her cloak back over one shoulder. Beneath her cloak she had on a very thin, white blouse and a black skirt girdled with a belt of silver links.

'I don't want,' she repeated, 'to start again. And the thought of doing with you . . . what I meant to do with that young blond boy . . . According to the same rules . . . The thought, Geralt, seems to me somewhat improper. An affront to both of us. Do you understand?'

He nodded once more. She looked at him from beneath lowered eyelashes.

'Will you go?'

'No.'

She was silent for a moment, fidgeting nervously.

'Are you angry?'

'No.'

'Right, come on, let's sit down somewhere, away from this hubbub, let's talk for a while. Because, as you can see, I'm glad we've met. Truly. Let's sit together for a while. Alright?'

'Let us, Yen.'

They headed off into the gloom, far onto the moors, towards the black wall of trees, avoiding couples locked in embraces. They had to go a long way in order to find a secluded spot. A dry hilltop marked by a juniper bush, as slender as a cypress.

The sorceress unfastened the brooch from her cloak, shook it out and spread it on the ground. He sat down beside her. He wanted to embrace her very much, but contrariness stopped him. Yennefer tidied up her deeply unbuttoned blouse, looked at him penetratingly, sighed and embraced him. He might have expected it. She had to make an effort to read his mind, but sensed his intentions involuntarily.

They said nothing.

'Oh, dammit,' she suddenly said, pulling away. She raised her hand and cried out a spell. Red and green spheres flew above their heads, breaking up high in the air, forming colourful, fluffy flowers. Laughter and joyous cries drifted up from the bonfires.

'Beltane . . . ' she said bitterly. 'May Day Eve . . . The cycle repeats. Let them enjoy themselves . . . if they can.'

There were other sorcerers in the vicinity. In the distance, three orange lightning bolts shot into the sky and away over by the forest a veritable geyser of rainbow-coloured, whirling meteors exploded. The people by the bonfires gave awe-struck gasps and cried out. Geralt, tense, stroked Yennefer's curls and breathed in the scent of lilac and gooseberry they gave off. If I desire her too intensely, he thought, she'll sense it and she'll be put off. Her hackles will rise, she'll bristle and spurn me. I'll ask her calmly how she's doing . . .

'Nothing to report,' she said, and something in her voice quavered. 'Nothing worth mentioning.'

'Don't do that to me, Yen. Don't read me. It unsettles me.'

'Forgive me. It's automatic. And what's new with you, Geralt?'

'Nothing. Nothing worth mentioning.'

They said nothing.

'Beltane!' she suddenly snapped, and he felt the arm she was pressing against his chest stiffen and tauten. 'They're enjoying themselves. They're celebrating the eternal cycle of nature regenerating itself. And us? What are we doing here? We, relicts, doomed to obliteration, to extinction and oblivion? Nature is born again, the cycle repeats itself. But not for us, Geralt. We cannot reproduce ourselves. We were deprived of that potential. We were

given the ability to do extraordinary things with nature, occasionally literally against her. And at the same time what is most natural and simple in nature was taken from us. What if we live longer than them? After our winter will come the spring, and we shall not be reborn; what finishes will finish along with us. But both you and I are drawn to those bonfires, though our presence here is a wicked, blasphemous mockery of this world.'

He was silent. He didn't like it when she fell into a mood like this, the origin of which he knew only too well. Once again, he thought, once again it's beginning to torment her. There was a time when it seemed she had forgotten, that she had become reconciled to it like the others. He embraced her, hugged her, rocked her very gently like a child. She let him. It didn't surprise him. He knew she needed it.

'You know, Geralt,' she suddenly said, now composed. 'I miss your silence the most.'

He touched her hair and ear with his mouth. I desire you, Yen, he thought, I desire you, but you know that. You know that, don't you, Yen?

'Yes, I do,' she whispered.

'Yen . . .'

She sighed again.

'Just today,' she said, looking at him with eyes wide open. 'Just this night, which will soon slip away. Let it be our Beltane. We shall part in the morning. Don't expect any more; I cannot, I could not . . . Forgive me. If I have hurt you, kiss me and go away.'

'If I kiss you I won't go away.'

'I was counting on that.'

She tilted her head. He touched her parted lips with his own. Tentatively. First the upper, then the lower. He entwined his fingers in her winding locks, touched her ear, her diamond earring, her neck. Yennefer, returning the kiss, clung to him, and her nimble fingers quickly and surely unfastened the buckles of his jacket.

She fell back onto her cloak, spread out on the soft moss. He pressed his mouth to her breast and felt the nipple harden and press against the very fine stuff of her blouse. She was breathing shallowly.

'Yen . . .'

‘Don’t say anything . . . Please . . .’

The touch of her naked, smooth, cool skin electrified his fingers and his palms. A shiver down his back being pricked by her fingernails. From the bonfires screams, singing, a whistle; a far, distant cloud of sparks in purple smoke. Caresses and touches. He touching her. She touching him. A shiver. And impatience. The gliding skin of her slim thighs gripping his hips, drawing closed like a clasp.

Beltane!

Breathing, riven into gasps. Flashes beneath their eyelids, the scent of lilac and gooseberry. The May Queen and May King? A blasphemous mockery? Oblivion?

Beltane! May Day Eve!

A moan. Hers? His? Black curls on his eyes, on his mouth. Intertwined fingers, quivering hands. A cry. Hers? Black eyelashes. A moan. His?

Silence. All eternity in the silence.

Beltane . . . Fires all the way to the horizon . . .

‘Yen?’

‘Oh, Geralt . . .’

‘Yen . . . Are you weeping?’

‘No!’

‘Yen . . .’

‘I promised myself . . . I promised . . .’

‘Don’t say anything. There’s no need. Aren’t you cold?’

‘Yes, I am.’

‘And now?’

‘Now I’m warmer.’

The sky grew lighter at an alarming rate, the contours of the black wall of trees becoming more prominent, the distinct, serrated line of the treetops emerging from the shapeless gloom. The blue foretoken of dawn creeping up from behind it spread along the horizon, extinguishing the lamps of the stars. It had grown cooler. He hugged her more tightly and covered her with his cloak.

‘Geralt?’

‘Mhm?’

‘It’ll soon be dawn.’

‘I know.’

‘Have I hurt you?’

‘A little.’

‘Will it begin again?’

‘It never ended.’

‘Please . . . You make me feel . . .’

‘Don’t say anything. Everything is all right.’

The smell of smoke creeping among the heather. The scent of lilac and gooseberry.

‘Geralt?’

‘Yes?’

‘Do you remember when we met in the Owl Mountains? And that golden dragon . . . What was he called?’

‘Three Jackdaws. Yes, I do.’

‘He told us . . .’

‘I remember, Yen.’

She kissed him where the neck becomes the collarbone and then nuzzled her head in, tickling him with her hair.

‘We’re made for each other,’ she whispered. ‘Perhaps we’re destined for each other? But nothing will come of it. It’s a pity, but when dawn breaks, we shall part. It cannot be any other way. We have to part so as not to hurt one another. We two, destined for each other. Created for each other. Pity. The one or ones who created us for each other ought to have made more of an effort. Destiny alone is insufficient, it’s too little. Something more is needed. Forgive me. I had to tell you.’

‘I know.’

‘I knew it was senseless for us to make love.’

‘You’re wrong. It wasn’t. In spite of everything.’

‘Ride to Cintra, Geralt.’

‘What?’

‘Ride to Cintra. Ride there and this time don’t give up. Don’t do

what you did then . . . When you were there . . .’

‘How did you know?’

‘I know everything about you. Have you forgotten? Ride to Cintra, go there as fast as you can. Fell times are approaching, Geralt. Very fell. You cannot be late . . .’

‘Yen . . .’

‘Please don’t say anything.’

It was cooler. Cooler and cooler. And lighter and lighter.

‘Don’t go yet. Let’s wait until the dawn . . .’

‘Yes, let’s.’

IV

‘Don’t move, sir. I must change your dressing. The wound is getting messy and your leg is swelling something terrible. Ye Gods, it looks hideous . . . We must find a doctor as fast as we can . . .’

‘Fuck the doctor,’ the Witcher groaned. ‘Hand me the chest, Yurga. Yes, that flacon there . . . Pour it straight onto the wound. Oh, bloody hell! It’s nothing, nothing, keep pouring . . . Oooow! Right. Bandage it up well and cover me . . .’

‘It’s swollen, sir, the whole thigh. And you’re burning with fever —’

‘Fuck the fever. Yurga?’

‘Yes, sir?’

‘I forgot to thank you . . .’

‘It’s not you who should be doing the thanking, sir, but me. You saved my life, you suffered an injury in my defence. And me? What did I do? I bandaged a wounded man, who’d fainted away, and put him on my cart and didn’t leave him to expire. It’s an ordinary matter, Witcher, sir.’

‘It’s not so ordinary, Yurga. I’ve been left . . . in similar situations . . . Like a dog . . .’

The merchant, lowering his head, said nothing.

‘Well, what can I say, it’s a base world,’ he finally muttered. ‘But that’s no reason for us all to become despicable. What we need is kindness. My father taught me that and I teach it to my sons.’

The Witcher was silent, and observed the branches of the trees above the road, sliding past as the cart went on. His thigh throbbed. He felt no pain.

‘Where are we?’

‘We’ve forded the River Trava, now we’re in the Groundcherry Forests. It’s no longer Temeria, but Sodden. You were asleep when we crossed the border, when the customs officers were rummaging in the cart. I’ll tell you, though, they were astonished by you. But their senior officer knew you and ordered us through without delay.’

‘He knew me?’

‘Aye, there’s no doubt. He called you Geralt. That’s what he said; Geralt of Rivia. Is that your name?’

‘It is . . .’

‘And he promised to send a man ahead with the tidings that a doctor is needed. And I gave him a little something so as he wouldn’t forget.’

‘Thank you, Yurga.’

‘No, Witcher, sir. I’ve already said, it’s me as thanks you. And not just that. I’m also in your debt. We have an agreement . . . What is it, sir? Are you feeling faint?’

‘Yurga . . . The flacon with the green seal . . .’

‘Sir . . . You’ll start . . . You were calling out dreadfully in your sleep . . .’

‘I must, Yurga . . .’

‘As you wish. Wait, I’ll pour it into a bowl right away . . . By the Gods, we need a doctor as quickly as possible, otherwise . . .’

The Witcher turned his head away. He heard the cries of children playing in a dried-up, inner moat surrounding the castle grounds. There were around ten of them. The youngsters were making an ear-splitting din, outshouting each other in shrill, excited voices which kept breaking into falsetto. They were running to and fro along the bottom of the moat, like a shoal of swift little fishes, unexpectedly and very quickly changing direction, but always staying together. As usual, behind the screeching older boys, as skinny as scarecrows, ran a little child, panting and quite incapable of catching up.

‘There are plenty of them,’ the Witcher observed.

Mousesack smiled sourly, tugging at his beard, and shrugged.

‘Aye, plenty.’

‘And which of them . . . Which of these boys is the celebrated Child of Destiny?’

The druid looked away.

‘I am forbidden, Geralt . . .’

‘Calanthe?’

‘Of course. You cannot have deluded yourself that she would give the child up so easily? You have met her, after all. She is a woman of iron. I shall tell you something, something I ought not to say, in

the hope that you'll understand. I hope too, that you will not betray me before her.'

'Speak.'

'When the child was born six years ago she summoned me and ordered me to cheat you. And kill it.'

'You refused.'

'No one refuses Calanthe,' Mousesack said, looking him straight in the eyes. 'I was prepared to take to the road when she summoned me once again. She retracted the order, without a word of explanation. Be cautious when you talk to her.'

'I shall. Mousesack, tell me, what happened to Duny and Pavetta?'

'They were sailing from Skellige to Cintra. They were surprised by a storm. Not a single splinter was found of the ship. Geralt . . . That the child was not with them then is an incredibly queer matter. Inexplicable. They were meant to take it with them but at the last moment did not. No one knows why, Pavetta could never be parted from—'

'How did Calanthe bear it?'

'What do you think?'

'Of course.'

Shrieking like a band of goblins, the boys hurtled upwards and flashed beside them. Geralt noticed that not far behind the head of the rushing herd hurried a little girl, as thin and clamorous as the boys, only with a fair plait waving behind her. Howling wildly, the band spilled down the moat's steep slope again. At least half of them, including the girl, slid down on their behinds. The smallest one, still unable to keep up, fell over, rolled down to the bottom and began crying loudly, clutching a grazed knee. The other boys surrounded him, jeering and mocking, and then ran on. The little girl knelt by the little boy, hugged him and wiped away his tears, smudging dust and dirt over his face.

'Let us go, Geralt. The queen awaits.'

'Let's go, Mousesack.'

Calanthe was sitting on a large bench suspended on chains from the bough of a huge linden tree. She appeared to be dozing, but that was belied by an occasional push of her foot to swing the bench every now and again. There were three young women with her. One

of them was sitting on the grass beside the swing, her spread-out dress shining bright white against the green like a patch of snow. The other two were not far away, chatting as they cautiously pulled apart the branches on some raspberry bushes.

'Ma'am,' Mousesack bowed.

The queen raised her head. Geralt went down on one knee.

'Witcher,' she said drily.

As in the past she was decorated with emeralds, which matched her green dress. And the colour of her eyes. As in the past, she was wearing a narrow, gold band on her mousy hair. But her hands, which he remembered as white and slender, were less slender now. She had gained weight.

'Greetings, Calanthe of Cintra.'

'Welcome, Geralt of Rivia. Rise. I've been waiting for you. Mousesack, my friend, escort the young ladies back to the castle.'

'At your behest, Your Majesty.'

They were left alone.

'Six years,' began Calanthe unsmilingly. 'You are horrifyingly punctual, Witcher.'

He did not comment.

'There were moments – what am I saying – years, when I convinced myself that you would forget. Or that other reasons would prevent you from coming. No, I did not in principle wish misfortune on you, but I had to take into consideration the none-too-safe nature of your profession. They say that death dogs your footsteps, Geralt of Rivia, but that you never look back. And later . . . When Pavetta . . . Do you know?'

'I do,' Geralt bowed his head. 'I sympathise with all my heart—'

'No,' she interrupted. 'It was long ago. I no longer wear mourning, as you see. I did, for long enough. Pavetta and Duny . . . Destined for each other. Until the very end. How can one not believe in the power of destiny?'

They were both silent. Calanthe moved her foot and set the swing in motion again.

'And so the Witcher has returned after six years, as agreed,' she said slowly, and a strange smile bloomed on her face. 'He has returned and demands the fulfilment of the oath. Do you think,

Geralt, that storytellers will tell of our meeting in this way, when a hundred years have passed? I think so. Except they will probably colour the tale, tug on heart strings, play on the emotions. Yes, they know how. I can imagine it. Please listen. And the cruel Witcher spake thus: “Fulfil your vow, O Queen, or my curse shall fall on you”. And the queen, weeping fulsomely, fell on her knees before the Witcher, crying: “Have mercy! Do not take the child from me! It is all I have left!”.’

‘Calanthe—’

‘Don’t interrupt,’ she said sharply. ‘I am telling a story, haven’t you noticed? Listen on. The evil, cruel Witcher stamped his foot, waved his arms and cried: “Beware, faithless one, beware of fate’s vengeance. If you do not keep your vow you will never escape punishment”. And the queen replied: “Very well, Witcher. Let it be as fate wishes it. Look over there, where ten children are frolicking. Choose the one destined to you, and you shall take it as your own and leave me with a broken heart”.’

The Witcher said nothing.

‘In the story,’ Calanthe’s smile became more and more ugly, ‘the queen, I presume, would let the Witcher guess thrice. But we aren’t in a story, Geralt. We are here in reality, you and I, and our problem. And our destiny. It isn’t a fairy story, it’s real life. Lousy, evil, onerous, not sparing of errors, harm, sorrow, disappointments or misfortunes; not sparing of anyone, neither witchers, nor queens. Which is why, Geralt of Rivia, you will only have one guess.’

The Witcher still said nothing.

‘Just one, single attempt,’ Calanthe repeated. ‘But as I said, this is not a fairy tale but life, which we must fill with moments of happiness for ourselves, for, as you know, we cannot count on fate to smile on us. Which is why, irrespective of the result of your choice, you will not leave here with nothing. You will take one child. The one you choose. A child you will turn into a witcher. Assuming the child survives the Trial of the Grasses, naturally.’

Geralt jerked up his head. The queen smiled. He knew that smile, hideous and evil, contemptuous because it did not conceal its artificiality.

‘You are astonished,’ she stated. ‘Well, I’ve studied a little. Since Pavetta’s child has the chance of becoming a witcher, I went to great pains. My sources, Geralt, reveal nothing, however, regarding how many children in ten withstand the Trial of the Grasses. Would

you like to satisfy my curiosity in this regard?'

'O Queen,' Geralt said, clearing his throat. 'You certainly went to sufficient pains in your studies to know that the code and my oath forbid me from even uttering that name, much less discussing it.'

Calanthe stopped the swing abruptly by jabbing a heel into the ground.

'Three, at most four in ten,' she said, nodding her head in feigned pensiveness. 'A stringent selection, very stringent, I'd say, and at every stage. First the Choice and then the Trials. And then the Changes. How many youngsters ultimately receive medallions and silver swords? One in ten? One in twenty?'

The Witcher said nothing.

'I've pondered long over this,' Calanthe continued, now without a smile. 'And I've come to the conclusion that the selection of the children at the stage of the Choice has scant significance. What difference does it make, in the end, Geralt, which child dies or goes insane, stuffed full of narcotics? What difference does it make whose brain bursts from hallucinations, whose eyes rupture and gush forth, instead of becoming cats' eyes? What difference does it make whether the child destiny chose or an utterly chance one dies in its own blood and puke? Answer me.'

The Witcher folded his arms on his chest, in order to control their trembling.

'What's the point of this?' he asked. 'Are you expecting an answer?'

'You're right, I'm not,' the queen smiled again. 'As usual you are quite correct in your deductions. Who knows, perhaps even though I'm not expecting an answer I would like benignly to devote a little attention to your frank words, freely volunteered? Words, which, who knows, perhaps you would like to unburden yourself of, and along with them whatever is oppressing your soul? But if not, too bad. Come on, let's get down to business, we must supply the storytellers with material. Let's go and choose a child, Witcher.'

'Calanthe,' he said, looking her in the eyes. 'It's not worth worrying about storytellers. If they don't have enough material they'll make things up anyway. And if they do have authentic material at their disposal, they'll distort it. As you correctly observed, this isn't a fairy tale, it's life. Lousy and evil. And so, damn it all, let's live it decently and well. Let's keep the amount of harm done to others to the absolute minimum. In a fairy tale, I

grant you, the queen has to beg the witcher and the witcher can demand what's his and stamp his foot. In real life the queen can simply say: "Please don't take the child". And the Witcher can reply: "Since you ask – I shall not". And go off into the setting sun. Such is life. But the storyteller wouldn't get a penny from his listeners for an ending to a fairy tale like that. At most they'd get a kick up the arse. Because it's dull.'

Calanthe stopped smiling and something he had seen once before flashed in her eyes.

'What?' she hissed.

'Let's not beat about the bush, Calanthe. You know what I mean. As I came here, so I shall leave. Should I choose a child? Why would I need one? Do you think it matters so much to me? That I came here to Cintra, driven by an obsession to take your grandchild away from you? No, Calanthe. I wanted, perhaps, to see this child, look destiny in the eyes . . . For I don't know myself . . . But don't be afraid. I shan't take it, all you have to do is ask—'

Calanthe sprang up from the bench and a green flame blazed in her eyes.

'Ask?' she hissed furiously. 'Me, afraid? Of you? I should be afraid of you, you accursed sorcerer? How dare you fling your scornful pity in my face? Revile me with your compassion? Accuse me of cowardice, challenge my will? My overfamiliarity has emboldened you! Beware!'

The Witcher decided not to shrug, concluding it would be safer to genuflect and bow his head. He was not mistaken.

'Well,' Calanthe hissed, standing over him. Her hands were lowered, clenched into fists bristling with rings. 'Well, at last. That is the right response. One answers a queen from such a position, when a queen asks one a question. And if it is not a question, but an order, one bows one's head even lower and goes off to carry it out, without a moment's delay. Is that clear?'

'Yes, O Queen.'

'Splendid. Now stand up.'

He stood up. She gazed at him and bit her lip.

'Did my outburst offend you very much? I refer to the form, not the content.'

'Not especially.'

‘Good. I shall try not to flare up again. And so, as I was saying, ten children are playing in the moat. You will choose the one you regard as the most suitable, you will take it, and by the Gods, make a witcher of it, because that is what destiny expects. And if not destiny, then know that I expect it.’

He looked her in the eyes and bowed low.

‘O Queen,’ he said. ‘Six years ago I proved to you that some things are more powerful than a queen’s will. By the Gods – if such exist – I shall prove that to you one more time. You will not compel me to make a choice I do not wish to make. I apologise for the form, but not the content.’

‘I have deep dungeons beneath the castle. I warn you, one second more, one word more and you will rot in them.’

‘None of the children playing in the moat is fit to be a witcher,’ he said slowly. ‘And Pavetta’s son is not among them.’

Calanthe squinted her eyes. He did not even shudder.

‘Come,’ she finally said, turning on her heel.

He followed her among rows of flowering shrubs, among flowerbeds and hedges. The queen entered an openwork summerhouse. Four large wicker chairs stood around a malachite table. A pitcher and two silver goblets stood on the veined table top supported by four legs in the shape of gryphons.

‘Be seated. And pour.’

She drank to him, vigorously, lustily. Like a man. He responded in kind, remaining standing.

‘Be seated,’ she repeated. ‘I wish to talk.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘How did you know Pavetta’s son is not among the children in the moat?’

‘I didn’t,’ Geralt decided to be frank. ‘It was a shot in the dark.’

‘Aha. I might have guessed. And that none of them is fit to be a witcher? Is that true? And how were you able to tell that? Were you aided by magic?’

‘Calanthe,’ he said softly. ‘I did not have to state it or find it out. What you said earlier contained the whole truth. Every child is fit. Selection decides. Later.’

‘By the Gods of the Sea, as my permanently absent husband

would say!' she laughed. 'So nothing is true? The whole Law of Surprise? Those legends about children that somebody was not expecting and about the ones who were first encountered? I suspected as much! It's a game! A game with chance, a game with destiny! But it's an awfully dangerous game, Geralt.'

'I know.'

'A game based on somebody's suffering. Why then, answer me, are parents or guardians forced to make such difficult and burdensome vows? Why are children taken from them? After all, there are plenty of children around who don't need to be taken away from anybody. Entire packs of homeless children and orphans roam the roads. One can buy a child cheaply enough in any village; every peasant is happy to sell one during the hungry gap, for why worry when he can easily sire another? Why then? Why did you force an oath on Duny, on Pavetta and on me? Why have you turned up here exactly six years after the birth of the child? And why, dammit, don't you want one, why do you say it's of no use?'

He was silent. Calanthe nodded.

'You do not reply,' she said, leaning back in her chair. 'Let's ponder on the reason for your silence. Logic is the mother of all knowledge. And what does she hint at? What do we have here? A witcher searching for destiny concealed in the strange and doubtful Law of Surprise. The witcher finds his destiny. And suddenly gives it up. He claims not to want the Child of Destiny. His face is stony; ice and metal in his voice. He judges that a queen – a woman when all's said and done – may be tricked, deceived by the appearances of hard maleness. No, Geralt, I shall not spare you. I know why you are declining the choice of a child. You are quitting because you do not believe in destiny. Because you are not certain. And you, when you are not certain . . . you begin to fear. Yes, Geralt. What leads you is fear. You are afraid. Deny that.'

He slowly put the goblet down on the table. Slowly, so that the clink of silver against malachite would not betray the uncontrollable shaking of his hand.

'You do not deny it?'

'No.'

She quickly leaned forward and seized his arm. Tightly.

'You have gained in my eyes,' she said. And smiled. It was a pretty smile. Against his will, almost certainly against his will, he responded with a smile.

‘How did you arrive at that, Calanthe?’

‘I arrived at nothing,’ she said, without releasing his arm. ‘It was a shot in the dark.’

They both burst out laughing. And then sat in silence among the greenery and the scent of wild cherry blossom, among the warmth and the buzzing of bees.

‘Geralt?’

‘Yes, Calanthe?’

‘Don’t you believe in destiny?’

‘I don’t know if I believe in anything. And as regards . . . I fear it isn’t enough. Something more is necessary.’

‘I must ask you something. What happened to you? I mean you were reputedly a Child of Destiny yourself. Mousesack claims—’

‘No, Calanthe. Mousesack was thinking about something completely different. Mousesack . . . He probably knows. But he uses those convenient myths when it suits him. It’s not true that I was an unexpected encounter at home, as a child. That’s not how I became a witcher. I’m a commonplace foundling, Calanthe. The unwanted bastard of a woman I don’t remember. But I know who she is.’

The queen looked at him penetratingly, but the Witcher did not continue.

‘Are all stories about the Law of Surprise myths?’

‘Yes. It’s hard to call an accident destiny.’

‘But you witchers do not stop searching?’

‘No, we don’t. But it’s senseless. Nothing has any point.’

‘Do you believe a Child of Destiny would pass through the Trials without danger?’

‘We believe such a child would not require the Trials.’

‘One question, Geralt. Quite a personal one. May I?’

He nodded.

‘There is no better way to pass on hereditary traits than the natural way, as we know. You went through the Trials and survived. So if you need a child with special qualities and endurance . . . Why don’t you find a woman who . . . I’m tactless, aren’t I? But I think I’ve guessed, haven’t I?’

‘As usual,’ he said, smiling sadly, ‘you are correct in your deductions, Calanthe. You guessed right, of course. What you’re suggesting is impossible for me.’

‘Forgive me,’ she said, and the smile vanished from her face. ‘Oh, well, it’s a human thing.’

‘It isn’t human.’

‘Ah . . . So, no witcher can—’

‘No, none. The Trial of the Grasses, Calanthe, is dreadful. And what is done to boys during the time of the Changes is even worse. And irreversible.’

‘Don’t start feeling sorry for yourself,’ she muttered. ‘Because it ill behooves you. It doesn’t matter what was done to you. I can see the results. Quite satisfactory, if you ask me. If I could assume that Pavetta’s child would one day be similar to you I wouldn’t hesitate for a moment.’

‘The risks are too great,’ he said quickly. ‘As you said. At most, four out of ten survive.’

‘Dammit, is only the Trial of the Grasses hazardous? Do only potential witchers take risks? Life is full of hazards, selection also occurs in life, Geralt. Misfortune, sicknesses and wars also select. Defying destiny may be just as hazardous as succumbing to it. Geralt . . . I would give you the child. But . . . I’m afraid, too.’

‘I wouldn’t take the child. I couldn’t assume the responsibility. I wouldn’t agree to burden you with it. I wouldn’t want the child to tell you one day . . . As I’m telling you—’

‘Do you hate that woman, Geralt?’

‘My mother? No, Calanthe. I presume she had a choice . . . Or perhaps she didn’t? No, but she did; a suitable spell or elixir would have been sufficient . . . A choice. A choice which should be respected, for it is the holy and irrefutable right of every woman. Emotions are unimportant here. She had the irrefutable right to her decision and she took it. But I think that an encounter with her, the face she would make then . . . Would give me something of a perverse pleasure, if you know what I mean.’

‘I know perfectly well what you mean,’ she smiled. ‘But you have slim chances of enjoying such a pleasure. I cannot judge your age, Witcher, but I suppose you’re much, much older than your appearance would indicate. So, that woman—’

‘That woman,’ he interrupted coldly, ‘probably looks much, much

younger than I do now.'

'A sorceress?'

'Yes.'

'Interesting. I thought sorceresses couldn't . . . ?'

'She probably thought so too.'

'Yes. But you're right, let's not discuss a woman's right to this decision, because it is a matter beyond debate. Let us return to our problem. You will not take the child? Definitely?'

'Definitely.'

'And if . . . If destiny is not merely a myth? If it really exists, doesn't a fear arise that it may backfire?'

'If it backfires, it'll backfire on me,' he answered placidly. 'For I am the one acting against it. You, after all, have carried out your side of the bargain. For if destiny isn't a myth, I would have to choose the appropriate child among the ones you have shown me. But is Pavetta's child among those children?'

'Yes,' Calanthe slowly nodded her head. 'Would you like to see it? Would you like to gaze into the eyes of destiny?'

'No. No, I don't. I quit, I renounce it. I renounce my right to the boy. I don't want to look destiny in the eyes, because I don't believe in it. Because I know that in order to unite two people, destiny is insufficient. Something more is necessary than destiny. I sneer at such destiny; I won't follow it like a blind man being led by the hand, uncomprehending and naive. This is my irrevocable decision, O Calanthe of Cintra.'

The queen stood up. She smiled. He was unable to guess what lay behind her smile.

'Let it be thus, Geralt of Rivia. Perhaps your destiny was precisely to renounce it and quit? I think that's exactly what it was. For you should know that if you had chosen, chosen correctly, you would see that the destiny you mock has been sneering at you.'

He looked into her glaring green eyes. She smiled. He could not decipher the smile.

There was a rosebush growing beside the summerhouse. He broke a stem and picked a flower, kneeled down, and proffered it to her, holding it in both hands, head bowed.

'Pity I didn't meet you earlier, White Hair,' she murmured, taking

the rose from his hands. ‘Rise.’

He stood up.

‘Should you change your mind,’ she said, lifting the rose up to her face. ‘Should you decide . . . Come back to Cintra. I shall be waiting. And your destiny will also be waiting. Perhaps not forever, but certainly for some time longer.’

‘Farewell, Calanthe.’

‘Farewell, Witcher. Look after yourself. I have . . . A moment ago I had a foreboding . . . A curious foreboding . . . that this is the last time I shall see you.’

‘Farewell, O Queen.’

V

He awoke and discovered to his astonishment that the pain gnawing at his thigh had vanished. It also seemed that the throbbing swelling which was stretching the skin had stopped troubling him. He tried to reach it, touch it, but could not move. Before he realised that he was being held fast solely by the weight of the skins covering him, a cold, hideous dread ran down to his belly and dug into his guts like a hawk's talons. He clenched and relaxed his fingers, rhythmically, repeating in his head, no, no, I'm not . . .

Paralysed.

'You have woken.'

A statement, not a question. A quiet, but distinct, soft voice. A woman. Probably young. He turned his head and groaned, trying to raise himself up.

'Don't move. At least not so vigorously. Are you in pain?'

'Nnnn . . .' the coating sticking his lips together broke. 'Nnno. The wound isn't . . . My back . . .'

'Bedsores.' An unemotional, cool statement, which did not suit the soft alto voice. 'I shall remedy it. Here, drink this. Slowly, in small sips.'

The scent and taste of juniper dominated the liquid. An old method, he thought. Juniper or mint; both insignificant additives, only there to disguise the real ingredients. In spite of that he recognised sewant mushrooms, and possibly burdock. Yes, certainly burdock, burdock neutralises toxins, it purifies blood contaminated by gangrene or infection.

'Drink. Drink it all up. Not so fast or you'll choke.'

The medallion around his neck began to vibrate very gently. So there was also magic in the draught. He widened his pupils with difficulty. Now that she had raised his head he could examine her more precisely. She was dainty. She was wearing men's clothing. Her face was small and pale in the darkness.

'Where are we?'

'In a tar makers' clearing.'

Indeed, resin could be smelled in the air. He heard voices coming from the campfire. Someone had just thrown on some brushwood,

and flames shot upwards with a crackle. He looked again, making the most of the light. Her hair was tied back with a snakeskin band. Her hair . . .

A suffocating pain in his throat and sternum. Hands tightly clenched into fists.

Her hair was red, flame-red, and when lit by the glow of the bonfire seemed as red as vermilion.

‘Are you in pain?’ she asked, interpreting the emotion, but wrongly. ‘Now . . . Just a moment . . .’

He sensed a sudden impact of warmth emanating from her hands, spreading over his back, flowing downwards to his buttocks.

‘We will turn you over,’ she said. ‘Don’t try by yourself. You are very debilitated. Hey, can someone help me?’

Steps from the bonfire, shadows, shapes. Somebody leaned over. It was Yurga.

‘How are you feeling, sir? Any better?’

‘Help me turn him over on his belly,’ said the woman. ‘Gently, slowly. That’s right . . . Good. Thank you.’

He did not have to look at her anymore. Lying on his belly, he did not have to risk looking her in the eyes. He calmed down and overcame the shaking of his hands. She could sense it. He heard the clasps of her bag clinking, flacons and small porcelain jars knocking against each other. He heard her breath, felt the warmth of her thigh. She was kneeling just beside him.

‘Was my wound,’ he asked, unable to endure the silence, ‘troublesome?’

‘It was, a little,’ and there was coldness in her voice. ‘It can happen with bites. The nastiest kinds of wound. But you must be familiar with it, Witcher.’

She knows. She’s digging around in my thoughts. Is she reading them? Probably not. And I know why. She’s afraid.

‘Yes, you must be familiar with it,’ she repeated, clinking the glass vessels again. ‘I saw a few scars on you . . . But I coped with them. I am, as you see, a sorceress. And a healer at the same time. It’s my specialisation.’

That adds up, he thought. He did not say a word.

‘To return to the wound,’ she continued calmly, ‘you ought to

know that you were saved by your pulse; fourfold slower than a normal man's. Otherwise you wouldn't have survived, I can say with complete honesty. I saw what had been tied around your leg. It was meant to be a dressing, but it was a poor attempt.'

He was silent.

'Later,' she continued, pulling his shirt up as far as his neck, 'infection set in, which is usual for bite wounds. It has been arrested. Of course, you took the witcher's elixir? That helped a lot. Though I don't understand why you took hallucinogens at the same time. I was listening to your ravings, Geralt of Rivia.'

She *is* reading my mind, he thought. Or perhaps Yurga told her my name? Perhaps I was talking in my sleep under the influence of the Black Gull? Damned if I know . . . But knowing my name gives her nothing. Nothing. She doesn't know who I am. She has no idea who I am.

He felt her gently massage a cold, soothing ointment with the sharp smell of camphor into his back. Her hands were small and very soft.

'Forgive me for doing it the old way,' she said. 'I could have removed the bedsores using magic, but I strained myself a little treating the wound on your leg and feel none too good. I've bandaged the wound on your leg, as much as I am able, so now you're in no danger. But don't get up for the next few days. Even magically sutured blood vessels tend to burst, and you'd have hideous effusions. A scar will remain, of course. One more for your collection.'

'Thanks . . .' He pressed his cheek against the skins in order to distort his voice, disguise its unnatural sound. 'May I ask . . . Whom should I thank?'

She won't say, he thought. Or she'll lie.

'My name is Visenna.'

I know, he thought.

'I'm glad,' he said slowly, with his cheek still against the skins. 'I'm glad our paths have crossed, Visenna.'

'Why, it's chance,' she said coolly, pulling his shirt down over his back and covering him with the sheepskins. 'I received word from the customs officers that I was needed. If I'm needed, I come. It's a curious habit I have. Listen, I'll leave the ointment with the merchant; ask him to rub it on every morning and evening. He

claims you saved his life, he can repay you like that.'

'And me? How can I repay you, Visenna?'

'Let's not talk about that. I don't take payment from witchers. Call it solidarity, if you will. Professional solidarity. And affection. As part of that affection some friendly advice or, if you wish, a healer's instructions: stop taking hallucinogens, Geralt. They have no healing power. None at all.'

'Thank you, Visenna. For your help and advice. Thank you . . . for everything.'

He dug his hand out from under the skins and found her knee. She shuddered, put her hand into his and squeezed it lightly. He cautiously released her fingers, and slid his down over her forearm.

Of course. The soft skin of a young woman. She shuddered even more strongly, but did not withdraw her arm. He brought his fingers back to her hand and joined his with hers.

The medallion on his neck vibrated and twitched.

'Thank you, Visenna,' he repeated, trying to control his voice. 'I'm glad our paths crossed.'

'Chance . . .' she said, but this time there was no coolness in her voice.

'Or perhaps destiny?' he asked, astonished, for the excitement and nervousness had suddenly evaporated from him completely. 'Do you believe in destiny, Visenna?'

'Yes,' she replied after a while. 'I do.'

'That people linked by destiny will always find each other?' he continued.

'Yes, I believe that too . . . What are you doing? Don't turn over . . .'

'I want to look into your face . . . Visenna. I want to look into your eyes. And you . . . You must look into mine.'

She made a movement as though about to spring up from her knees. But she remained beside him. He turned over slowly, lips twisting with pain. There was more light, someone had put some more wood on the fire.

She was not moving now. She simply moved her head to the side, offering her profile, but this time he clearly saw her mouth quivering. She tightened her fingers on his hand, powerfully.

He looked.

There was no similarity at all. She had an utterly different profile. A small nose. A narrow chin. She was silent. Then she suddenly leaned over him and looked him straight in the eye. From close up. Without a word.

‘How do you like my enhanced eyes?’ he asked calmly. ‘Unusual, aren’t they? Do you know, Visenna, what is done to witchers’ eyes to improve them? Do you know it doesn’t always work?’

‘Stop it,’ she said softly. ‘Stop it, Geralt.’

‘Geralt . . .’ he suddenly felt something tearing in him. ‘Vesemir gave me that name. Geralt of Rivia! I even learned to imitate a Rivian accent. Probably from an inner need to possess a homeland. Even if it was an invented one. Vesemir . . . gave me my name. Vesemir also revealed yours. Not very willingly.’

‘Be quiet, Geralt. Be quiet.’

‘You tell me today you believe in destiny. And back then . . . Did you believe back then? Oh, yes, you must have. You must have believed that destiny would bring us together. The fact you did nothing to quicken this encounter ought to be attributed to that.’

She was silent.

‘I always wanted . . . I have pondered over what I would say to you, when we finally met. I’ve thought about the question I would ask you. I thought it would give me some sort of perverse pleasure . . .’

What sparkled on her cheek was a tear. Undoubtedly. He felt his throat constrict until it hurt. He felt fatigue. Drowsiness. Weakness.

‘In the light of day . . .’ he groaned. ‘Tomorrow, in the sunshine, I’ll look into your eyes, Visenna . . . And I’ll ask you my question. Or perhaps I won’t ask you, because it’s too late. Destiny? Oh, yes, Yen was right. It’s not sufficient to be destined for each other. Something more is needed . . . But tomorrow I’ll look into your eyes . . . In the light of the sun . . .’

‘No,’ she said gently, quietly, velvety, in a voice which gnawed at, racked the layers of memory, memory which no longer existed. Which should never have existed, but had.

‘Yes!’ he protested. ‘Yes. I want to —’

‘No. Now you will fall asleep. And when you awake, you’ll stop wanting. Why should we look at each other in the sunlight? What

will it change? Nothing can now be reversed, nothing changed. What's the purpose of asking me questions, Geralt? Does knowing that I won't be able to answer give you some kind of perverse pleasure? What will mutual hurt give us? No, we won't look at each other in the daylight. Go to sleep, Geralt. And just between us, Vesemir did not give you that name. Although it doesn't change or reverse anything either, I'd like you to know that. Farewell and look after yourself. And don't try to look for me . . .'

'Visenna—'

'No, Geralt. Now you'll fall asleep. And I . . . I was a dream. Farewell.'

'No! Visenna!'

'Sleep.' There was a soft order in her velvety voice, breaking his will, tearing it like cloth. Warmth, suddenly emanating from her hands.

'Sleep.'

He slept.

VI

‘Are we in Riverdell yet, Yurga?’

‘Have been since yesterday, sir. Soon the River Yaruga and then my homeland. Look, even the horses are walking more jauntily, tossing their heads. They can sense home is near.’

‘Home . . . Do you live in the city?’

‘No, outside the walls.’

‘Interesting,’ the Witcher said, looking around. ‘There’s almost no trace of war damage. I had heard this land was devastated.’

‘Well,’ Yurga said. ‘One thing we’re not short of is ruins. Take a closer look – on almost every cottage, in every homestead, you can see the white timber of new joinery. And over there on the far bank, just look, it was even worse, everything was burned right down to the ground . . . Well, war’s war, but life must go on. We endured the greatest turmoil when the Black Forces marched through our land. True enough, it looked then as though they’d turn everything here into a wasteland. Many of those who fled then never returned. But fresh people have settled in their place. Life must go on.’

‘That’s a fact,’ Geralt muttered. ‘Life must go on. It doesn’t matter what happened. Life must go on . . .’

‘You’re right. Right, there you are, put them on. I’ve mended your britches, patched them up. They’ll be good as new. It’s just like this land, sir. It was rent by war, ploughed up as if by the iron of a harrow, ripped up, bloodied. But now it’ll be good as new. And it will be even more fertile. Even those who rotted in the ground will serve the good and fertilise the soil. Presently it is hard to plough, because the fields are full of bones and ironware, but the earth can cope with iron too.’

‘Are you afraid the Nilfgaardians, the Black Forces, will return? They found a way through the mountains once already . . .’

‘Well, we’re afeared. And what of it? Do we sit down and weep and tremble? Life must go on. And what will be, will be. What is destined can’t be avoided, in any case.’

‘Do you believe in destiny?’

‘How can I not believe? After what I encountered on the bridge, in the wilderness, when you saved me from death? Oh, Witcher, sir,

you'll see, my wife will fall at your feet . . .'

'Oh, come on. Frankly speaking, I have more to be grateful to you for. Back there on the bridge . . . That's my job, after all, Yurga, my trade. I mean, I protect people for money. Not out of the goodness of my heart. Admit it, Yurga, you've heard what people say about witchers. That no one knows who's worse; them or the monsters they kill—'

'That's not true, sir, and I don't know why you talk like that. What, don't I have eyes? You're cut from the same cloth as that healer.'

'Visenna . . .'

'She didn't tell us her name. But she followed right behind us, for she knew she was needed, caught us up in the evening, and took care of you at once, having barely dismounted. You see, sir, she took great pains over your leg, the air was crackling from all that magic, and we fled into the forest out of fear. And then there was blood pouring from her nose. I see it's not a simple thing, working magic. You see, she dressed your wound with such care, truly, like a —'

'Like a mother?' Geralt clenched his teeth.

'Aye. You've said it. And when you fell asleep . . .'

'Yes, Yurga?'

'She could barely stand up, she was as white as a sheet. But she came to check none of us needed any help. She healed the tar maker's hand, which had been crushed by a log. She didn't take a penny, and even left some medicine. No, Geralt, sir, I know what people say about Witchers and sorcerers in the world isn't all good. But not here. We, from Upper Sodden and the people from Riverdell, we know better. We owe too much to sorcerers not to know what they're like. Memories about them here aren't rumours and gossip, but hewn in stone. You'll see for yourself, just wait till we leave the copse. Anyway, you're sure to know better yourself. For that battle was talked about all over the world, and a year has barely passed. You must have heard.'

'I haven't been here for a year,' the Witcher muttered. 'I was in the North. But I heard . . . The second Battle of Sodden . . .'

'Precisely. You'll soon see the hill and the rock. We used to call that hill Kite Top, but now everybody calls it the Sorcerers' Peak or the Mountain of the Fourteen. For twenty-two of them stood on that

hill, twenty-two sorcerers fought, and fourteen fell. It was a dreadful battle, sir. The earth reared up, fire poured from the sky like rain and lightning bolts raged . . . Many perished. But the sorcerers overcame the Black Forces, and broke the Power which was leading them. And fourteen of them perished in that battle. Fourteen laid down their lives . . . What, sir? What's the matter?'

'Nothing. Go on, Yurga.'

'The battle was dreadful, oh my, but were it not for those sorcerers on the hill, who knows, perhaps we wouldn't be talking here today, riding homeward, for that home wouldn't exist, nor me, and maybe not you either . . . Yes, it was thanks to the sorcerers. Fourteen of them perished defending us, the people of Sodden and Riverdell. Ha, certainly, others also fought there, soldiers and noblemen, and peasants, too. Whoever could, took up a pitchfork or an axe, or even a club . . . All of them fought valiantly and many fell. But the sorcerers . . . It's no feat for a soldier to fall, for that is his trade, after all, and life is short anyhow. But the sorcerers could have lived, as long they wished. And they didn't waver.'

'They didn't waver,' the Witcher repeated, rubbing his forehead with a hand. 'They didn't waver. And I was in the North . . .'

'What's the matter, sir?'

'Nothing.'

'Yes . . . So now we – everyone from around here – take flowers there, to that hill, and in May, at Beltane, a fire always burns. And it shall burn there forever and a day. And forever shall they be in people's memories, that fourteen. And living like that in memory is . . . is . . . something more! More, Geralt, sir!'

'You're right, Yurga.'

'Every child of ours knows the names of the fourteen, carved in the stone that stands on the top of the hill. Don't you believe me? Listen: Axel Raby, Triss Merigold, Atlan Kerk, Vanielle of Brugge, Dagobert of Vole—'

'Stop, Yurga.'

'What's the matter, sir? You're as pale as death!'

'It's nothing.'

VII

He walked uphill very slowly, cautiously, listening to the creaking of the sinews and muscles around the magically healed wound. Although it seemed to be completely healed, he continued to protect the leg and not risk resting all his body weight on it. It was hot and the scent of grass struck his head, pleasantly intoxicating him.

The obelisk was not standing in the centre of the hill's flat top, but was further back, beyond the circle of angular stones. Had he climbed up there just before sunset the shadow of the menhir falling on the circle would have marked the precise diameter, would have indicated the direction in which the faces of the sorcerers had been turned during the battle. Geralt looked in that direction, towards the boundless, undulating fields. If any bones of the fallen were still there – and there were for certain – they were covered by lush grass. A hawk was circling, describing a calm circle on outspread wings. The single moving point in a landscape transfixed in the searing heat.

The obelisk was wide at the base – five people would have had to link hands in order to encircle it. It was apparent that without the help of magic it could not have been hauled up onto the hill. The surface of the menhir, which was turned towards the stone circle, was smoothly worked; runic letters could be seen engraved on it.

The names of the fourteen who fell.

He moved slowly closer. Yurga had been right. Flowers lay at the foot of the obelisk – ordinary, wild flowers – poppies, lupins, mallows and forget-me-nots.

The names of the fourteen.

He read them slowly, from the top, and before him appeared the faces of those he had known.

The chestnut-haired Triss Merigold, cheerful, giggling for no reason, looking like a teenager. He had liked her. And she had liked him.

Lawdbor of Murivel, with whom he had almost fought in Vizima, when he had caught the sorcerer using delicate telekinesis to tamper with dice in a game.

Lytta Neyd, known as Coral. Her nickname derived from the

colour of the lipstick she used. Lytta had once denounced him to King Belohun, so he went to the dungeon for a week. After being released he went to ask her why. When, still without knowing the reason, he had ended up in her bed, he spent another week there.

Old Gorazd, who had offered him a hundred marks to let him dissect his eyes, and a thousand for the chance to carry out a post mortem – 'not necessarily today' – as he had put it then.

Three names remained.

He heard a faint rustling behind him and turned around.

She was barefoot, in a simple, linen dress. She was wearing a garland woven from daisies on long, fair hair, falling freely onto her shoulders and back.

'Greetings,' he said.

She looked up at him with cold, blue eyes, but did not answer.

He noticed she was not suntanned. That was odd, then, at the end of the summer, when country girls were usually tanned bronze. Her face and uncovered shoulders had a slight golden sheen.

'Did you bring flowers?'

She smiled and lowered her eyelashes. He felt a chill. She passed him without a word and knelt at the foot of the menhir, touching the stone with her hand.

'I do not bring flowers,' she said, lifting her head. 'But the ones lying here are for me.'

He looked at her. She knelt so that she was concealing the last name engraved in the stone of the menhir from him. She was bright, unnaturally, luminously bright against the stone.

'Who are you?' he asked slowly.

She smiled and emanated cold.

'Don't you know?'

Yes, I do, he thought, gazing into the cold blue of her eyes. Yes, I think I do.

He was tranquil. He could not be anything else. Not anymore.

'I've always wondered what you look like, my lady.'

'You don't have to address me like that,' she answered softly. 'We've known each other for years, after all.'

'We have,' he agreed. 'They say you dog my footsteps.'

‘I do. But you have never looked behind you. Until today. Today, you looked back for the first time.’

He was silent. He had nothing to say. He was weary.

‘How . . . How will it happen?’ he finally asked, cold and emotionless.

‘I’ll take you by the hand,’ she said, looking him directly in the eyes. ‘I’ll take you by the hand and lead you through the meadow. Into the cold, wet fog.’

‘And then? What is there, beyond the fog?’

‘Nothing,’ she smiled. ‘There is nothing more.’

‘You dogged my every footstep,’ he said. ‘But struck down others, those that I passed on my way. Why? I was meant to end up alone, wasn’t I? So I would finally begin to be afraid? I’ll tell you the truth. I was always afraid of you; always. I never looked behind me out of fear. Out of terror that I’d see you following me. I was always afraid, my life has passed in fear. I was afraid . . . until today.’

‘Until today?’

‘Yes. Until today. We’re standing here, face to face, but I don’t feel any fear. You’ve taken everything from me. You’ve also taken the fear from me.’

‘Then why are your eyes full of fear, Geralt of Rivia? Your hands are trembling, you are pale. Why? Do you fear the last – fourteenth – name engraved on the obelisk so much? If you wish I shall speak that name.’

‘You don’t have to. I know what it is. The circle is closing, the snake is sinking its teeth into its own tail. That is how it must be. You and that name. And the flowers. For her and for me. The fourteenth name engraved in the stone, a name that I have spoken in the middle of the night and in the sunlight, during frosts and heat waves and rain. No, I’m not afraid to speak it now.’

‘Then speak it.’

‘Yennefer . . . Yennefer of Vengerberg.’

‘And the flowers are mine.’

‘Let us be done with this,’ he said with effort. ‘Take . . . Take me by the hand.’

She stood up and came closer, and he felt the coldness radiating from her; a sharp, penetrating cold.

‘Not today,’ she said. ‘One day, yes. But not today.’

‘You have taken everything from me—’

‘No,’ she interrupted. ‘I do not take anything. I just take people by the hand. So that no one will be alone at that moment. Alone in the fog . . . We shall meet again, Geralt of Rivia. One day.’

He did not reply. She turned around slowly and walked away. Into the mist, which suddenly enveloped the hilltop, into the fog, which everything vanished into, into the white, wet fog, into which melted the obelisk, the flowers lying at its foot and the fourteen names engraved on it. There was nothing, only the fog and the wet grass under his feet, sparkling from drops of water which smelled intoxicating, heady, sweet, until his forehead ached, he began to forget and become weary . . .

‘Geralt, sir! What’s the matter? Did you fall asleep? I told you, you’re weak. Why did you climb up to the top?’

‘I fell asleep.’ He wiped his face with his hand and blinked. ‘I fell asleep, dammit . . . It’s nothing, Yurga, it’s this heat . . .’

‘Aye, it’s devilish hot . . . We ought to be going, sir. Come along, I’ll aid you down the slope.’

‘There’s nothing wrong with me . . .’

‘Nothing, nothing. Then I wonder why you’re staggering. Why the hell did you go up the hill in such a heat? Wanted to read their names? I could have told you them all. What’s the matter?’

‘Nothing . . . Yurga . . . Do you really remember all the names?’

‘Certainly.’

‘I’ll see what your memory’s like . . . The last one. The fourteenth. What name is it?’

‘What a doubter you are. You don’t believe in anything. You want to find out if I’m lying? I told you, didn’t I, that every youngster knows those names. The last one, you say? Well, the last one is Yoël Grethen of Carreras. Perhaps you knew him?’

Geralt rubbed his eyelid with his wrist. And he glanced at the menhir. At all the names.

‘No,’ he said. ‘I didn’t.’

VIII

‘Geralt, sir?’

‘Yes, Yurga?’

The merchant lowered his head and said nothing for some time, winding around a finger the remains of the thin strap with which he was repairing the Witcher’s saddle. He finally straightened up and gently tapped the servant driving the cart on the back with his fist.

‘Mount one of those spare horses, Pokvit. I’ll drive. Sit behind me on the box, Geralt, sir. Why are you hanging around the cart, Pokvit? Go on, ride on! We want to talk here, we don’t need your eyes!’

Roach, dawdling behind the cart, neighed, tugged at the tether, clearly envious of Pokvit’s mare trotting down the highway.

Yurga clicked his tongue and tapped the horses lightly with the reins.

‘Well,’ he said hesitantly. ‘It’s like this, sir. I promised you . . . Back then on the bridge . . . I made a promise—’

‘You needn’t worry,’ the Witcher quickly interrupted. ‘It’s not necessary, Yurga.’

‘But it is,’ the merchant said curtly. ‘It’s my word. Whatever I find at home but am not expecting is yours.’

‘Give over. I don’t want anything from you. We’re quits.’

‘No, sir. Should I find something like that at home it means it’s destiny. For if you mock destiny, if you deceive it, then it will punish you severely.’

I know, thought the Witcher. I know.

‘But . . . Geralt, sir . . .’

‘What, Yurga?’

‘I won’t find anything at home I’m not expecting. Nothing, and for certain not what you were hoping for. Witcher, sir, hear this: after the last child, my woman cannot have any more and whatever you’re after, there won’t be an infant at home. Seems to me you’re out of luck.’

Geralt did not reply.

Yurga said nothing either. Roach snorted again and tossed her head.

'But I have two sons,' Yurga suddenly said quickly, looking ahead, towards the road. 'Two; healthy, strong and smart. I mean, I'll have to get them apprenticed somewhere. One, I thought, would learn to trade with me. But the other . . .'

Geralt said nothing.

'What do you say?' Yurga turned his head away, and looked at him. 'You demanded a promise on the bridge. You had in mind a child for your witcher's apprenticeship, and nothing else, didn't you? Why does that child have to be unexpected? Can it not be expected? I've two, so one of them could go for a witcher. It's a trade like any other. It ain't better or worse.'

'Are you certain,' Geralt said softly, 'it isn't worse?'

Yurga squinted.

'Protecting people, saving their lives, how do you judge that; bad or good? Those fourteen on the hill? You on that there bridge? What were you doing? Good or bad?'

'I don't know,' said Geralt with effort. 'I don't know, Yurga. Sometimes it seems to me that I know. And sometimes I have doubts. Would you like your son to have doubts like that?'

'Why not?' the merchant said gravely. 'He might as well. For it's a human and a good thing.'

'What?'

'Doubts. Only evil, sir, never has any. But no one can escape his destiny.'

The Witcher did not answer.

The highway curved beneath a high bluff, under some crooked birch trees, which by some miracle were hanging onto the vertical hillside. The birches had yellow leaves. Autumn, Geralt thought, it's autumn again. A river sparkled down below, the freshly-cut palisade of a watchtower shone white, the roofs of cottages, hewn stakes of the jetty. A windlass creaked. A ferry was reaching the bank, pushing a wave in front of it, shoving the water with its blunt prow, parting the sluggish straw and leaves in the dirty layer of dust floating on the surface. The ropes creaked as the ferrymen hauled them. The people thronged on the bank were clamouring. There was everything in the din: women screaming, men cursing, children crying, cattle lowing, horses neighing and sheep bleating.

The monotonous, bass music of fear.

‘Get away! Get away, get back, dammit!’ yelled a horseman, head bandaged with a bloody rag. His horse, submerged up to its belly, thrashed around, lifting its fore hooves high and splashing water. Yelling and cries from the jetty – the shield bearers were brutally jostling the crowd, hitting out in all directions with the shafts of their spears.

‘Get away from the ferry!’ the horseman yelled, swinging his sword around. ‘Soldiers only! Get away, afore I start cracking some skulls!’

Geralt pulled on his reins, holding back his mare, who was dancing near the edge of the ravine.

Heavily armoured men, weapons and armour clanging, galloped along the ravine, stirring up clouds of dust which obscured the shield bearers running in their wake.

‘Geraaaalt!’

He looked down. A slim man in a cherry jerkin and a bonnet with an egret’s feather was jumping up and down and waving his arms on an abandoned cart loaded with cages which had been shoved off the highway. Chickens and geese fluttered and squawked in the cages.

‘Geraaalt! It’s me!’

‘Dandelion! Come here!’

‘Get away, get away from the ferry!’ roared the horseman with the bandaged head on the jetty. ‘The ferry’s for the army only! If you want to get to the far bank, scum, seize your axes and get into the forest, cobble together some rafts! The ferry’s just for the army!’

‘By the Gods, Geralt,’ the poet panted, scrambling up the side of the ravine. His cherry jerkin was dotted, as though by snow, with birds’ feathers. ‘Do you see what’s happening? The Sodden forces have surely lost the battle, and the retreat has begun. What am I saying? What retreat? It’s a flight, simply a panicked flight! And we have to scarper, too, Geralt. To the Yaruga’s far bank . . .’

‘What are you doing here, Dandelion? How did you get here?’

‘What am I doing?’ the bard yelled. ‘You want to know? I’m fleeing like everybody else, I was bumping along on that cart all day! Some whoreson stole my horse in the night! Geralt, I beg you, get me out of this hell! I tell you, the Nilfgaardians could be here any moment! Whoever doesn’t get the Yaruga behind them will be

slaughtered. Slaughtered, do you understand?'

'Don't panic, Dandelion.'

Below on the jetty, the neighing of horses being pulled onto the ferry by force and the clattering of hooves on the planks. Uproar. A seething mass. The splash of water after a cart was pushed into the river, the lowing of oxen holding their muzzles above the surface. Geralt looked on as the bundles and crates from the cart turned around in the current, banged against the side of the ferry and drifted away. Screaming, curses. In the ravine a cloud of dust, hoof beats.

'One at a time!' yelled the bandaged soldier, driving his horse into the crowd. 'Order, dammit! One at a time!'

'Geralt,' Dandelion groaned, seizing a stirrup. 'Do you see what's happening? We haven't a chance of getting on that ferry. The soldiers will get as many across on it as they can, and then they'll burn it so the Nilfgaardians won't be able to use it. That's how it's normally done, isn't it?'

'Agreed,' the Witcher nodded. 'That's how it's normally done. I don't understand, though, why the panic? What, is this the first war ever, have there never been any others? Just like usual, the kings' forces beat each other up and then the kings reach agreement, sign treaties and get plastered to celebrate. Nothing will really change for those having their ribs crushed on the jetty now. So why all this brutality?'

Dandelion looked at him intently, without releasing the stirrup.

'You must have lousy information, Geralt,' he said. 'Or you're unable to understand its significance. This isn't an ordinary war about succession to a throne or a small scrap of land. It's not a skirmish between two feudal lords, which peasants watch while leaning on their pitchforks.'

'What is it then? Enlighten me, because I really don't know what it's about. Just between you and I, it doesn't actually interest me that much, but please explain.'

'There's never been a war like this,' the bard said gravely. 'The Nilfgaard army are leaving scorched earth and bodies behind them. Entire fields of corpses. This is a war of destruction, total destruction. Nilfgaard against everyone. Cruelty—'

'There is and has never been a war without cruelty,' the Witcher interrupted. 'You're exaggerating, Dandelion. It's like it is by the

ferry: that's how it's normally done. A kind of military tradition, I'd say. As long as the world has existed, armies marching through a country kill, plunder, burn and rape; though not necessarily in that order. As long as the world has existed, peasants have hidden in forests with their women and what they can carry, and when everything is over, return—'

'Not in this war, Geralt. After this war there won't be anybody or anything to return to. Nilfgaard is leaving smouldering embers behind it, the army is marching in a row and dragging everybody out. Scaffolds and stakes stretch for miles along the highways, smoke is rising into the sky across the entire horizon. You said there hasn't been anything like this since the world has existed? Well, you were right. Since the world has existed. Our world. For it looks as though the Nilfgaardians have come from beyond the mountains to destroy our world.'

'That makes no sense. Who would want to destroy the world? Wars aren't waged to destroy. Wars are waged for two reasons. One is power and the other is money.'

'Don't philosophise, Geralt! You won't change what's happening with philosophy! Why won't you listen? Why won't you see? Why don't you want to understand? Believe me, the Yaruga won't stop the Nilfgaardians. In the winter, when the river freezes over, they'll march on. I tell you, we must flee, flee to the North; they may not get that far. But even if they don't, our world will never be what it was. Geralt, don't leave me here! I'll never survive by myself! Don't leave me!'

'You must be insane, Dandelion,' the Witcher said, leaning over in the saddle. 'You must be insane with fear, if you could think I'd leave you. Give me your hand and jump up on the horse. There's nothing for you here, nor will you shove your way onto the ferry. I'll take you upstream and then we'll hunt for a boat or a ferry.'

'The Nilfgaardians will capture us! They're close now. Did you see those horsemen? They are clearly coming straight from the fighting. Let's ride downstream towards the mouth of the Ina.'

'Stop looking on the dark side. We'll slip through, you'll see. Crowds of people are heading downstream, it'll be the same at every ferry as it is here, they're sure to have nabbed all the boats too. We'll ride upstream, against the current. Don't worry, I'll get you across on a log if I have to.'

'The far bank's barely visible!'

‘Don’t whinge. I said I’d get you across.’

‘What about you?’

‘Hop up onto the horse. We’ll talk on the way. Hey, not with that bloody sack! Do you want to break Roach’s back?’

‘Is it Roach? Roach was a bay, and she’s a chestnut.’

‘All of my horses are called Roach. You know that perfectly well; don’t try to get round me. I said get rid of that sack. What’s in it, dammit? Gold?’

‘Manuscripts! Poems! And some vittles . . .’

‘Throw it into the river. You can write some new poems. And I’ll share my food with you.’

Dandelion made a forlorn face, but did not ponder long, and hurled the sack into the water. He jumped onto the horse and wriggled around, making a place for himself on the saddlebags, and grabbed the Witcher’s belt.

‘Time to go, time to go,’ he urged anxiously. ‘Let’s not waste time, Geralt, we’ll disappear into the forest, before—’

‘Stop it, Dandelion. That panic of yours is beginning to affect Roach.’

‘Don’t mock. If you’d seen what I—’

‘Shut up, dammit. Let’s ride, I’d like to get you across before dusk.’

‘Me? What about you?’

‘I have matters to deal with on this side of the river.’

‘You must be mad, Geralt. Do you have a death wish? What “matters”?’

‘None of your business. I’m going to Cintra.’

‘To Cintra? Cintra is no more.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘There is no Cintra. Just smouldering embers and piles of rubble. The Nilfgaardians—’

‘Dismount, Dandelion.’

‘What?’

‘Get off!’ The Witcher jerked around. The troubadour looked at his face and leaped from the horse onto the ground, took a step

back and stumbled.

Geralt got off slowly. He threw the reins across the mare's head, stood for a moment undecided, and then wiped his face with a gloved hand. He sat down on the edge of a tree hollow, beneath a spreading dogwood bush with blood-red branches.

'Come here, Dandelion,' he said. 'Sit down. And tell me what's happened to Cintra. Everything.'

The poet sat down.

'The Nilfgaardians invaded across the passes,' he began after a moment's silence. 'There were thousands of them. They surrounded the Cintran army in the Marnadal valley. A battle was joined lasting the whole day, from dawn till dusk. The forces of Cintra fought courageously, but were decimated. The king fell, and then their queen—'

'Calanthe.'

'Yes. She headed off a stampede, didn't let them disperse, gathered anyone she was able to around herself and the standard. They fought their way through the encirclement and fell back across the river towards the city. Whoever was able to.'

'And Calanthe?'

'She defended the river crossing with a handful of knights, and shielded the retreat. They say she fought like a man, threw herself like a woman possessed into the greatest turmoil. They stabbed her with pikes as she charged the Nilfgaardian foot. She was transported to the city gravely wounded. What's in that canteen, Geralt?'

'Vodka. Want some?'

'What do you think?'

'Speak. Go on, Dandelion. Tell me everything.'

'The city didn't put up a fight. There was no siege, because there was no one to defend the walls. What was left of the knights and their families, the noblemen and the queen . . . They barricaded themselves in the castle. The Nilfgaardians captured the castle at once, their sorcerers pulverised the gate and some of the walls. Only the keep was being defended, clearly protected by spells, because it resisted the Nilfgaardian magic. In spite of that, the Nilfgaardians forced their way inside within four days. They didn't find anyone alive. Not a soul. The women had killed the children, the men had killed the women and then fallen on their swords or

. . . What's the matter, Geralt?'

'Speak, Dandelion.'

'Or . . . like Calanthe . . . Headlong from the battlements, from the very top. They say she asked someone to . . . But no one would. So she crawled to the battlements and . . . Headfirst. They say dreadful things were done to her body. I don't want to . . . What's the matter?'

'Nothing. Dandelion . . . In Cintra there was a . . . little girl. Calanthe's granddaughter, she was around ten or eleven. Her name was Ciri. Did you hear anything about her?'

'No. But there was a terrible massacre in the city and the castle and almost no one got out alive. And nobody survived of those who defended the keep, I told you. And most of the women and children from the notable families were there.'

The Witcher said nothing.

'That Calanthe,' Dandelion asked. 'Did you know her?'

'Yes.'

'And the little girl you were asking about? Ciri?'

'I knew her too.'

The wind blew from the river, rippled the water, shook the trees and the leaves fell from the branches in a shimmering shower. Autumn, thought the Witcher, it's autumn again.

He stood up.

'Do you believe in destiny, Dandelion?'

The troubadour raised his head and looked at him with his eyes wide open.

'Why do you ask?'

'Answer.'

'Well . . . yes.'

'But did you know that destiny alone is not enough? That something more is necessary?'

'I don't understand.'

'You're not the only one. But that's how it is. Something more is needed. The problem is that . . . that I won't ever find out what.'

'What's the matter, Geralt?'

‘Nothing, Dandelion. Come, get on. Let’s go, we’re wasting the day. Who knows how long it’ll take us to find a boat, and we’ll need a big one. I’m not leaving Roach, after all.’

‘Are we crossing the river today?’ the poet asked, happily.

‘Yes. There’s nothing for me on this side of the river.’

IX

‘Yurga!’

‘Darling!’

She ran from the gate – her hair escaping her headscarf, blowing around – stumbling and crying out. Yurga threw the halter to his servant, jumped down from the cart, ran to meet his wife, seized her around the waist, lifted her up and spun her, whirled her around.

‘I’m home, my darling! I’ve returned!’

‘Yurga!’

‘I’m back! Hey, throw open the gates! The man of the house has returned!’

She was wet, smelling of soap suds. She had clearly been doing the laundry. He stood her on the ground, but she still did not release him, and remained clinging, trembling, warm.

‘Lead me inside.’

‘By the Gods, you’ve returned . . . I couldn’t sleep at night . . . Yurga . . . I couldn’t sleep at night—’

‘I’ve returned. Oh, I’ve returned! And I’ve returned with riches! Do you see the cart? Hey, hurry, drive it in! Do you see the cart? I’m carrying enough goods to—’

‘Yurga, what are goods to me, or a cart . . . You’ve returned . . . Healthy . . . In one piece—’

‘I’ve returned wealthy, I tell you. You’ll see directly—’

‘Yurga? But who’s that? That man in black? By the Gods, and with a sword—’

The merchant looked around. The Witcher had dismounted and was standing with his back to them, pretending to be adjusting the girth and saddlebags. He did not look at them, did not approach.

‘I’ll tell you later. Oh, but if it weren’t for him . . . But where are the lads? Hale?’

‘Yes, Yurga, they’re hale. They went to the fields to shoot at crows, but the neighbours will tell them you’re back. They’ll soon rush home, the three of them—’

‘Three? What do you mean, Goldencheeks? Were you—’

‘No . . . But I must tell you something . . . You won’t be cross?’

‘Me? With you?’

‘I’ve taken a lassie in, Yurga. I took her from the druids, you know, the ones who rescued children after the war? They gathered homeless and stray children in the forests . . . Barely alive . . . Yurga? Are you cross?’

Yurga held a hand to his forehead and looked back. The Witcher was walking slowly behind the cart, leading his horse. He was not looking at them, his head turned away.

‘Yurga?’

‘O, Gods,’ the merchant groaned. ‘O, Gods! Something I wasn’t expecting! At home!’

‘Don’t take on, Yurga . . . You’ll see, you’ll like her. She’s a clever lassie, pleasing, hardworking . . . A mite odd. She won’t say where she’s from, she weeps at once if you ask. So I don’t. Yurga, you know I always wished for a daughter . . . What ails you?’

‘Nothing,’ he said softly. ‘Nothing. Destiny. The whole way he was raving in his sleep, delirious ravings, nothing but destiny and destiny . . . By the Gods . . . It’s not for the likes of us to understand. We can’t mark what people like him think. What they dream about. It’s not for us to understand . . .’

‘Dad!’

‘Nadbor! Sulik! How you’ve grown, a pair of young bulls! Well, come here, to me! Look alive . . .’

He broke off, seeing a small, very slim, mousy-haired creature walking slowly behind the boys. The little girl looked at him and he saw the huge eyes as green as spring grass, shining like two little stars. He saw the girl suddenly start, run . . . He heard her shrill, piercing cry.

‘Geralt!’

The Witcher turned away from his horse with a swift, agile movement and ran to meet her. Yurga stared open-mouthed. He had never thought a man could move so quickly.

They came together in the centre of the farmyard. The mousy-haired girl in a grey dress. And the white-haired Witcher with a sword on his back, all dressed in black leather, gleaming with silver. The Witcher bounding softly, the girl trotting, the Witcher on

his knees, the girl's thin hands around his neck, the mousy hair on his shoulders. Goldencheeks shrieked softly. Yurga hugged his rosy-cheeked wife when she cried out softly, pulling her towards him without a word, and gathered up and hugged both boys.

'Geralt!' the little girl repeated, clinging to the Witcher's chest. 'You found me! I knew you would! I always knew! I knew you'd find me!'

'Ciri,' said the Witcher.

Yurga could not see his face hidden among the mousy hair. He saw hands in black gloves squeezing the girl's back and shoulders.

'You found me! Oh, Geralt! I was waiting all the time! For so very long . . . We'll be together now, won't we? Now we'll be together, won't we? Say it, Geralt! Forever! Say it!'

'Forever, Ciri.'

'It's like they said! Geralt! It's like they said! Am I your destiny? Say it! Am I your destiny?'

Yurga saw the Witcher's eyes. And was very astonished. He heard his wife's soft weeping, felt the trembling of her shoulders. He looked at the Witcher and waited, tensed, for his answer. He knew he would not understand it, but he waited for it. And heard it.

'You're more than that, Ciri. Much more.'

Blood of Elves

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Verily I say unto you, the era of the sword and axe is nigh, the era of the wolf's blizzard. The Time of the White Chill and the White Light is nigh, the Time of Madness and the Time of Contempt: Tedd Deireádh, the Time of End. The world will die amidst frost and be reborn with the new sun. It will be reborn of the Elder Blood, of Hen Ichaer, of the seed that has been sown. A seed which will not sprout but will burst into flame.

Ess'tuath esse! Thus it shall be! Watch for the signs! What signs these shall be, I say unto you: first the earth will flow with the blood of Aen Seidhe, the Blood of Elves …

Aen Ithlinnespeath, *Ithlinne Aegli aep Aevenien's prophecy*

CHAPTER ONE

The town was in flames.

The narrow streets leading to the moat and the first terrace belched smoke and embers, flames devouring the densely clustered thatched houses and licking at the castle walls. From the west, from the harbour gate, the screams and clamour of vicious battle and the dull blows of a battering ram smashing against the walls grew ever louder.

Their attackers had surrounded them unexpectedly, shattering the barricades which had been held by no more than a few soldiers, a handful of townsmen carrying halberds and some crossbowmen from the guild. Their horses, decked out in flowing black caparisons, flew over the barricades like spectres, their riders' bright, glistening blades sowing death amongst the fleeing defenders.

Ciri felt the knight who carried her before him on his saddle abruptly spur his horse. She heard his cry. 'Hold on,' he shouted. 'Hold on!'

Other knights wearing the colours of Cintra overtook them, sparring, even in full flight, with the Nilfgaardians. Ciri caught a glimpse of the skirmish from the corner of her eye – the crazed swirl of blue-gold and black cloaks amidst the clash of steel, the clatter of blades against shields, the neighing of horses—

Shouts. No, not shouts. Screams.

'Hold on!'

Fear. With every jolt, every jerk, every leap of the horse pain shot through her hands as she clutched at the reins. Her legs contracted painfully, unable to find support, her eyes watered from the smoke. The arm around her suffocated her, choking her, the force compressing her ribs. All around her screaming such as she had never before heard grew louder. What must one do to a man to make him scream so?

Fear. Overpowering, paralysing, choking fear.

Again the clash of iron, the grunts and snorts of the horses. The houses whirled around her and suddenly she could see windows belching fire where a moment before there'd been nothing but a muddy little street strewn with corpses and cluttered with the abandoned possessions of the fleeing population. All at once the knight at her back was wracked by a strange wheezing cough. Blood spurted over the hands grasping the reins. More screams. Arrows whistled past.

A fall, a shock, painful bruising against armour. Hooves pounded past her, a horse's belly and a frayed girth flashing by above her head, then another horse's belly and a flowing black caparison. Grunts of exertion, like a lumberjack's when chopping wood. But this isn't wood; it's iron against iron. A shout, muffled and dull, and something huge and black collapsed into the mud next to her with a splash, spurting blood. An armoured foot quivered, thrashed, goring the earth with an enormous spur.

A jerk. Some force plucked her up, pulled her onto another saddle. *Hold on!* Again the bone-shaking speed, the mad gallop. Arms and legs desperately searching for support. The horse rears. *Hold on!* . . . There is no support. There is no . . . There is no . . . There is blood. The horse falls. It's impossible to jump aside, no way to break free, to escape the tight embrace of these chainmail-clad arms. There is no way to avoid the blood pouring onto her head and over her shoulders.

A jolt, the squelch of mud, a violent collision with the ground, horrifically still after the furious ride. The horse's harrowing wheezes and squeals as it tries to regain its feet. The pounding of horseshoes, fetlocks and hooves flashing past. Black caparisons and cloaks. Shouting.

The street is on fire, a roaring red wall of flame. Silhouetted before it, a rider towers over the flaming roofs, enormous. His black-caparisoned horse prances, tosses its head, neighs.

The rider stares down at her. Ciri sees his eyes gleaming through

the slit in his huge helmet, framed by a bird of prey's wings. She sees the fire reflected in the broad blade of the sword held in his lowered hand.

The rider looks at her. Ciri is unable to move. The dead man's motionless arms wrapped around her waist hold her down. She is locked in place by something heavy and wet with blood, something which is lying across her thigh, pinning her to the ground.

And she is frozen in fear: a terrible fear which turns her entrails inside out, which deafens Ciri to the screams of the wounded horse, the roar of the blaze, the cries of dying people and the pounding drums. The only thing which exists, which counts, which still has any meaning, is fear. Fear embodied in the figure of a black knight wearing a helmet decorated with feathers frozen against the wall of raging, red flames.

The rider spurs his horse, the wings on his helmet fluttering as the bird of prey takes to flight, launching itself to attack its helpless victim, paralysed with fear. The bird – or maybe the knight – screeches terrifyingly, cruelly, triumphantly. A black horse, black armour, a black flowing cloak, and behind this – flames. A sea of flames.

Fear.

The bird shrieks. The wings beat, feathers slap against her face. *Fear!*

Help! Why doesn't anyone help me? Alone, weak, helpless – I can't move, can't force a sound from my constricted throat. Why does no one come to help me?

I'm terrified!

Eyes blaze through the slit in the huge winged helmet. The black cloak veils everything—

'Ciri !'

She woke, numb and drenched in sweat, with her scream – the scream which had woken her – still hanging in the air, still vibrating somewhere within her, beneath her breast-bone and burning against her parched throat. Her hands ached, clenched around the blanket; her back ached . . .

'Ciri. Calm down.'

The night was dark and windy, the crowns of the surrounding pine trees rustling steadily and melodiously, their limbs and trunks creaking in the wind. There was no malevolent fire, no screams,

only this gentle lullaby. Beside her the campfire flickered with light and warmth, its reflected flames glowing from harness buckles, gleaming red in the leather-wrapped and iron-banded hilt of a sword leaning against a saddle on the ground. There was no other fire and no other iron. The hand against her cheek smelled of leather and ashes. Not of blood.

'Geralt—'

'It was just a dream. A bad dream.'

Ciri shuddered violently, curling her arms and legs up tight.

A dream. Just a dream.

The campfire had already died down; the birch logs were red and luminous, occasionally crackling, giving off tiny spurts of blue flame which illuminated the white hair and sharp profile of the man wrapping a blanket and sheepskin around her.

'Geralt, I—'

'I'm right here. Sleep, Ciri. You have to rest. We've still a long way ahead of us.'

I can hear music, she thought suddenly. *Amidst the rustling of the trees . . . there's music. Lute music. And voices. The Princess of Cintra . . . A child of destiny . . . A child of Elder Blood, the blood of elves. Geralt of Rivia, the White Wolf, and his destiny. No, no, that's a legend. A poet's invention. The princess is dead. She was killed in the town streets while trying to escape . . .*

Hold on . . . ! Hold . . .

'Geralt?'

'What, Ciri?'

'What did he do to me? What happened? What did he . . . do to me?'

'Who?'

'The knight . . . The black knight with feathers on his helmet . . . I can't remember anything. He shouted . . . and looked at me. I can't remember what happened. Only that I was frightened . . . I was so frightened . . .'

The man leaned over her, the flame of the campfire sparkling in his eyes. They were strange eyes. Very strange. Ciri had been frightened of them, she hadn't liked meeting his gaze. But that had been a long time ago. A very long time ago.

‘I can’t remember anything,’ she whispered, searching for his hand, as tough and coarse as raw wood. ‘The black knight—’

‘It was a dream. Sleep peacefully. It won’t come back.’

Ciri had heard such reassurances in the past. They had been repeated to her endlessly; many, many times she had been offered comforting words when her screams had woken her during the night. But this time it was different. Now she believed it. Because it was Geralt of Rivia, the White Wolf, the Witcher, who said it. The man who was her destiny. The one for whom she was destined. Geralt the Witcher, who had found her surrounded by war, death and despair, who had taken her with him and promised they would never part.

She fell asleep holding tight to his hand.

The bard finished the song. Tilting his head a little he repeated the ballad’s refrain on his lute, delicately, softly, a single tone higher than the apprentice accompanying him.

No one said a word. Nothing but the subsiding music and the whispering leaves and squeaking boughs of the enormous oak could be heard. Then, all of a sudden, a goat tethered to one of the carts which circled the ancient tree bleated lengthily. At that moment, as if given a signal, one of the men seated in the large semi-circular audience stood up. Throwing his cobalt blue cloak with gold braid trim back over his shoulder, he gave a stiff, dignified bow.

‘Thank you, Master Dandilion,’ he said, his voice resonant without being loud. ‘Allow me, Radcliffe of Oxenfurt, Master of the Arcana, to express what I am sure is the opinion of everyone here present and utter words of gratitude and appreciation for your fine art and skill.’

The wizard ran his gaze over those assembled – an audience of well over a hundred people – seated on the ground, on carts, or standing in a tight semi-circle facing the foot of the oak. They nodded and whispered amongst themselves. Several people began to applaud while others greeted the singer with upraised hands. Women, touched by the music, sniffed and wiped their eyes on whatever came to hand, which differed according to their standing, profession and wealth: peasant women used their forearms or the backs of their hands, merchants’ wives dabbed their eyes with linen handkerchiefs while elves and noblewomen used kerchiefs of the finest tight-woven cotton, and Baron Vilibert’s three daughters, who

had, along with the rest of his retinue, halted their falcon hunt to attend the famous troubadour's performance, blew their noses loudly and sonorously into elegant mould-green cashmere scarves.

'It would not be an exaggeration to say,' continued the wizard, 'that you have moved us deeply, Master Dandilion. You have prompted us to reflection and thought; you have stirred our hearts. Allow me to express our gratitude, and our respect.'

The troubadour stood and took a bow, sweeping the heron feather pinned to his fashionable hat across his knees. His apprentice broke off his playing, grinned and bowed too, until Dandilion glared at him sternly and snapped something under his breath. The boy lowered his head and returned to softly strumming his lute strings.

The assembly stirred to life. The merchants travelling in the caravan whispered amongst themselves and then rolled a sizable cask of beer out to the foot of the oak tree. Wizard Radcliffe lost himself in quiet conversation with Baron Vilibert. Having blown their noses, the baron's daughters gazed at Dandilion in adoration – which went entirely unnoticed by the bard, engrossed as he was in smiling, winking and flashing his teeth at a haughty, silent group of roving elves, and at one of them in particular: a dark-haired, large-eyed beauty sporting a tiny ermine cap. Dandilion had rivals for her attention – the elf, with her huge eyes and beautiful torque hat, had caught his audience's interest as well, and a number of knights, students and goliards were paying court to her with their eyes. The elf clearly enjoyed the attention, picking at the lace cuffs of her chemise and fluttering her eyelashes, but the group of elves with her surrounded her on all sides, not bothering to hide their antipathy towards her admirers.

The glade beneath Bleobheris, the great oak, was a place of frequent rallies, a well-known travellers' resting place and meeting ground for wanderers, and was famous for its tolerance and openness. The druids protecting the ancient tree called it the Seat of Friendship and willingly welcomed all comers. But even during an event as exceptional as the world-famous troubadour's just-concluded performance the travellers kept to themselves, remaining in clearly delineated groups. Elves stayed with elves. Dwarfish craftsmen gathered with their kin, who were often hired to protect the merchant caravans and were armed to the teeth. Their groups tolerated at best the gnome miners and halfling farmers who camped beside them. All non-humans were uniformly distant towards humans. The humans repaid in kind, but were not seen to

mix amongst themselves either. Nobility looked down on the merchants and travelling salesmen with open scorn, while soldiers and mercenaries distanced themselves from shepherds and their reeking sheepskins. The few wizards and their disciples kept themselves entirely apart from the others, and bestowed their arrogance on everyone in equal parts. A tight-knit, dark and silent group of peasants lurked in the background. Resembling a forest with their rakes, pitchforks and flails poking above their heads, they were ignored by all and sundry.

The exception, as ever, was the children. Freed from the constraints of silence which had been enforced during the bard's performance, the children dashed into the woods with wild cries, and enthusiastically immersed themselves in a game whose rules were incomprehensible to all those who had bidden farewell to the happy years of childhood. Children of elves, dwarves, halflings, gnomes, half-elves, quarter-elves and toddlers of mysterious provenance neither knew nor recognised racial or social divisions. At least, not yet.

'Indeed!' shouted one of the knights present in the glade, who was as thin as a beanpole and wearing a red and black tunic emblazoned with three lions passant. 'The wizard speaks the truth! The ballads were beautiful. Upon my word, honourable Dandilion, if you ever pass near Baldhorn, my lord's castle, stop by without a moment's hesitation. You will be welcomed like a prince – what am I saying? Welcomed like King Vizimir himself! I swear on my sword, I have heard many a minstrel, but none even came close to being your equal, master. Accept the respect and tributes those of us born to knighthood, and those of us appointed to the position, pay to your skills!'

Flawlessly sensing the opportune moment, the troubadour winked at his apprentice. The boy set his lute aside and picked up a little casket which served as a collection box for the audience's more measurable expressions of appreciation. He hesitated, ran his eyes over the crowd, then replaced the little casket and grabbed a large bucket standing nearby. Master Dandilion bestowed an approving smile on the young man for his prudence.

'Master!' shouted a sizeable woman sitting on a cart, the sides of which were painted with a sign for 'Vera Loewenhaupt and Sons', and which was full of wickerwork. Her sons, nowhere to be seen, were no doubt busy wasting away their mother's hard-earned fortune. 'Master Dandilion, what is this? Are you going to leave us in suspense? That can't be the end of your ballad? Sing to us of

what happened next!'

'Songs and ballads' – the musician bowed – 'never end, dear lady, because poetry is eternal and immortal, it knows no beginning, it knows no end—'

'But what happened next?' The tradeswoman didn't give up, generously rattling coins into the bucket Dandilion's apprentice held out to her. 'At least tell us about it, even if you have no wish to sing of it. Your songs mention no names, but we know the witcher you sing of is no other than the famous Geralt of Rivia, and the enchantress for whom he burns with love is the equally famous Yennefer. And the Child Surprise, destined for the witcher and sworn to him from birth, is Cirilla, the unfortunate Princess of Cintra, the town destroyed by the Invaders. Am I right?'

Dandilion smiled, remaining enigmatic and aloof. 'I sing of universal matters, my dear, generous lady,' he stated. 'Of emotions which anyone can experience. Not about specific people.'

'Oh, come on!' yelled a voice from the crowd. 'Everyone knows those songs are about Geralt the Witcher!'

'Yes, yes!' squealed Baron Vilibert's daughters in chorus, drying their sodden scarves. 'Sing on, Master Dandilion! What happened next? Did the witcher and Yennefer the Enchantress find each other in the end? And did they love each other? Were they happy? We want to know!'

'Enough!' roared the dwarf leader with a growl in his throat, shaking his mighty waist-length, red beard. 'It's crap – all these princesses, sorceresses, destiny, love and women's fanciful tales. If you'll pardon the expression, great poet, it's all lies, just a poetic invention to make the story prettier and more touching. But of the deeds of war – the massacre and plunder of Cintra, the battles of Marnadal and Sodden – you did sing that mightily, Dandilion! There's no regrets in parting with silver for such a song, a joy to a warrior's heart! And I, Sheldon Skaggs, declare there's not an ounce of lies in what you say – and I can tell the lies from the truth because I was there at Sodden. I stood against the Nilfgaard invaders with an axe in my hand . . .'

'I, Donimir of Troy,' shouted the thin knight with three lions passant blazoned across his tunic, 'was at both battles of Sodden! But I did not see you there, sir dwarf!'

'No doubt because you were looking after the supply train!' Sheldon Skaggs retorted. 'While I was in the front line where things

got hot!'

'Mind your tongue, beardy!' said Donimir of Troy flushing, hitching up his sword belt. 'And who you're speaking to!'

'Have a care yourself!' The dwarf whacked his palm against the axe wedged in his belt, turned to his companions and grinned. 'Did you see him there? Frigging knight! See his coat of arms? Ha! Three lions on a shield? Two shitting and the third snarling!'

'Peace, peace!' A grey-haired druid in a white cloak averted trouble with a sharp, authoritative voice. 'This is not fitting, gentlemen! Not here, under Bleobheris' crown, an oak older than all the disputes and quarrels of the world! And not in Poet Dandilion's presence, from whose ballads we ought to learn of love, not contention.'

'Quite so!' a short, fat priest with a face glistening with sweat seconded the druid. 'You look but have no eyes, you listen but have deaf ears. Because divine love is not in you, you are like empty barrels—'

'Speaking of barrels,' squeaked a long-nosed gnome from his cart, painted with a sign for 'Iron hardware, manufacture and sale', 'roll another out, guildsmen! Poet Dandilion's throat is surely dry – and ours too, from all these emotions!'

'—Verily, like empty barrels, I tell ye!' The priest, determined not to be put off, drowned out the ironware gnome. 'You have understood nothing of Master Dandilion's ballad, you have learned nothing! You did not see that these ballads speak of man's fate, that we are no more than toys in the hands of the gods, our lands no more than their playground. The ballads about destiny portrayed the destinies of us all, and the legend of Geralt the Witcher and Princess Cirilla – although it is set against the true background of that war – is, after all, a mere metaphor, the creation of a poet's imagination designed to help us—'

'You're talking rubbish, holy man!' hollered Vera Loewenhaupt from the heights of her cart. 'What legend ? What imaginative creation? You may not know him, but I know Geralt of Rivia. I saw him with my own eyes in Wyzima, when he broke the spell on King Foltest's daughter. And I met him again later on the Merchants' Trail, where, at Gildia's request, he slew a ferocious griffin which was preying on the caravans and thus saved the lives of many good people. No. This is no legend or fairy-tale. It is the truth, the sincere truth, which Master Dandilion sang for us.'

‘I second that,’ said a slender female warrior with her black hair smoothly brushed back and plaited into a thick braid. ‘I, Rayla of Lyria, also know Geralt the White Wolf, the famous slayer of monsters. And I’ve met the enchantress, Lady Yennefer, on several occasions – I used to visit Aedirn and her home town of Vengerberg. I don’t know anything about their being in love, though.’

‘But it has to be true,’ the attractive elf in the ermine toque suddenly said in a melodious voice. ‘Such a beautiful ballad of love could not but be true.’

‘It could not!’ Baron Vilibert’s daughters supported the elf and, as if on command, wiped their eyes on their scarves. ‘Not by any measure!’

‘Honourable wizard !’ Vera Loewenhaupt turned to Radcliffe. ‘Were they in love or not? Surely you know what truly happened to them, Yennefer and the witcher. Disclose the secret!’

‘If the song says they were in love,’ replied the wizard, ‘then that’s what happened, and their love will endure down the ages. Such is the power of poetry.’

‘It is said,’ interrupted Baron Vilibert all of a sudden, ‘that Yennefer of Vengerberg was killed on Sodden Hill. Several enchantresses were killed there—’

‘That’s not true,’ said Donimir of Troy. ‘Her name is not on the monument. I am from those parts and have often climbed Sodden Hill and read the names engraved on the monument. Three enchantresses died there: Triss Merigold, Lytta Neyd, known as Coral . . . hmm . . . and the name of the third has slipped my mind . . .’

The knight glanced at Wizard Radcliffe, who smiled wordlessly.

‘And this witcher,’ Sheldon Skaggs suddenly called out, ‘this Geralt who loved Yennefer, has also bitten the dust, apparently. I heard he was killed somewhere in Transriver. He slew and slew monsters until he met his match. That’s how it goes: he who fights with the sword dies by the sword. Everyone comes across someone who will better them eventually, and is made to taste cold hard iron.’

‘I don’t believe it.’ The slender warrior contorted her pale lips, spat vehemently on the ground and crossed her chainmail-clad arms with a crunch. ‘I don’t believe there is anyone to best Geralt of Rivia. I have seen this witcher handle a sword. His speed is simply inhuman—’

‘Well said,’ threw in Wizard Radcliffe. ‘Inhuman. Witchers are mutated, so their reactions—’

‘I don’t understand you, magician.’ The warrior twisted her lips even more nastily. ‘Your words are too learned. I know one thing: no swordsman I have ever seen can match Geralt of Rivia, the White Wolf. And so I will not accept that he was defeated in battle as the dwarf claims.’

‘Every swordsman’s an arse when the enemy’s not sparse,’ remarked Sheldon Skaggs sententiously. ‘As the elves say.’

‘Elves,’ stated a tall, fair-haired representative of the Elder Race coldly, from his place beside the elf with the beautiful toque, ‘are not in the habit of using such vulgar language.’

‘No! No!’ squealed Baron Vilibert’s daughters from behind their green scarves. ‘Geralt the Witcher can’t have been killed ! The witcher found Ciri, the child destined for him, and then the Enchantress Yennefer, and all three lived happily ever after! Isn’t that true, Master Dandilion?’

‘’Twas a ballad, my noble young ladies,’ said the beer-parched gnome, manufacturer of ironwares, with a yawn. ‘Why look for truth in a ballad ? Truth is one thing, poetry another. Let’s take this – what was her name? – Ciri ? The famous Child Surprise. Master Dandilion trumped that up for sure. I’ve been to Cintra many a time and the king and queen lived in a childless home, with no daughter, no son—’

‘Liar!’ shouted a red-haired man in a sealskin jacket, a checked kerchief bound around his forehead. ‘Queen Calanthe, the Lionness of Cintra, had a daughter called Pavetta. She died, together with her husband, in a tempest which struck out at sea, and the depths swallowed them both.’

‘So you see for yourselves I’m not making this up!’ The ironware gnome called everyone to be his witnesses. ‘The Princess of Cintra was called Pavetta, not Ciri.’

‘Cirilla, known as Ciri, was the daughter of this drowned Pavetta,’ explained the red-haired man. ‘Calanthe’s granddaughter. She was not the princess herself, but the daughter of the Princess of Cintra. She was the Child Surprise destined for the witcher, the man to whom – even before she was born – the queen had sworn to hand her granddaughter over to, just as Master Dandilion has sung. But the witcher could neither find her nor collect her. And here our poet has missed the truth.’

‘Oh yes, he’s missed the truth indeed,’ butted in a sinewy young man who, judging by his clothes, was a journeyman on his travels prior to crafting his masterpiece and passing his master’s exams. ‘The witcher’s destiny bypassed him: Cirilla was killed during the siege of Cintra. Before throwing herself from the tower, Queen Calanthe killed the princess’s daughter with her own hand, to prevent her from falling into the Nilfgaardians’ claws alive.’

‘It wasn’t like that. Not like that at all!’ objected the red-haired man. ‘The princess’s daughter was killed during the massacre while trying to escape from the town.’

‘One way or another,’ shouted Ironware, ‘the witcher didn’t find Cirilla! The poet lied!’

‘But lied beautifully,’ said the elf in the toque, snuggling up to the tall, fair-haired elf.

‘It’s not a question of poetry but of facts!’ shouted the journeyman. ‘I tell you, the princess’s daughter died by her grandmother’s hand. Anyone who’s been to Cintra can confirm that!’

‘And I say she was killed in the streets trying to escape,’ declared the red-haired man. ‘I know because although I’m not from Cintra I served in the Earl of Skellige’s troop supporting Cintra during the war. As everyone knows, Eist Tuirseach, the King of Cintra, comes from the Skellige Isles. He was the earl’s uncle. I fought in the earl’s troop at Marnadal and Cintra and later, after the defeat, at Sodden —’

‘Yet another veteran,’ Sheldon Skaggs snarled to the dwarves crowded around him. ‘All heroes and warriors. Hey, folks! Is there at least one of you out there who didn’t fight at Marnadal or Sodden?’

‘That dig is out of place, Skaggs,’ the tall elf reproached him, putting his arm around the beauty wearing the toque in a way intended to dispel any lingering doubts amongst her admirers. ‘Don’t imagine you were the only one to fight at Sodden. I took part in the battle as well.’

‘On whose side, I wonder,’ Baron Vilibert said to Radcliffe in a highly audible whisper which the elf ignored entirely.

‘As everyone knows,’ he continued, sparing neither the baron nor the wizard so much as a glance, ‘over a hundred thousand warriors stood on the field during the second battle of Sodden Hill, and of those at least thirty thousand were maimed or killed. Master

Dandilion should be thanked for immortalising this famous, terrible battle in one of his ballads. In both the lyrics and melody of his work I heard not an exaltation but a warning. So I repeat: offer praise and everlasting renown to this poet for his ballad, which may, perhaps, prevent a tragedy as horrific as this cruel and unnecessary war from occurring in the future.'

'Indeed,' said Baron Vilibert, looking defiantly at the elf. 'You have read some very interesting things into this ballad, honoured sir. An unnecessary war, you say? You'd like to avoid such a tragedy in the future, would you? Are we to understand that if the Nilfgaardians were to attack us again you would advise that we capitulate? Humbly accept the Nilfgaardian yoke?'

'Life is a priceless gift and should be protected,' the elf replied coldly. 'Nothing justifies wide-scale slaughter and sacrifice of life, which is what the battles at Sodden were – both the battle lost and the battle won. Both of them cost the humans thousands of lives. And with them, you lost unimaginable potential—'

'Elven prattle!' snarled Sheldon Skaggs. 'Dim-witted rubbish! It was the price that had to be paid to allow others to live decently, in peace, instead of being chained, blinded, whipped and forced to work in salt and sulphur mines. Those who died a heroic death, those who will now, thanks to Dandilion, live on forever in our memories, taught us to defend our own homes. Sing your ballads, Dandilion, sing them to everyone. Your lesson won't go to waste, and it'll come in handy, you'll see! Because, mark my words, Nilfgaard will attack us again. If not today, then tomorrow! They're licking their wounds now, recovering, but the day when we'll see their black cloaks and feathered helmets again is growing ever nearer !'

'What do they want from us?' yelled Vera Loewenhaupt. 'Why are they bent on persecuting us? Why don't they leave us in peace, leave us to our lives and work? What do the Nilfgaardians want?'

'They want our blood!' howled Baron Vilibert.

'And our land!' someone cried from the crowd of peasants.

'And our women!' chimed in Sheldon Skaggs, with a ferocious glower.

Several people started to laugh – as quietly and furtively as they could. Even though the idea that anyone other than another dwarf would desire one of the exceptionally unattractive dwarf-women was highly amusing, it was not a safe subject for teasing or jests –

especially not in the presence of the short, stocky, bearded individuals whose axes and short-swords had an ugly habit of leaping from their belts and into their hands at incredible speed. And the dwarves, for some unknown reason, were entirely convinced that the rest of the world was lecherously lying in wait for their wives and daughters, and were extremely touchy about it.

'This had to happen at some point,' the grey-haired druid declared suddenly. 'This had to happen. We forgot that we are not the only ones in this world, that the whole of creation does not revolve around us. Like stupid, fat, lazy minnows in a slimy pond we chose not to accept the existence of pike. We allowed our world, like the pond, to become slimy, boggy and sluggish. Look around you – there is crime and sin everywhere, greed, the pursuit of profit, quarrels and disagreements are rife. Our traditions are disappearing, respect for our values is fading. Instead of living according to Nature we have begun to destroy it. And what have we got for it? The air is poisoned by the stink of smelting furnaces, the rivers and brooks are tainted by slaughter houses and tanneries, forests are being cut down without a thought . . . Ha – just look! – even on the living bark of sacred Bleobheris, there just above the poet's head, there's a foul phrase carved out with a knife – and it's misspelled at that – by a stupid, illiterate vandal. Why are you surprised? It had to end badly—'

'Yes, yes!' the fat priest joined in. 'Come to your senses, you sinners, while there is still time, because the anger and vengeance of the gods hangs over you! Remember Ithlin's oracle, the prophetic words describing the punishment of the gods reserved for a tribe poisoned by crime! "The Time of Contempt will come, when the tree will lose its leaves, the bud will wither, the fruit will rot, the seed turn bitter and the river valleys will run with ice instead of water. The White Chill will come, and after it the White Light, and the world will perish beneath blizzards." Thus spoke Seeress Ithlin! And before this comes to pass there will be visible signs, plagues will ravish the earth – Remember! – the Nilfgaard are our punishment from the gods! They are the whip with which the Immortals will lash you sinners, so that you may—'

'Shut up, you sanctimonious old man!' roared Sheldon Skaggs, stamping his heavy boots. 'Your superstitious rot make me sick! My guts are churning—'

'Careful, Sheldon.' The tall elf cut him short with a smile. 'Don't mock another's religion. It is not pleasant, polite or . . . safe.'

'I'm not mocking anything,' protested the dwarf. 'I don't doubt

the existence of the gods, but it annoys me when someone drags them into earthly matters and tries to pull the wool over my eyes using the prophecies of some crazy elf. The Nilfgaardians are the instrument of the gods? Rubbish! Search back through your memories to the past, to the days of Dezmod, Radowid and Sambuk, to the days of Abrad, the Old Oak! You may not remember them, because your lives are so very short – you're like Mayflies – but I remember, and I'll tell you what it was like in these lands just after you climbed from your boats on the Yaruga Estuary and the Pontar Delta onto the beach. Three kingdoms sprang from the four ships which beached on those shores; the stronger groups absorbed the weaker and so grew, strengthening their positions. They invaded others territories, conquered them, and their kingdoms expanded, becoming ever larger and more powerful. And now the Nilfgaardians are doing the same, because theirs is strong and united, disciplined and tightly knit country. And unless you close ranks in the same way, Nilfgaard will swallow you as a pike does a minnow – just as this wise druid said!'

'Let them just try!' Donimir of Troy puffed out his lion-emblazoned chest and shook his sword in its scabbard. 'We beat them hollow on Sodden Hill, and we can do it again!'

'You're very cocksure,' snarled Sheldon Skaggs. 'You've evidently forgotten, sir knight, that before the battle of Sodden Hill, the Nilfgaard had advanced across your lands like an iron roller, strewing the land between Marnadal and Transriver with the corpses of many a gallant fellow like yourself. And it wasn't loud-mouthed smart-arses like you who stopped the Nilfgaardians, but the united strengths of Temeria, Redania, Aedirn and Kaedwen. Concord and unity, that's what stopped them!'

'Not just that,' remarked Radcliffe in a cold, resonant voice. 'Not just that, Master Skaggs.'

The dwarf hawked loudly, blew his nose, shuffled his feet then bowed a little to the wizard.

'No one is denying the contribution of your fellowship,' he said. 'Shame on he who does not acknowledge the heroism of the brotherhood of wizards on Sodden Hill. They stood their ground bravely, shed blood for the common cause, and contributed most eminently to our victory. Dandilion did not forget them in his ballad, and nor shall we. But note that these wizards stood united and loyal on the Hill, and accepted the leadership of Vilgefortz of Roggeveen just as we, the warriors of the Four Kingdoms, acknowledged the command of Vizimir of Redania. It's just a pity

this solidarity and concord only lasted for the duration of the war, because, with peace, here we are divided again. Vizimir and Foltest are choking each other with customs taxes and trading laws, Demawend of Aedirn is bickering with Henselt over the Northern Marches while the League of Hengfors and the Thyssenids of Kovir don't give a toss. And I hear that looking for the old concord amongst the wizards is useless, too. We are not closely knit, we have no discipline and no unity. But Nilfgaard does!'

'Nilfgaard is ruled by Emperor Emhyr var Emreis, a tyrant and autocrat who enforces obedience with whip, noose and axe!' thundered Baron Vilibert. 'What are you proposing, sir dwarf? How are we supposed to close ranks? With similar tyranny? And which king, which kingdom, in your opinion, should subordinate the others? In whose hands would you like to see the sceptre and knout?'

'What do I care?' replied Skaggs with a shrug. 'That's a human affair. Whoever you chose to be king wouldn't be a dwarf anyway.'

'Or an elf, or even half-elf,' added the tall representative of the Elder Race, his arm still wrapped around the toque-wearing beauty. 'You even consider quarter-elves inferior—'

'That's where it stings,' laughed Vilibert. 'You're blowing the same horn as Nilfgaard because Nilfgaard is also shouting about equality, promising you a return to the old order as soon as we've been conquered and they've scythed us off these lands. That's the sort of unity, the sort of equality you're dreaming of, the sort you're talking about and trumpeting! Nilfgaard pays you gold to do it! And it's hardly surprising you love each other so much, the Nilfgaardians being an elven race—'

'Nonsense,' the elf said coldly. 'You talk rubbish, sir knight. You're clearly blinded by racism. The Nilfgaardians are human, just like you.'

'That's an outright lie! They're descended from the Black Seidhe and everyone knows it! Elven blood flows through their veins! The blood of elves!'

'And what flows through yours?' The elf smiled derisively. 'We've been combining our blood for generations, for centuries, your race and mine, and doing so quite successfully – fortunately or unfortunately, I don't know. You started persecuting mixed relationships less than a quarter of a century ago and, incidentally, not very successfully. So show me a human now who hasn't a dash of Seidhe Ichaer, the blood of the Elder Race.'

Vilibert visibly turned red. Vera Loewenhaupt also flushed. Wizard Radcliffe bowed his head and coughed. And, most interestingly, the beautiful elf in the ermine toque blushed too.

'We are all children of Mother Earth.' The grey-haired druid's voice resounded in the silence. 'We are children of Mother Nature. And though we do not respect our mother, though we often worry her and cause her pain, though we break her heart, she loves us. Loves us all. Let us remember that, we who are assembled here in this Seat of Friendship. And let us not bicker over which of us was here first: Acorn was the first to be thrown up by the waves and from Acorn sprouted the Great Bleobheris, the oldest of oaks. Standing beneath its crown, amongst its primordial roots, let us not forget our own brotherly roots, the earth from which these roots grow. Let us remember the words of Poet Dandilion's song—'

'Exactly!' exclaimed Vera Loewenhaupt. 'And where is he?'

'He's fled,' ascertained Sheldon Skaggs, gazing at the empty place under the oak. 'Taken the money and fled without saying goodbye. Very elf-like!'

'Dwarf-like!' squealed Ironware.

'Human-like,' corrected the tall elf, and the beauty in the toque rested her head against his shoulder.

'Hey, minstrel,' said Mama Lantieri, striding into the room without knocking, the scents of hycinths, sweat, beer and smoked bacon wafting before her. 'You've got a guest. Enter, noble gentleman.'

Dandilion smoothed his hair and sat up in the enormous carved armchair. The two girls sitting on his lap quickly jumped up, covering their charms and pulling down their disordered clothes. The modesty of harlots, thought the poet, was not at all a bad title for a ballad. He got to his feet, fastened his belt and pulled on his doublet, all the while looking at the nobleman standing at the threshold.

'Indeed,' he remarked, 'you know how to find me anywhere, though you rarely pick an opportune moment. You're lucky I'd not yet decided which of these two beauties I prefer. And at your prices, Lantieri, I cannot afford them both.'

Mama Lantieri smiled in sympathy and clapped her hands. Both girls – a fair-skinned, freckled islander and a dark-haired half-elf – swiftly left the room. The man at the door removed his cloak and

handed it to Mama along with a small but well-filled money-bag.

'Forgive me, master,' he said, approaching the table and making himself comfortable. 'I know this is not a good time to disturb you. But you disappeared out from beneath the oak so quickly . . . I did not catch you on the High Road as I had intended and did not immediately come across your tracks in this little town. I'll not take much of your time, believe me—'

'They always say that, and it's always a lie,' the bard interrupted. 'Leave us alone, Lantieri, and see to it that we're not disturbed. I'm listening, sir.'

The man scrutinised him. He had dark, damp, almost tearful eyes, a pointed nose and ugly, narrow lips.

'I'll come to the point without wasting your time,' he declared, waiting for the door to close behind Mama. 'Your ballads interest me, master. To be more specific, certain characters of which you sang interest me. I am concerned with the true fate of your ballad's heroes. If I am not mistaken, the true destinies of real people inspired the beautiful work I heard beneath the oak tree? I have in mind . . . Little Cirilla of Cintra. Queen Calanthe's granddaughter.'

Dandilion gazed at the ceiling, drumming his fingers on the table.

'Honoured sir,' he said dryly, 'you are interested in strange matters. You ask strange questions. Something tells me you are not the person I took you to be.'

'And who did you take me to be, if I may ask?'

'I'm not sure you may. It depends if you are about to convey greetings to me from any mutual friends. You should have done so initially, but somehow you have forgotten.'

'I did not forget at all.' The man reached into the breast pocket of his sepia-coloured velvet tunic and pulled out a money-bag somewhat larger than the one he had handed the procuress but just as well-filled, which clinked as it touched the table. 'We simply have no mutual friends, Dandilion. But might this purse not suffice to mitigate the lack?'

'And what do you intend to buy with this meagre purse?' The troubadour pouted. 'Mama Lantieri's entire brothel and all the land surrounding it?'

'Let us say that I intend to support the arts. And an artist. In order to chat with the artist about his work.'

'You love art so much, do you, dear sir? Is it so vital for you to

talk to an artist that you press money on him before you've even introduced yourself and, in doing so, break the most elementary rules of courtesy?'

'At the beginning of our conversation' – the stranger's dark eyes narrowed imperceptibly – 'my anonymity did not bother you.'

'And now it is starting to.'

'I am not ashamed of my name,' said the man, a faint smile appearing on his narrow lips. 'I am called Rience. You do not know me, Master Dandilion, and that is no surprise. You are too famous and well known to know all of your admirers. Yet everyone who admires your talents feels he knows you, knows you so well that a certain degree of familiarity is permissible. This applies to me, too. I know it is a misconception, so please graciously forgive me.'

'I graciously forgive you.'

'Then I can count on you agreeing to answer a few questions—'

'No! No you cannot,' interrupted the poet, putting on airs. 'Now, if you will graciously forgive *me*, I am not willing to discuss the subjects of my work, its inspiration or its characters, fictitious or otherwise. To do so would deprive poetry of its poetic veneer and lead to triteness.'

'Is that so?'

'It certainly is. For example, if, having sung the ballad about the miller's merry wife, I were to announce it's really about Zvirka, Miller Loach's wife, and I included an announcement that Zvirka can most easily be bedded every Thursday because on Thursdays the miller goes to market, it would no longer be poetry. It would be either rhyming couplets, or foul slander.'

'I understand, I understand,' Rience said quickly. 'But perhaps that is a bad example. I am not, after all, interested in anyone's peccadilloes or sins. You will not slander anyone by answering my questions. All I need is one small piece of information: what really happened to Cirilla, the Queen of Cintra's granddaughter? Many people claim she was killed during the siege of the town; there are even eye-witnesses to support the claim. From your ballad, however, it would appear that the child survived. I am truly interested to know if this is your imagination at work, or the truth? True or false?'

'I'm extremely pleased you're so interested.' Dandilion smiled broadly. 'You may laugh, Master whatever-your-name-is, but that

was precisely what I intended when I composed the ballad. I wished to excite my listeners and arouse their curiosity.'

'True or false?' repeated Rience coldly.

'If I were to give that away I would destroy the impact of my work. Goodbye, my friend. You have used up all the time I can spare you. And two of my many inspirations are waiting out there, wondering which of them I will choose.'

Rience remained silent for a long while, making no move to leave. He stared at the poet with his unfriendly, moist eyes, and the poet felt a growing unease. A merry din came from the bawdy-house's main room, punctuated from time to time by high-pitched feminine giggles. Dandilion turned his head away, pretending to show derisive haughtiness but, in fact, he was judging the distance to the corner of the room and the tapestry showing a nymph sprinkling her breasts with water poured from a jug.

'Dandilion,' Rience finally spoke, slipping his hand back into the pocket of his sepia-coloured tunic, 'answer my questions. Please. I have to know the answer. It's incredibly important to me. To you, too, believe me, because if you answer of your own free will then—'

'Then what?'

A hideous grimace crept over Rience's narrow lips.

'Then I won't have to force you to speak.'

'Now listen, you scoundrel.' Dandilion stood up and pretended to pull a threatening face. 'I loathe violence and force, but I'm going to call Mama Lantieri in a minute and she will call a certain Gruzila who fulfils the honourable and responsible role of bouncer in this establishment. He is a true artist in his field. He'll kick your arse so hard you'll soar over the town roofs with such magnificence that the few people passing by at this hour will take you for a Pegasus.'

Rience made an abrupt gesture and something glistened in his hand.

'Are you sure,' he asked, 'you'll have time to call her?'

Dandilion had no intention of checking if he would have time. Nor did he intend to wait. Before the stiletto had locked in Rience's hand Dandilion had taken a long leap to the corner of the room, dived under the nymph tapestry, kicked open a secret door and rushed headlong down the winding stairs, nimbly steering himself with the aid of the well-worn banisters. Rience darted after him, but the poet was sure of himself – he knew the secret passage like the

back of his hand, having used it numerous times to flee creditors, jealous husbands and furious rivals from whom he had, from time to time, stolen rhymes and tunes. He knew that after the third turning he would be able to grope for a revolving door, behind which there was a ladder leading down to the cellar. He was sure that his persecutor would be unable to stop in time, would run on and step on a trapdoor through which he would fall and land in the pigsty. He was equally sure that – bruised, covered in shit and mauled by the pigs – his persecutor would give up the chase.

Dandilion was mistaken, as was usually the case whenever he was too confident. Something flashed a sudden blue behind his back and the poet felt his limbs grow numb, lifeless and stiff. He couldn't slow down for the revolving door, his legs wouldn't obey him. He yelled and rolled down the stairs, bumping against the walls of the little corridor. The trapdoor opened beneath him with a dry crack and the troubadour tumbled down into the darkness and stench. Before thumping his head on the dirt floor and losing consciousness, he remembered Mama Lantieri saying something about the pigsty being repaired.

The pain in his constricted wrists and shoulders, cruelly twisted in their joints, brought him back to his senses. He wanted to scream but couldn't; it felt as though his mouth had been stuck up with clay. He was kneeling on the dirt floor with a creaking rope hauling him up by his wrists. He tried to stand, wanting to ease the pressure on his shoulders, but his legs, too, were tied together. Choking and suffocating he somehow struggled to his feet, helped considerably by the rope which tugged mercilessly at him.

Rience was standing in front of him and his evil eyes glinted in the light of a lantern held aloft by an unshaven ruffian who stood over six feet tall. Another ruffian, probably no shorter, stood behind him. Dandilion could hear his breathing and caught a whiff of stale sweat. It was the reeking man who tugged on the rope looped over a roof beam and fastened to the poet's wrists.

Dandilion's feet tore off the dirt floor. The poet whistled through his nose, unable to do anything more.

'Enough,' Rience snapped at last – he spoke almost immediately, yet it had seemed an age to Dandilion. The bard's feet touched the ground but, despite his most heart-felt desire, he could not kneel again – the tight drawn rope was still holding him as taut as a string.

Rience came closer. There was not even a trace of emotion on his face; the damp eyes had not changed their expression in the least. His tone of voice, too, remained calm, quiet, even a little bored.

'You nasty rhymester. You runt. You scum. You arrogant nobody. You tried to run from me? No one has escaped me yet. We haven't finished our conversation, you clown, you sheep's head. I asked you a question under much pleasanter circumstances than these. Now you are going to answer all my questions, and in far less pleasant circumstances. Am I right?'

Dandilion nodded eagerly. Only now did Rience smile and make a sign. The bard squealed helplessly, feeling the rope tighten and his arms, twisted backwards, cracking in their joints.

'You can't talk,' Rience confirmed, still smiling loathsomely, 'and it hurts, doesn't it? For the moment, you should know I'm having you strung up like this for my own pleasure – just because I love watching people suffer. Go on, just a little higher.'

Dandilion was wheezing so hard he almost choked.

'Enough,' Rience finally ordered, then approached the poet and grabbed him by his shirt ruffles. 'Listen to me, you little cock. I'm going to lift the spell so you can talk. But if you try to raise your charming voice any louder than necessary, you'll be sorry.'

He made a gesture with his hand, touched the poet's cheek with his ring and Dandilion felt sensation return to his jaw, tongue and palate.

'Now,' Rience continued quietly, 'I am going to ask you a few questions and you are going to answer them quickly, fluently and comprehensively. And if you stammer or hesitate even for a moment, if you give me the slightest reason to doubt the truth of your words, then . . . Look down.'

Dandilion obeyed. He discovered to his horror that a short rope had been tied to the knots around his ankles, with a bucket full of lime attached to the other end.

'If I have you pulled any higher,' Rience smiled cruelly, 'and this bucket lifts with you, then you will probably never regain the feeling in your hands. After that, I doubt you will be capable of playing anything on a lute. I really doubt it. So I think you'll talk to me. Am I right?'

Dandilion didn't agree because he couldn't move his head or find his voice out of sheer fright. But Rience did not seem to require

confirmation.

‘It is to be understood,’ he stated, ‘that I will know immediately if you are telling the truth, if you try to trick me I will realise straight away, and I won’t be fooled by any poetic ploys or vague erudition. This is a trifle for me – just as paralysing you on the stairs was a trifle. So I advise you to weigh each word with care, you piece of scum. So, let’s get on with it and stop wasting time. As you know, I’m interested in the heroine of one of your beautiful ballads, Queen Calanthe of Cintra’s granddaughter, Princess Cirilla, endearingly known as Ciri. According to eye-witnesses this little person died during the siege of the town, two years ago. Whereas in your ballad you so vividly and touchingly described her meeting a strange, almost legendary individual, the . . . witcher . . . Geralt, or Gerald. Leaving the poetic drivel about destiny and the decrees of fate aside, from the rest of the ballad it seems the child survived the Battle of Cintra in one piece. Is that true?’

‘I don’t know . . .’ moaned Dandilion. ‘By all the gods, I’m only a poet! I’ve heard this and that, and the rest . . .’

‘Well ?’

‘The rest I invented. Made it up! I don’t know anything!’ The bard howled on seeing Rience give a sign to the reeking man and feeling the rope tighten. ‘I’m not lying!’

‘True.’ Rience nodded. ‘You’re not lying outright, I would have sensed it. But you are beating about the bush. You wouldn’t have thought the ballad up just like that, not without reason. And you do know the witcher, after all. You have often been seen in his company. So talk, Dandilion, if you treasure your joints. Everything you know.’

‘This Ciri,’ panted the poet, ‘was destined for the witcher. She’s a so-called Child Surprise . . . You must have heard it, the story’s well known. Her parents swore to hand her over to the witcher—’

‘Her parents are supposed to have handed the child over to that crazed mutant? That murderous mercenary? You’re lying, rhymester. Keep such tales for women.’

‘That’s what happened, I swear on my mother’s soul,’ sobbed Dandilion. ‘I have it from a reliable source . . . The witcher—’

‘Talk about the girl. For the moment I’m not interested in the witcher.’

‘I don’t know anything about the girl! I only know that the

witcher was going to fetch her from Cintra when the war broke out. I met him at the time. He heard about the massacre, about Calanthe's death, from me . . . He asked me about the child, the queen's granddaughter . . . But I knew everyone in Cintra was killed, not a single soul in the last bastion survived—'

'Go on. Fewer metaphors, more hard facts!'

'When the witcher learned of the massacre and fall of Cintra he forsook his journey. We both escaped north. We parted ways in Hengfors and I haven't seen him since . . . But because he talked, on the way, a bit about this . . . Ciri, or whatever-her-name-is . . . and about destiny . . . Well, I made up this ballad. I don't know any more, I swear!'

Rience scowled at him.

'And where is this witcher now?' he asked. 'This hired monster murderer, this poetic butcher who likes to discuss destiny?'

'I told you, the last time I saw him—'

'I know what you said,' Rience interrupted. 'I listened carefully to what you said. And now you're going to listen carefully to me. Answer my questions precisely. The question is: if no one has seen Geralt, or Gerald, the Witcher for over a year, where is he hiding? Where does he usually hide?'

'I don't know where it is,' the troubadour said quickly. 'I'm not lying. I really don't know—'

'Too quick, Dandilion, too quick.' Rience smiled ominously. 'Too eager. You are cunning but not careful enough. You don't know where it is, you say. But I warrant you know what it is.'

Dandilion clenched his teeth with anger and despair.

'Well?' Rience made a sign to the reeking man. 'Where is the witcher hiding? What is the place called?'

The poet remained silent. The rope tightened, twisting his hands painfully, and his feet left the ground. Dandilion let out a howl, brief and broken because Rience's wizardly ring immediately gagged him.

'Higher, higher.' Rience rested his hands on his hips. 'You know, Dandilion, I could use magic to sound out your mind, but it's exhausting. Besides, I like seeing people's eyes pop out of their sockets from pain. And you're going to tell me anyway.'

Dandilion knew he would. The rope secured to his ankles grew

taut, the bucket of lime scraped along the ground.

‘Sir,’ said the first ruffian suddenly, covering the lantern with his cloak and peering through the gap in the pigsty door, ‘someone’s coming. A lass, I think.’

‘You know what to do,’ Rience hissed. ‘Put the lantern out.’

The reeking man released the rope and Dandilion tumbled inertly to the ground, falling in such a way that he could see the man with the lantern standing at the door and the reeking man, a long knife in his hand, lying in wait on the other side. Light broke in from the bawdy-house through gaps in the planks, and the poet heard the singing and hubbub.

The door to the pigsty creaked open revealing a short figure wrapped in a cloak and wearing a round, tightly fitting cap. After a moment’s hesitation, the woman crossed the threshold. The reeking man threw himself at her, slashing forcefully with his knife, and tumbled to his knees as the knife met with no resistance, passing through the figure’s throat as though through a cloud of smoke. Because the figure really was a cloud of smoke – one which was already starting to disperse. But before it completely vanished another figure burst into the pigsty, indistinct, dark and nimble as a weasel. Dandilion saw it throw a cloak at the lantern man, jump over the reeking one, saw something glisten in its hand, and heard the reeking man wheeze and choke savagely. The lantern man disentangled himself from the cloak, jumped, took a swing with his knife. A fiery lightning bolt shot from the dark figure with a hiss, slapped over the tough’s face and chest with a crack and spread over him like flaming oil. The ruffian screamed piercingly and the grim reek of burning meat filled the pigsty.

Then Rience attacked. The spell he cast illuminated the darkness with a bluish flash in which Dandilion saw a slender woman wearing man’s clothes gesticulating strangely with both hands. He only glimpsed her for a second before the blue glow disappeared with a bang and a blinding flash. Rience fell back with a roar of fury and collapsed onto the wooden pigsty walls, breaking them with a crash. The woman dressed in man’s clothing leapt after him, a stiletto flashing in her hand. The pigsty filled with brightness again – this time golden – beaming from a bright oval which suddenly appeared in the air. Dandilion saw Rience spring up from the dusty floor, leap into the oval and immediately disappear. The oval dimmed but, before it went out entirely, the woman ran up to it shouting incomprehensively, stretching out her hand. Something crackled and rustled and the dying oval boiled with roaring flames

for a moment. A muffled sound, as if coming from a great distance, reached Dandilion's ears – a sound very much like a scream of pain. The oval went out completely and darkness engulfed the pigsty again. The poet felt the power which gagged him disappear.

'Help!' he howled. 'Help!'

'Stop yelling, Dandilion,' said the woman, kneeling next to him and slicing through the knots with Rience's stiletto.

'Yennefer? Is that you?'

'Surely you're not going to say you don't remember how I look. And I'm sure my voice is not unfamiliar to your musical ear. Can you get up? They didn't break any bones, did they?'

Dandilion stood with difficulty, groaned and stretched his aching shoulders.

'What's with them?' He indicated the bodies lying on the ground.

'We'll check.' The enchantress snicked the stiletto shut. 'One of them should still be alive. I've a few questions for him.'

'This one,' the troubadour stood over the reeking man, 'probably still lives.'

'I doubt it,' said Yennefer indifferently. 'I severed his windpipe and carotid artery. There might still be a little murmur in him but not for long.'

Dandilion shuddered.

'You slashed his throat?'

'If, out of inborn caution, I hadn't sent an illusion in first, I would be the one lying there now. Let's look at the other one . . . Bloody hell. Such a sturdy fellow and he still couldn't take it. Pity, pity—'

'He's dead, too?'

'He couldn't take the shock. Hmm . . . I fried him a little too hard . . . See, even his teeth are charred—What's the matter with you, Dandilion? Are you going to be sick?'

'I am,' the poet replied indistinctly, bending over and leaning his forehead against the pigsty wall.

'That's everything?' The enchantress put her tumbler down and reached for the skewer of roast chickens. 'You haven't lied about anything? Haven't forgotten anything?'

‘Nothing. Apart from “thank you”. Thank you, Yennefer.’

She looked him in the eyes and nodded her head lightly, making her glistening, black curls writhe and cascade down to her shoulders. She slipped the roast chicken onto a trencher and began dividing it skilfully. She used a knife and fork. Dandilion had only known one person, up until then, who could eat a chicken with a knife and fork as skilfully. Now he knew how, and from whom, Geralt had learnt the knack. *Well*, he thought, *no wonder. After all, he did live with her for a year in Vengerberg and before he left her, she had instilled a number of strange things into him*. He pulled the other chicken from the skewer and, without a second thought, ripped off a thigh and began eating it, pointedly holding it with both hands.

‘How did you know?’ he asked. ‘How did you arrive with help on time?’

‘I was beneath Bleobheris during your performance.’

‘I didn’t see you.’

‘I didn’t want to be seen. Then I followed you into town. I waited here, in the tavern – it wasn’t fitting, after all, for me to follow you in to that haven of dubious delight and certain gonorrhoea. But I eventually became impatient and was wandering around the yard when I thought I heard voices coming from the pigsty. I sharpened my hearing and it turned out it wasn’t, as I’d first thought, some sodomite but you. Hey, innkeeper! More wine, if you please!’

‘At your command, honoured lady! Quick as a flash!’

‘The same as before, please, but this time without the water. I can only tolerate water in a bath, in wine I find it quite loathsome.’

‘At your service, at your service!’

Yennefer pushed her plate aside. There was still enough meat on the chicken, Dandilion noticed, to feed the innkeeper and his family for breakfast. A knife and fork were certainly elegant and refined, but they weren’t very effective.

‘Thank you,’ he repeated, ‘for rescuing me. That cursed Rience wouldn’t have spared my life. He’d have squeezed everything from me and then butchered me like a sheep.’

‘Yes, I think he would.’ She poured herself and the bard some wine then raised her tumbler. ‘So let’s drink to your rescue and health, Dandilion.’

‘And to yours, Yennefer,’ he toasted her in return. ‘To health for which – as of today – I shall pray whenever the occasion arises. I’m

indebted to you, beautiful lady, and I shall repay the debt in my songs. I shall explode the myth which claims wizards are insensitive to the pain of others, that they are rarely eager to help poor, unfortunate, unfamiliar mortals.'

'What to do.' She smiled, half-shutting her beautiful violet eyes. 'The myth has some justification; it did not spring from nowhere. But you're not a stranger, Dandilion. I know you and like you.'

'Really?' The poet smiled too. 'You have been good at concealing it up until now. I've even heard the rumour that you can't stand me, I quote, any more than the plague.'

'It was the case once.' The enchantress suddenly grew serious. 'Later my opinion changed. Later, I was grateful to you.'

'What for, if I may ask?'

'Never mind,' she said, toying with the empty tumbler. 'Let us get back to more important questions. Those you were asked in the pigsty while your arms were being twisted out of their sockets. What really happened, Dandilion? Have you really not seen Geralt since you fled the banks of the Yaruga? Did you really not know he returned south after the war? That he was seriously wounded – so seriously there were even rumours of his death? Didn't you know anything?'

'No. I didn't. I stayed in Pont Vanis for a long time, in Esterad Thyssen's court. And then at Niedamir's in Hengfors—'

'You didn't know.' The enchantress nodded and unfastened her tunic. A black velvet ribbon wound around her neck, an obsidian star set with diamonds hanging from it. 'You didn't know that when his wounds healed Geralt went to Transriver ? You can't guess who he was looking for?'

'That I can. But I don't know if he found her.'

'You don't know,' she repeated. 'You, who usually know everything, and then sing about everything. Even such intimate matters as someone else's feelings. I listened to your ballads beneath Bleobheris, Dandilion. You dedicated a good few verses to me.'

'Poetry,' he muttered, staring at the chicken, 'has its rights. No one should be offended—'

'"Hair like a raven's wing, as a storm in the night . . ."' quoted Yennefer with exaggerated emphasis, '". . . and in the violet eyes sleep lightning bolts . . ." Isn't that how it went?'

‘That’s how I remembered you.’ The poet smiled faintly. ‘May the first who wishes to claim the description is untrue throw the first stone.’

‘Only I don’t know,’ the Enchantress pinched her lips together, ‘who gave you permission to describe my internal organs. How did it go? “Her heart, as though a jewel, adorned her neck. Hard as if of diamond made, and as a diamond so unfeeling, sharper than obsidian, cutting—” Did you make that up yourself? Or perhaps . . .?’

Her lips quivered, twisted.

‘. . . or perhaps you listened to someone’s confidences and grievances?’

‘Hmm . . .’ Dandilion cleared his throat and veered away from the dangerous subject. ‘Tell me, Yennefer, when did you last see Geralt?’

‘A long time ago.’

‘After the war?’

‘After the war . . .’ Yennefer’s voice changed a little. ‘No, I never saw him after the war. For a long time . . . I didn’t see anybody. Well, back to the point, Poet. I am a little surprised to discover that you do not know anything, you have not heard anything and that, in spite of this, someone searching for information picked you out to stretch over a beam. Doesn’t that worry you?’

‘It does.’

‘Listen to me,’ she said sharply, banging her tumbler against the table. ‘Listen carefully. Strike that ballad from your repertoire. Do not sing it again.’

‘Are you talking about—’

‘You know perfectly well what I’m talking about. Sing about the war against Nilfgaard. Sing about Geralt and me, you’ll neither harm nor help anyone in the process, you’ll make nothing any better or worse. But do not sing about the Lion Cub of Cintra.’

She glanced around to check if any of the few customers at this hour were eavesdropping, and waited until the lass clearing up had returned to the kitchen.

‘And do try to avoid one-to-one meetings with people you don’t know,’ she said quietly. ‘People who “forget” to introduce themselves by conveying greetings from a mutual acquaintance.

Understand ?'

He looked at her surprised. Yennefer smiled.

'Greetings from Dijkstra, Dandilion.'

Now the bard glanced around timidly. His astonishment must have been evident and his expression amusing because the sorceress allowed herself a quite derisive grimace.

'While we are on the subject,' she whispered, leaning across the table, 'Dijkstra is asking for a report. You're on your way back from Verden and he's interested in hearing what's being said at King Ervyll's court. He asked me to convey that this time your report should be to the point, detailed and under no circumstances in verse. Prose, Dandilion. Prose.'

The poet swallowed and nodded. He remained silent, pondering the question.

But the enchantress anticipated him. 'Difficult times are approaching, ' she said quietly. 'Difficult and dangerous. A time of change is coming. It would be a shame to grow old with the uncomfortable conviction that one had done nothing to ensure that these changes are for the better. Don't you agree?'

He agreed with a nod and cleared his throat. 'Yennefer?'

'I'm listening, Poet.'

'Those men in the pigsty . . . I would like to know who they were, what they wanted, who sent them. You killed them both, but rumour has it that you can draw information even from the dead.'

'And doesn't rumour also have it that necromancy is forbidden, by edict of the Chapter? Let it go, Dandilion. Those thugs probably didn't know much anyway. The one who escaped . . . Hmm . . . He's another matter.'

'Rience. He was a wizard, wasn't he?'

'Yes. But not a very proficient one.'

'Yet he managed to escape from you. I saw how he did it – he teleported, didn't he? Doesn't that prove anything?'

'Indeed it does. That someone helped him. Rience had neither the time nor the strength to open an oval portal suspended in the air. A portal like that is no joke. It's clear that someone else opened it. Someone far more powerful. That's why I was afraid to chase him, not knowing where I would land. But I sent some pretty hot stuff after him. He's going to need a lot of spells and some effective burn

elixirs, and will remain marked for some time.'

'Maybe you will be interested to hear that he was a Nilfgaardian.'

'You think so?' Yennefer sat up and with a swift movement pulled the stiletto from her pocket and turned it in her palm. 'A lot of people carry Nilfgaardian knives now. They're comfortable and handy – they can even be hidden in a cleavage—'

'It's not the knife. When he was questioning me he used the term "battle for Cintra", "conquest of the town" or something along those lines. I've never heard anyone describe those events like that. For us, it has always been a massacre. The Massacre of Cintra. No one refers to it by any other name.'

The magician raised her hand, scrutinised her nails. 'Clever, Dandilion. You have a sensitive ear.'

'It's a professional hazard.'

'I wonder which profession you have in mind?' She smiled coquettishly. 'But thank you for the information. It was valuable.'

'Let it be,' he replied with a smile, 'my contribution to making changes for the better. Tell me, Yennefer, why is Nilfgaard so interested in Geralt and the girl from Cintra?'

'Don't stick your nose into that business.' She suddenly turned serious. 'I said you were to forget you ever heard of Calanthe's granddaughter.'

'Indeed, you did. But I'm not searching for a subject for a ballad.'

'What the hell are you searching for then? Trouble?'

'Let's take it,' he said quietly, resting his chin on his clasped hands and looking the enchantress in the eye. 'Let's take it that Geralt did, in fact, find and rescue the child. Let's take it that he finally came to believe in the power of destiny, and took the child with him. Where to? Rience tried to force it out of me with torture. But you know, Yennefer. You know where the witcher is hiding.'

'I do.'

'And you know how to get there.'

'I know that too.'

'Don't you think he should be warned? Warned that the likes of Rience are looking for him and the little girl? I would go, but I honestly don't know where it is . . . That place whose name I prefer not to say . . .'

‘Get to the point, Dandilion.’

‘If you know where Geralt is, you ought to go and warn him. You owe him that, Yennefer. There was, after all, something between you.’

‘Yes,’ she acknowledged coldly. ‘There was something between us. That’s why I know him a bit. He does not like having help imposed on him. And if he was in need of it he would seek it from those he could trust. A year has gone by since those events and I . . . I’ve not had any news from him. And as for our debt, I owe him exactly as much as he owes me. No more and no less.’

‘So I’ll go then.’ He raised his head high. ‘Tell me—’

‘I won’t,’ she interrupted. ‘Your cover’s blown, Dandilion. They might come after you again; the less you know the better. Vanish from here. Go to Redania, to Dijkstra and Filippa Eilhart, stick to Vizimir’s court. And I warn you once more: forget the Lion Cub of Cintra. Forget about Ciri. Pretend you have never heard the name. Do as I ask. I wouldn’t like anything bad to happen to you. I like you too much, owe you too much—’

‘You’ve said that already. What do you owe me, Yennefer?’

The sorceress turned her head away, did not say anything for a while.

‘You travelled with him,’ she said finally. ‘Thanks to you he was not alone. You were a friend to him. You were with him.’

The bard lowered his eyes.

‘He didn’t get much from it,’ he muttered. ‘He didn’t get much from our friendship. He had little but trouble because of me. He constantly had to get me out of some scrape . . . help me . . .’

She leaned across the table, put her hand on his and squeezed it hard without saying anything. Her eyes held regret.

‘Go to Redania,’ she repeated after a moment. ‘To Tretogor. Stay in Dijkstra’s and Filippa’s care. Don’t play at being a hero. You have got yourself mixed up in a dangerous affair, Dandilion.’

‘I’ve noticed.’ He grimaced and rubbed his aching shoulder. ‘And that is precisely why I believe Geralt should be warned. You are the only one who knows where to look for him. You know the way. I guess you used to be . . . a guest there . . . ?’

Yennefer turned away. Dandilion saw her lips pinch, the muscles in her cheek quiver.

‘Yes, in the past,’ she said and there was something elusive and strange in her voice. ‘I used to be a guest there, sometimes. But never uninvited.’

The wind howled savagely, rippling through the grasses growing over the ruins, rustling in the hawthorn bushes and tall nettles. Clouds sped across the sphere of the moon, momentarily illuminating the great castle, drenching the moat and few remaining walls in a pale glow undulating with shadows, and revealing mounds of skulls baring their broken teeth and staring into nothingness through the black holes of their eye-sockets. Ciri squealed sharply and hid her face in the witcher’s cloak.

The mare, prodded on by the witcher’s heels, carefully stepped over a pile of bricks and passed through the broken arcade. Her horseshoes, ringing against the flagstones, awoke weird echoes between the walls, muffled by the howling gale. Ciri trembled, digging her hands into the horse’s mane.

‘I’m frightened,’ she whispered.

‘There’s nothing to be frightened of,’ replied the witcher, laying his hand on her shoulder. ‘It’s hard to find a safer place in the whole world. This is Kaer Morhen, the Witchers’ Keep. There used to be a beautiful castle here. A long time ago.’

She did not reply, bowing her head low. The witcher’s mare, called Roach, snorted quietly, as if she too wanted to reassure the girl.

They immersed themselves in a dark abyss, in a long, unending black tunnel dotted with columns and arcades. Roach stepped confidently and willingly, ignoring the impenetrable darkness, and her horseshoes rang brightly against the floor.

In front of them, at the end of the tunnel, a straight, vertical line suddenly flared with a red light. Growing taller and wider it became a door beyond which was a faint glow, the flickering brightness of torches stuck in iron mounts on the walls. A black figure stood framed in the door, blurred by the brightness.

‘Who comes?’ Ciri heard a menacing, metallic voice which sounded like a dog’s bark. ‘Geralt?’

‘Yes, Eskel. It’s me.’

‘Come in.’

The witcher dismounted, took Ciri from the saddle, stood her on

the ground and pressed a bundle into her little hands which she grabbed tightly, only regretting that it was too small for her to hide behind completely.

'Wait here with Eskel,' he said. 'I'll take Roach to the stables.'

'Come into the light, laddie,' growled the man called Eskel. 'Don't lurk in the dark.'

Ciri looked up into his face and barely restrained her frightened scream. He wasn't human. Although he stood on two legs, although he smelled of sweat and smoke, although he wore ordinary human clothes, he was not human. *No human can have a face like that*, she thought.

'Well, what are you waiting for?' repeated Eskel.

She didn't move. In the darkness she heard the clatter of Roach's horseshoes grow fainter. Something soft and squeaking ran over her foot. She jumped.

'Don't loiter in the dark, or the rats will eat your boots.'

Still clinging to her bundle Ciri moved briskly towards the light. The rats bolted out from beneath her feet with a squeak. Eskel leaned over, took the package from her and pulled back her hood.

'A plague on it,' he muttered. 'A girl. That's all we need.'

She glanced at him, frightened. Eskel was smiling. She saw that he was human after all, that he had an entirely human face, deformed by a long, ugly, semi-circular scar running from the corner of his mouth across the length of his cheek up to the ear.

'Since you're here, welcome to Kaer Morhen,' he said. 'What do they call you?'

'Ciri,' Geralt replied for her, silently emerging from the darkness. Eskel turned around. Suddenly, quickly, wordlessly, the witchers fell into each other's arms and wound their shoulders around each other tight and hard. For one brief moment.

'Wolf, you're alive.'

'I am.'

'All right.' Eskel took a torch from its bracket. 'Come on. I'm closing the inner gates to stop the heat escaping.'

They walked along the corridor. There were rats here, too; they flitted under the walls, squeaked from the dark abyss, from the branching passages, and skittered before the swaying circle of light

thrown by the torch. Ciri walked quickly, trying to keep up with the men.

‘Who’s wintering here, Eskel? Apart from Vesemir?’

‘Lambert and Coën.’

They descended a steep and slippery flight of stairs. A gleam was visible below them. Ciri heard voices, detected the smell of smoke.

The hall was enormous, and flooded with light from a huge hearth roaring with flames which were being sucked up into the heart of the chimney. The centre of the hall was taken up by an enormous, heavy table. At least ten people could sit around that table. There were three. Three humans. Three witchers, Ciri corrected herself. She saw nothing but their silhouettes against the fire in the hearth.

‘Greetings, Wolf. We’ve been waiting for you.’

‘Greetings, Vesemir. Greetings, lads. It’s good to be home again.’

‘Who have you brought us?’

Geralt was silent for a moment, then put his hand on Ciri’s shoulder and lightly pushed her forward. She walked awkwardly, hesitantly, huddled up and hunched, her head lowered. *I’m frightened* , she thought. *I’m very frightened. When Geralt found me, when he took me with him, I thought the fear wouldn’t come back. I thought it had passed . . . And now, instead of being at home, I’m in this terrible, dark, ruined old castle full of rats and dreadful echoes . . . I’m standing in front of a red wall of fire again. I see sinister black figures, I see dreadful, menacing, glistening eyes staring at me—*

‘Who is this child, Wolf? Who is this girl?’

‘She’s my . . .’ Geralt suddenly stammered. She felt his strong, hard hands on her shoulders. And suddenly the fear disappeared, vanished without a trace. The roaring red fire gave out warmth. Only warmth. The black silhouettes were the silhouettes of friends. Carers. Their glistening eyes expressed curiosity. Concern. And unease . . .

Geralt’s hands clenched over her shoulders.

‘She’s our destiny.’

Verily, there is nothing so hideous as the monsters, so contrary to nature, known as witchers for they are the offspring of foul sorcery and devilry. They are rogues without virtue, conscience or scruple, true diabolic creations, fit only for killing. There is no place amidst honest men for such as they.

And Kaer Morhen, where these infamous beings nestle, where they perform their foul practices, must be wiped from the surface of this earth, and all trace of it strewn with salt and saltpetre.

Anonymous, *Monstrum,* or *Description of the Witcher*

Intolerance and superstition has always been the domain of the more stupid amongst the common folk and, I conjecture, will never be uprooted, for they are as eternal as stupidity itself. There, where mountains tower today, one day there will be seas; there where today seas surge, will one day be deserts. But stupidity will remain stupidity.

Nicodemus de Boot, *Meditations on life, Happiness and Prosperity*

CHAPTER TWO

Triss Merigold blew into her frozen hands, wriggled her fingers and murmured a magic formula. Her horse, a gelding, immediately reacted to the spell, snorting and turning its head, looking at the enchantress with eyes made watery by the cold and wind.

‘You’ve got two options, old thing,’ said Triss, pulling on her gloves. ‘Either you get used to magic or I sell you to some peasants to pull a plough.’

The gelding pricked up its ears, snorted vapour through its nostrils and obediently started down the wooded mountainside. The magician leaned over in the saddle, avoiding being lashed by the frosty branches.

The magic worked quickly; she stopped feeling the sting of cold in her elbows and on her neck and the unpleasant sensation of cold which had made her hunch her shoulders and draw her head in disappeared. The spell, warming her, also muffled the hunger which had been eating at her for several hours. Triss cheered up, made herself comfortable in the saddle and, with greater attention than before, started to take stock of her surroundings.

Ever since she had left the beaten track, she had been guided by the greyish-white wall of mountains and their snow-capped summits which glistened gold in those rare moments when the sun pierced the clouds – usually in the morning or just before sunset. Now that she was closer to the mountain chain she had to take greater care. The land around Kaer Morhen was famous for its wildness and inaccessibility, and the gap in the granite wall that was a vital landmark was not easy for an inexperienced eye to find. It was enough to turn down one of the numerous gullies and gorges to lose sight of it. And even she who knew the land, knew the way and knew where to look for the pass, could not allow herself to lose her concentration for an instant.

The forest came to an end. A wide valley opened before the enchantress, strewn with boulders which ran across the valley to the sheer mountain-slope on the other side. The Gwenllech, the River of White Stones, flowed down the heart of the valley, foam seething between the boulders and logs washed along by the current. Here, in its upper reaches, the Gwenllech was no more than a wide but shallow stream. Up here it could be crossed without any difficulty. Lower down, in Kaedwen, in its middle reaches, the river was an insurmountable obstacle, rushing and breaking against the beds of its deep chasms.

The gelding, driven into the water, hastened its step, clearly wanting to reach the opposite bank as quickly as possible. Triss held it back lightly – the stream was shallow, reaching just above the horse's fetlocks but the pebbles covering the bed were slippery and the current was sharp and quick. The water churned and foamed around her mount's legs.

The magician looked up at the sky. The growing cold and increasing wind here, in the mountains, could herald a blizzard and she did not find the prospect of spending yet another night in a grotto or rocky nook too attractive. She could, if she had to, continue her journey even through a blizzard; she could locate the path using telepathy, she could – using magic – make herself insensitive to the cold. She could, if she had to. But she preferred not to have to.

Luckily, Kaer Morhen was already close. Triss urged the gelding on to flat scree, over an enormous heap of stones washed down by glaciers and streams, and rode into a narrow pass between rocky outcrops. The gorge walls rose vertically and seemed to meet high above her, only divided by a narrow line of sky. It grew warmer, the wind howling above the rocks could no longer reach to lash and

sting at her.

The pass broadened, leading through a ravine and then into the valley, opening onto a huge depression, covered by forest, which stretched out amidst jagged boulders. The magician ignored the gentle, accessible depression rim and rode down towards the forest, into the thick backwoods. Dry branches cracked under the gelding's hooves. Forced to step over fallen tree trunks, the horse snorted, danced and stamped. Triss pulled at the reins, tugged at her mount's shaggy ear and scolded it harshly with spiteful allusions to its lameness. The steed, looking for all the world as though it were ashamed of itself, walked with a more even and sprightly gait and picked its way through the thicket.

Before long they emerged onto clearer land, riding along the trough of a stream which barely trickled along the ravine bed. The magician looked around carefully, finally finding what she was looking for. Over the gully, supported horizontally by enormous boulders, lay a mighty tree trunk, dark, bare and turning green with moss. Triss rode closer, wanting to make sure this was, indeed, the Trail and not a tree accidentally felled in a gale. But she spied a narrow, indistinct pathway disappearing into the woods. She could not be mistaken – this was definitely the Trail, a path encircling the old castle of Kaer Morhen and beset with obstacles, where witchers trained to improve their running speeds and controlled breathing. The path was known as the Trail, but Triss knew young witchers had given it their own name: The Killer.

She clung to the horse's neck and slowly rode under the trunk. At that moment, she heard stones grating. And the fast, light footsteps of someone running.

She turned in her saddle, pulled on the reins and waited for the witcher to run out onto the log.

A witcher did run out onto the log, flitted along it like an arrow without slowing down, without even using his arms to aid his balance – running nimbly, fluently, with incredible grace. He flashed by, approaching and disappearing amongst the trees without disturbing a single branch. Triss sighed loudly, shaking her head in disbelief.

Because the witcher, judging by his height and build, was only about twelve.

The magician eased the reins, nudged the horse with her heels and trotted upstream. She knew the Trail cut across the ravine once more, at a spot known as the Gullet. She wanted to catch a glimpse

of the little witcher once again – children had not been trained in Kaer Morhen for near to a quarter of a century.

She was not in a great hurry. The narrow Killer path meandered and looped its way through the forest and, in order to master it, the little witcher would take far longer than she would, following the shortcut. However, she could not loiter either. Beyond the Gullet, the Trail turned into the woods and led straight to the fortress. If she did not catch the boy at the precipice, she might not see him at all. She had already visited Kaer Morhen a few times, and knew she saw only what the witchers wanted her to see. Triss was not so naïve as to be unaware that they wanted to show her only a tiny fraction of the things to be seen in Kaer Morhen.

After a few minutes riding along the stony trough of the stream she caught sight of the Gullet – a leap over the gully created by two huge mossy rocks, overgrown with gnarled, stunted trees. She released the reins. The horse snorted and lowered its head towards the water trickling between pebbles.

She did not have to wait long. The witcher's silhouette appeared on the rock and the boy jumped, not slowing his pace. The magician heard the soft smack of his landing and a moment later a rattle of stones, the dull thud of a fall and a quiet cry. Or rather, a squeal.

Triss instantly leaped from her saddle, threw the fur off her shoulders and dashed across the mountainside, pulling herself up using tree branches and roots. Momentum aided her climb until she slipped on the conifer needles and fell to her knees next to a figure huddled on the stones. The youngster, on seeing her, jumped up like a spring, backed away in a flash and nimbly grabbed the sword slung across his back – then tripped and collapsed between the junipers and pines. The magician did not rise from her knees; she stared at the boy and opened her mouth in surprise.

Because it was not a boy.

From beneath an ash-blonde fringe, poorly and unevenly cut, enormous emerald eyes – the predominant features in a small face with a narrow chin and upturned nose – stared out at her. There was fear in the eyes.

'Don't be afraid,' Triss said tentatively.

The girl opened her eyes even wider. She was hardly out of breath and did not appear to be sweating. It was clear she had already run the Killer more than once.

‘Nothing’s happened to you?’

The girl did not reply; instead she sprang up, hissed with pain, shifted her weight to her left leg, bent over and rubbed her knee. She was dressed in a sort of leather suit sewn together – or rather stuck together – in a way which would make any tailor who took pride in his craft howl in horror and despair. The only pieces of her equipment which seemed to be relatively new, and fitted her, were her knee-high boots, her belts and her sword. More precisely, her little sword.

‘Don’t be afraid,’ repeated Triss, still not rising from her knees. ‘I heard your fall and was scared, that’s why I rushed here—’

‘I slipped,’ murmured the girl.

‘Have you hurt yourself?’

‘No. You?’

The enchantress laughed, tried to get up, winced and swore at the pain in her ankle. She sat down and carefully straightened her foot, swearing once more.

‘Come here, little one, help me get up.’

‘I’m not little.’

‘If you say so. In that case, what are you?’

‘A witcher!’

‘Ha! So, come here and help me get up, witcher.’

The girl did not move from the spot. She shifted her weight from foot to foot, and her hands, in their fingerless, woollen gloves, toyed with her sword belt as she glanced suspiciously at Triss.

‘Have no fear,’ said the enchantress with a smile. ‘I’m not a bandit or outsider. I’m called Triss Merigold and I’m going to Kaer Morhen. The witchers know me. Don’t gape at me. I respect your suspicion, but be reasonable. Would I have got this far if I hadn’t known the way? Have you ever met a human on the Trail?’

The girl overcame her hesitation, approached and stretched out her hand. Triss stood with only a little assistance. Because she was not concerned with having help. She wanted a closer look at the girl. And to touch her.

The green eyes of the little witcher-girl betrayed no signs of mutation, and the touch of her little hand did not produce the slight, pleasant tingling sensation so characteristic of witchers.

Although she ran the Killer path with a sword slung across her back, the ashen-haired girl had not been subjected to the Trial of Grasses or to Changes. Of that, Triss was certain.

'Show me your knee, little one.'

'I'm not little.'

'Sorry. But surely you have a name?'

'I do. I'm . . . Ciri.'

'It's a pleasure. A bit closer if you please, Ciri.'

'It's nothing.'

'I want to see what "nothing" looks like. Ah, that's what I thought. "Nothing" looks remarkably like torn trousers and skin grazed down to raw flesh. Stand still and don't be scared.'

'I'm not scared . . . Awww!'

The magician laughed and rubbed her palm, itching from casting the spell, against her hip. The girl bent over and gazed at her knee.

'Oooh,' she said. 'It doesn't hurt any more! And there's no hole . . . Was that magic?'

'You've guessed it.'

'Are you a witch?'

'Guessed again. Although I prefer to be called an enchantress. To avoid getting it wrong you can call me by my name, Triss. Just Triss. Come on, Ciri. My horse is waiting at the bottom. We'll go to Kaer Morhen together.'

'I ought to run.' Ciri shook her head. 'It's not good to stop running because you get milk in your muscles. Geralt says—'

'Geralt is at the keep?'

Ciri frowned, pinched her lips together and shot a glance at the enchantress from beneath her ashen fringe. Triss chuckled again.

'All right,' she said. 'I won't ask. A secret's a secret, and you're right not to disclose it to someone you hardly know. Come on. When we get there we'll see who's at the castle and who isn't. And don't worry about your muscles – I know what to do about lactic acid. Ah, here's my mount. I'll help you . . .'

She stretched out her hand, but Ciri didn't need any help. She jumped agilely into the saddle, lightly, almost without taking off. The gelding started, surprised, and stamped, but the girl quickly

took up the reins and reassured it.

‘You know how to handle a horse, I see.’

‘I can handle anything.’

‘Move up towards the pommel.’ Triss slipped her foot into the stirrup and caught hold of the mane. ‘Make a bit of room for me. And don’t poke my eye out with that sword.’

The gelding, spurred on by her heels, moved off along the stream bed at a walking pace. They rode across another gully and climbed the rounded mountainside. From there they could see the ruins of Kaer Morhen huddled against the stone precipices – the partially demolished trapezium of the defensive wall, the remains of the barbican and gate, the thick, blunt column of the donjon.

The gelding snorted and jerked its head, crossing what remained of the bridge over the moat. Triss tugged at the reins. The decaying skulls and skeletons strewn across the river bed made no impression on her. She had seen them before.

‘I don’t like this,’ the girl suddenly remarked. ‘It’s not as it should be. The dead should to be buried in the ground. Under a barrow. Shouldn’t they?’

‘They should,’ the magician agreed calmly. ‘I think so, too. But the witchers treat this graveyard as a . . . reminder.’

‘Reminder of what?’

‘Kaer Morhen,’ Triss said as she guided the horse towards the shattered arcades, ‘was assaulted. There was a bloody battle here in which almost all the witchers died. Only those who weren’t in the keep at the time survived.’

‘Who attacked them? And why?’

‘I don’t know,’ she lied. ‘It was a terribly long time ago, Ciri. Ask the witchers about it.’

‘I have,’ grunted the girl. ‘But they didn’t want to tell me.’

I can understand that, thought the magician. *A child trained to be a witcher, a girl, at that, who has not undergone the mutations, should not be told such things. A child like that should not hear about the massacre. A child like that should not be terrified by the prospect that they too may one day hear words describing it like those which were screamed by the fanatics who marched on Kaer Morhen long ago. Mutant. Monster. Freak. Damned by the gods, a creature contrary to nature. No, I do not blame the witchers for not telling you about it, little Ciri. And I shan’t*

tell you either. I have even more reason to be silent. Because I am a wizard, and without the aid of wizards those fanatics would never have conquered the castle. And that hideous lampoon, that widely distributed Monstrum *which stirred the fanatics up and drove them to such wickedness was also, apparently, some wizard's anonymous work. But I, little Ciri, do not recognise collective responsibility, I do not feel the need to expiate the events which took place half a century before my birth. And the skeletons which are meant to serve as an eternal reminder will ultimately rot away completely, disintegrate into dust and be forgotten, will disappear with the wind which constantly whips the mountainside . . .*

'They don't want to lie like that,' said Ciri suddenly. 'They don't want to be a symbol, a bad conscience or a warning. But neither do they want their dust to be swept away by the wind.'

Triss raised her head, hearing a change in the girl's voice. Immediately she sensed a magical aura, a pulsating and a rush of blood in her temples. She grew tense but did not utter a word, afraid of breaking into or disrupting what was happening.

'An ordinary barrow.' Ciri's voice was becoming more and more unnatural, metallic, cold and menacing. 'A mound of earth which will be overgrown with nettles. Death has cold blue eyes, and the height of the obelisk does not matter, nor does the writing engraved on it matter. Who can know that better than you, Triss Merigold, the Fourteenth One of the Hill?'

The enchantress froze. She saw the girl's hands clench the horse's mane.

'You died on the Hill, Triss Merigold.' The strange, evil voice spoke again. 'Why have you come here? Go back, go back at once and take this child, the Child of Elder Blood, with you. Return her to those to whom she belongs. Do this, Fourteenth One. Because if you do not you will die once more. The day will come when the Hill will claim you. The mass grave, and the obelisk on which your name is engraved, will claim you.'

The gelding neighed loudly, tossing its head. Ciri jerked suddenly, shuddered.

'What happened?' asked Triss, trying to control her voice.

Ciri coughed, passed both hands through her hair and rubbed her face.

'Nn . . . nothing . . .' she muttered hesitantly. 'I'm tired, that's why . . . That's why I fell asleep. I ought to run . . .'

The magical aura disappeared. Triss experienced a sudden cold wave sweep through her entire body. She tried to convince herself it was the effect of the defensive spell dying away, but she knew that wasn't true. She glanced up at the stone blocks of the castle, the black, empty eye-sockets of its ruined loop-holes gaping at her. A shudder ran through her.

The horse's shoes rang against the slabs in the courtyard. The magician quickly leaped from the saddle and held out her hand to Ciri. Taking advantage of the touch of their hands she carefully emitted a magical impulse. And was astounded. Because she didn't feel anything. No reaction, no reply. And no resistance. In the girl who had, just a moment ago, manifested an exceptionally strong aura there was not a trace of magic. She was now an ordinary, badly dressed child whose hair had been incompetently cut.

But a moment ago, this child had been no ordinary child.

Triss did not have time to ponder the strange event. The grate of an iron-clad door reached her, coming from the dark void of the corridor which gaped behind the battered portal. She slipped the fur cape from her shoulders, removed her fox-fur hat and, with a swift movement of the head, tousled her hair – long, full locks the colour of fresh chestnuts, with a sheen of gold, her pride and identifying characteristic.

Ciri sighed with admiration. Triss smiled, pleased by the effect she'd had. Beautiful, long, loose hair was a rarity, an indication of a woman's position, her status, the sign of a free woman, a woman who belonged to herself. The sign of an unusual woman – because 'normal' maidens wore their hair in plaits, 'normal' married women hid theirs beneath a caul or a coif. Women of high birth, including queens, curled their hair and styled it. Warriors cut it short. Only druids and magicians – and whores – wore their hair naturally so as to emphasise their independence and freedom.

The witchers appeared unexpectedly and silently, as usual, and, also as usual, from nowhere. They stood before her, tall, slim, their arms crossed, the weight of their bodies on their left legs – a position from which, she knew, they could attack in a split second. Ciri stood next to them, in an identical position. In her ludicrous clothes, she looked very funny.

'Welcome to Kaer Morhern, Triss.'

'Greetings, Geralt.'

He had changed. He gave the impression of having aged. Triss

knew that, biologically, this was impossible – witchers aged, certainly, but too slowly for an ordinary mortal, or a magician as young as her, to notice the changes. But one glance was enough for her to realise that although mutation could hold back the physical process of ageing, it did not alter the mental. Geralt's face, slashed by wrinkles, was the best evidence of this. With a sense of deep sorrow Triss tore her gaze away from the white-haired witcher's eyes. Eyes which had evidently seen too much. What's more, she saw nothing of what she had expected in those eyes.

'Welcome,' he repeated. 'We are glad you've come.'

Eskel stood next to Geralt, resembling the Wolf like a brother apart from the colour of his hair and the long scar which disfigured his cheek. And the youngest of the Kaer Morhen witchers, Lambert, was there with his usual ugly, mocking expression. Vesemir was not there.

'Welcome and come in,' said Eskel. 'It is as cold and blustery as if someone has hung themselves. Ciri, where are you off to? The invitation does not apply to you. The sun is still high, even if it is obscured. You can still train.'

'Hey.' The Enchantress tossed her hair. 'Politeness comes cheap in Witchers' Keep now, I see. Ciri was the first to greet me, and brought me to the castle. She ought to keep me company—'

'She is undergoing training here, Merigold.' Lambert grimaced in a parody of a smile. He always called her that: 'Merigold', without giving her a title or a name. Triss hated it. 'She is a student, not a major domo. Welcoming guests, even such pleasant ones as yourself, is not one of her duties. We're off, Ciri.'

Triss gave a little shrug, pretending not to see Geralt and Eskel's embarrassed expressions. She did not say anything, not wanting to embarrass them further. And, above all, she did not want them to see how very intrigued and fascinated she was by the girl.

'I'll take your horse,' offered Geralt, reaching for the reins. Triss surreptitiously shifted her hand and their palms joined. So did their eyes.

'I'll come with you,' she said naturally. 'There are a few little things in the saddle-bags which I'll need.'

'You gave me a very disagreeable experience not so long ago,' he muttered as soon as they had entered the stable. 'I studied your impressive tombstone with my own eyes. The obelisk in memory of your heroic death at the battle of Sodden. The news that it was a

mistake only reached me recently. I can't understand how anyone could mistake anyone else for you, Triss.'

'It's a long story,' she answered. 'I'll tell you some time. And please forgive me for the disagreeable moment.'

'There's nothing to forgive. I've not had many reasons to be happy of late and the feelings I experienced on hearing that you lived cannot compare to any other. Except perhaps what I feel now when I look at you.'

Triss felt something explode inside her. Her fear of meeting the white-haired witcher, which had accompanied her throughout her journey, had struggled within her with her hope of having such a meeting. Followed by the sight of that tired, jaded face, those sick eyes which saw everything, cold and calculating, which were unnaturally calm but yet so infused with emotion . . .

She threw her arms around his neck, instantly, without thinking. She caught hold of his hand, abruptly placed it on the nape of her neck, under her hair. A tingling ran down her back, penetrated her with such rapture she almost cried out. In order to muffle and restrain the cry her lips found his lips and stuck to them. She trembled, pressing hard against him, her excitement building and increasing, forgetting herself more and more.

Geralt did not forget himself.

'Triss . . . Please.'

'Oh, Geralt . . . So much . . .'

'Triss.' He moved her away delicately. 'We're not alone . . . They're coming.'

She glanced at the entrance and saw the shadows of the approaching witchers only after some time, heard their steps even later. Oh well, her hearing, which she considered very sensitive, could not compete with that of a witcher.

'Triss, my child!'

'Vesemir !'

Vesemir was really very old. Who knows, he could be even older than Kaer Morhen. But he walked towards her with a brisk, energetic and sprightly step; his grip was vigorous and his hands strong.

'I am happy to see you again, Grandfather.'

'Give me a kiss. No, not on the hand, little sorceress. You can kiss

my hand when I'm resting on my bier. Which will, no doubt, be soon. Oh, Triss, it is a good thing you have come . . . Who can cure me if not you?'

'Cure, you? Of what? Of behaving like a child, surely! Take your hand from my backside, old man, or I'll set fire to that grey beard of yours!'

'Forgive me. I keep forgetting you are grown up, and I can no longer put you on my knee and pat you. As to my health . . . Oh, Triss, old age is no joke. My bones ache so I want to howl. Will you help an old man, child?'

'I will.' The enchantress freed herself from his bear-like embrace and cast her eye over the witcher accompanying Vesemir. He was young, apparently the same age as Lambert, and wore a short, black beard which did not hide the severe disfigurement left behind by smallpox. This was unusual; witchers were generally highly immune to infectious diseases.

'Triss Merigold, Coën.' Geralt introduced them to each other. 'This is Coën's first winter with us. He comes from the north, from Poviss.'

The young witcher bowed. He had unusually pale, yellow-green irises and the whites of his eyes, riddled with red threads, indicated difficult and troublesome processes during his mutation.

'Let us go, child,' uttered Vesemir, taking her by the arm. 'A stable is no place to welcome a guest, but I couldn't wait to see you.'

In the courtyard, in a recess in the wall sheltered from the wind, Ciri was training under Lambert's instructions. Deftly balancing on a beam hanging on chains, she was attacking – with her sword – a leather sack bound with straps to make it resemble a human torso. Triss stopped to watch.

'Wrong!' yelled Lambert. 'You're getting too close! Don't hack blindly at it! I told you, the very tip of the sword, at the carotid artery! Where does a humanoid have its carotid artery? On top of its head? What's happening? Concentrate, Princess!'

Ha, thought Triss. *So it is truth, not a legend. She is the one. I guessed correctly*.

She decided to attack without delay, not allowing the witchers to try any ruses.

'The famous Child Surprise?' she said indicating Ciri. 'I see you

have applied yourselves to fulfilling the demands of fate and destiny? But it seems you have muddled the stories, boys. In the fairy-tales I was told, shepherdesses and orphans become princesses. But here, I see, a princess is becoming a witcher. Does that not appear somewhat daring to you?'

Vesemir glanced at Geralt. The white-haired witcher remained silent, his face perfectly still; he did not react with even the slightest quiver of his eyelids to Vesemir's unspoken request for support.

'It's not what you think.' The old man cleared his throat. 'Geralt brought her here last autumn. She has no one apart from—Triss, how can one not believe in destiny when—'

'What has destiny to do with waving a sword around?'

'We are teaching her to fence,' Geralt said quietly, turning towards her and looking her straight in the eyes. 'What else are we to teach her? We know nothing else. Destiny or no, Kaer Morhen is now her home. At least for a while. Training and swordsmanship amuse her, keep her healthy and fit. They allow her to forget the tragedy she has lived through. This is her home now, Triss. She has no other.'

'Masses of Cintrians,' the enchantress said, holding his gaze, 'fled to Verden after the defeat, to Brugge, Temeria and the Islands of Skellige. Amongst them are magnates, barons, knights. Friends, relations . . . as well as this girl's subjects.'

'Friends and relations did not look for her after the war. They did not find her.'

'Because she was not destined for them?' She smiled at him, not very sincerely but very prettily. As prettily as she could. She did not want him to use that tone of voice.

The witcher shrugged. Triss, knowing him a little, immediately changed tactics and gave up the argument.

She looked at Ciri again. The girl, agilely stepping along the balance beam, executed a half-turn, cut lightly, and immediately leaped away. The dummy, struck, swayed on its rope.

'Well, at last!' shouted Lambert. 'You've finally got it! Go back and do it again. I want to make sure it wasn't a fluke!'

'The sword,' Triss turned to the witchers, 'looks sharp. The beam looks slippery and unstable. And Lambert looks like an idiot, demoralising the girl with all his shouting. Aren't you afraid of an unfortunate accident? Or maybe you're relying on destiny to protect

the child against it?'

'Ciri practised for nearly six months without a sword,' said Coën. 'She knows how to move. And we are keeping an eye on her because—'

'Because this is her home,' finished Geralt quietly but firmly. Very firmly. Using a tone which put an end to the discussion.

'Exactly. It is.' Vesemir took a deep breath. 'Triss, you must be tired. And hungry?'

'I cannot deny it,' she sighed, giving up on trying to catch Geralt's eye. 'To be honest, I'm on my last legs. I spent last night on the Trail in a shepherd's hut which was practically falling apart, buried in straw and sawdust. I used spells to insulate the shack; if it weren't for that I would probably be dead. I long for clean linen.'

'You will have supper with us now. And then you will sleep as long as you wish, and rest. We have prepared the best room for you, the one in the tower. And we have put the best bed we could find in Kaer Morhen there.'

'Thank you.' Triss smiled faintly. *In the tower*, she thought. *All right, Vesemir. Let it be the tower for today, if appearances matter so much to you. I can sleep in the tower in the best of all the beds in Kaer Morhen. Although I would prefer to sleep with Geralt in the worst.*

'Let's go, Triss.'

'Let's go.'

The wind hammered against the shutters and ruffled the remains of the moth-eaten tapestries which had been used to insulate the window. Triss lay in perfect darkness in the best bed in the whole of Kaer Morhen. She couldn't sleep – and not because the best bed in Kaer Morhen was a dilapidated antique. Triss was thinking hard. And all the thoughts chasing sleep away revolved around one fundamental question.

What had she been summoned to the fortress for? Who had summoned her? Why? For what purpose?

Vesemir's illness was just a pretext. Vesemir was a witcher. The fact that he was also an old man did not change the fact that many a youngster could envy him his health. If the old man had been stung by a manticore or bitten by a werewolf Triss would have accepted that she had been summoned to aid him. But 'aching bones' was a joke. For an ache in his bones, not a very original

complaint within the horrendously cold walls of Kaer Morhen, Vesemir could have treated with a witchers' elixir or – an even simpler solution – with strong rye vodka, applied internally and externally in equal proportions. He didn't need a magician, with her spells, filters and amulets.

So who had summoned her? Geralt?

Triss thrashed about in the bedclothes, feeling a wave of heat come over her. And a wave of arousal, made all the stronger by anger. She swore quietly, kicked her quilt away and rolled on to her side. The ancient bedstead squeaked and creaked. *I've no control over myself*, she thought. *I'm behaving like a stupid adolescent. Or even worse – like an old maid deprived of affection. I can't even think logically.*

She swore again.

Of course it wasn't Geralt. Don't get excited, little one. Don't get excited, just think of his expression in the stable. You've seen expressions like that before. You've seen them, so don't kid yourself. The foolish, contrite, embarrassed expressions of men who want to forget, who regret, who don't want to remember what happened, don't want to go back to what has been. By all the gods, little one, don't fool yourself it's different this time. It's never different. And you know it. Because, after all, you've had a fair amount of experience.

As far as her erotic life was concerned, Triss Merigold had the right to consider herself a typical enchantress. It had began with the sour taste of forbidden fruit, made all the more exciting by the strict rules of the academy and the prohibitions of the mistress under whom she practised. Then came her independence, freedom and a crazy promiscuity which ended, as it usually does, in bitterness, disillusionment and resignation. Then followed a long period of loneliness and the discovery that if she wanted to release her tension and stress then someone who wanted to consider himself her lord and master – as soon as he had turned on his back and wiped the sweat from his brow – was entirely superfluous. There were far less troublesome ways of calming her nerves – ones with the additional advantages of not staining her towels with blood, not passing wind under the quilt and not demanding breakfast. That was followed by a short-lived and entertaining fascination with the same sex, which ended in the conclusion that soiling towels, passing wind and greediness were by no means exclusively male attributes. Finally, like all but a few magicians, Triss moved to affairs with other wizards, which proved sporadic and frustrating in their cold, technical and almost ritual course.

Then Geralt of Rivia appeared. A witcher leading a stormy life, and tied to her good friend Yennefer in a strange, turbulent and almost violent relationship.

Triss had watched them both and was jealous even though it seemed there was little to be jealous of. Their relationship quite obviously made them both unhappy, had led straight to destruction, pain and yet, against all logic . . . it had lasted. Triss couldn't understand it. And it had fascinated her. It had fascinated her to such an extent that . . .

. . . she had seduced the witcher – with the help of a little magic. She had hit on a propitious moment, a moment when he and Yennefer had scratched at each other's eyes yet again and had abruptly parted. Geralt had needed warmth, and had wanted to forget.

No, Triss had not desired to take him away from Yennefer. As a matter of fact, her friend was more important to her than he was. But her brief relationship with the witcher had not disappointed. She had found what she was looking for – emotions in the form of guilt, anxiety and pain. His pain. She had experienced his emotions, it had excited her and, when they parted, she had been unable to forget it. And she had only recently understood what pain is. The moment when she had overwhelmingly wanted to be with him again. For a short while – just for a moment – to be with him.

And now she was so close . . .

Triss clenched her fist and punched the pillow. *No*, she thought, *no. Don't be silly. Don't think about it. Think about . . .*

About Ciri. Is she . . .

Yes. She was the real reason behind her visit to Kaer Morhen. *The ash-blonde girl who, here in Kaer Morhen, they want to turn into a witcher. A real witcher. A mutant. A killing machine, like themselves.*

It's clear, she suddenly thought, feeling a passionate arousal of an entirely different nature. *It's obvious. They want to mutate the child, subject her to the Trial of Grasses and Changes, but they don't know how to do it*. Vesemir was the only witcher left from the previous generation, and he was only a fencing instructor. The Laboratorium, hidden in the vaults of Kaer Morhen, with its dusty demi-johns of elixirs, the alembics, ovens and retorts . . . None of the witchers knew how to use them. The mutagenic elixirs had been concocted by some renegade wizard in the distant past and then perfected over the years by the wizard's successors, who had, over the years,

magically controlled the process of Changes to which children were subjected. And at a vital moment the chain had snapped. There was no more magical knowledge or power. The witchers had the herbs and Grasses, they had the Laboratorium. They knew the recipe. But they had no wizard.

Who knows, she thought, *perhaps they have tried? Have they given children concoctions prepared without the use of magic?*

She shuddered at the thought of what might have happened to those children.

And now they want to mutate the girl but can't. And that might mean . . . They may ask me to help. And then I'll see something no living wizard has seen, I'll learn something no living wizard has learned. Their famous Grasses and herbs, the secret virus cultures, the renowned, mysterious recipes . . .

And I will be the one to give the child a number of elixirs, who will watch the Changes of mutation, who will watch, with my own eyes . . .

Watch the ashen-haired child die.

Oh, no. Triss shuddered again. *Never. Not at such a price.*

Besides, she thought, *I've probably got excited too soon again. That's probably not what this is about. We talked over supper, gossiped about this and that. I tried to guide the conversation to the Child Surprise several times to no avail. They changed the subject at once.*

She had watched them. Vesemir had been tense and troubled; Geralt uneasy, Lambert and Eskel falsely merry and talkative, Coën so natural as to be unnatural. The only one who had been sincere and open was Ciri, rosy-cheeked from the cold, dishevelled, happy and devilishly voracious. They had eaten beer potage, thick with croutons and cheese, and Ciri had been surprised they had not served mushrooms as well. They had drunk cider, but the girl had been given water and was clearly both astonished and revolted by it. 'Where's the salad?' she had yelled, and Lambert had rebuked her sharply and ordered her to take her elbows off the table.

Mushrooms and salad. In December?

Of course, thought Triss. *They're feeding her those legendary cave saprophytes – a mountain plant unknown to science – giving her the famous infusions of their mysterious herbs to drink. The girl is developing quickly, is acquiring a witcher's infernal fitness. Naturally, without the mutation, without the risk, without the hormonal upheaval. But the magician must not know this. It is to be kept a secret from the*

magician. They aren't going to tell me anything; they aren't going to show me anything.

I saw how that girl ran. I saw how she danced on the beam with her sword, agile and swift, full of a dancer's near-feline grace, moving like an acrobat. I must, she thought, *I absolutely must see her body, see how she's developing under the influence of whatever it is they're feeding her. And what if I managed to steal samples of these 'mushrooms' and 'salads' and take them away? Well, well . . .*

And trust? I don't give a fig for your trust, witchers. There's cancer out there in the world, smallpox, tetanus and leukaemia, there are allergies, there's cot death. And you're keeping your 'mushrooms', which could perhaps be distilled and turned into life-saving medicines, hidden away from the world. You're keeping them a secret even from me, and others to whom you declare your friendship, respect and trust. Even I'm forbidden to see not just the Laboratorium, but even the bloody mushrooms!

So why did you bring me here? Me, a magician?

Magic!

Triss giggled. *Ha*, she thought, *witchers, I've got you! Ciri scared you just as she did me. She 'withdrew' into a daydream, started to prophesy, gave out an aura which, after all, you can sense almost as well as I can. She automatically reached for something psychokinetically, or bent a pewter spoon with her will as she stared at it during lunch. She answered questions you only thought, and maybe even some which you were afraid to ask yourselves. And you felt fear. You realised that your Surprise is more surprising than you had imagined.*

You realised that you have the Source in Kaer Morhen.

And that, you can't manage without a magician.

And you don't have a single friendly magician, not a single one you could trust. Apart from me and . . .

And Yennefer.

The wind howled, banged the shutter and swelled the tapestry. Triss rolled on to her back and, lost in thought, started to bite her thumb nail.

Geralt had not invited Yennefer. He had invited her. *Does that mean . . . ?*

Who knows. Maybe. But if it's as I think then why . . . ?

Why . . . ?

‘Why hasn’t he come to me?’ she shouted quietly into the darkness, angry and aroused.

She was answered by the wind howling amidst the ruins.

The morning was sunny but devilishly cold. Triss woke chilled through and through, without having had enough sleep, but finally assured and decided.

She was the last to go down to the hall. She accepted the tribute of gazes which rewarded her efforts – she had changed her travel clothes for an attractive but simple dress and had skilfully applied magical scents and non-magical but incredibly expensive cosmetics. She ate her porridge chatting with the witchers about unimportant and trivial matters.

‘Water again?’ muttered Ciri suddenly, peering into her tumbler. ‘My teeth go numb when I drink water! I want some juice! That blue one!’

‘Don’t slouch,’ said Lambert, stealing a glance at Triss from the corner of his eye. ‘And don’t wipe your mouth with your sleeve! Finish your food; it’s time for training. The days are getting shorter.’

‘Geralt.’ Triss finished her porridge. ‘Ciri fell on the Trail yesterday. Nothing serious, but it was because of that jester’s outfit she wears. It all fits so badly, and it hinders her movements.’

Vesemir cleared his throat and turned his eyes away. *Aha*, thought the enchantress, *so it’s your work, master of the sword. Predictable enough, Ciri’s short tunic does look as if it has been cut out with a knife and sewn together with an arrow-head.*

‘The days are, indeed, getting shorter,’ she continued, not waiting for a comment. ‘But we’re going to make today shorter still. Ciri, have you finished? Come with me, if you please. We shall make some vital adjustments to your uniform.’

‘She’s been running around in this for a year, Merigold,’ said Lambert angrily. ‘And everything was fine until . . .’

‘. . . until a woman arrived who can’t bear to look at clothes in poor taste which don’t fit? You’re right, Lambert. But a woman has arrived, and the old order’s collapsed; a time of great change has arrived. Come on, Ciri.’

The girl hesitated, looked at Geralt. Geralt nodded his agreement and smiled. Pleasantly. Just as he had smiled in the past when, when . . .

Triss turned her eyes away. His smile was not for her.

Ciri's little room was a faithful replica of the witchers' quarters. It was, like theirs, devoid of almost all fittings and furniture. There was practically nothing there beside a few planks nailed together to form a bed, a stool and a trunk. Witchers decorated the walls and doors of their quarters with the skins of animals they killed when hunting – stags, lynx, wolves and even wolverines. On the door of Ciri's little room, however, hung the skin of an enormous rat with a hideous scaly tail. Triss fought back her desire to tear the stinking abomination down and throw it out of the window.

The girl, standing by the bed, stared at her expectantly.

'We'll try,' said the enchantress, 'to make this . . . sheath fit a little better. I've always had a knack for cutting and sewing so I ought to be able to manage this goatskin, too. And you, little witcher-girl, have you ever had a needle in your hand? Have you been taught anything other than making holes with a sword in sacks of straw?'

'When I was in Transriver, in Kagen, I had to spin,' muttered Ciri unwillingly. 'They didn't give me any sewing because I only spoilt the linen and wasted thread; they had to undo everything. The spinning was terribly boring – yuk!'

'True,' giggled Triss. 'It's hard to find anything more boring. I hated spinning, too.'

'And did you have to? I did because . . . But you're a wi— magician. You can conjure anything up! That amazing dress . . . did you conjure it up?'

'No.' Triss smiled. 'Nor did I sew it myself. I'm not that talented.'

'And my clothes, how are you going to make them? Conjure them up?'

'There's no need. A magic needle is enough, one which we shall charm into working more vigorously. And if there's a need . . .'

Triss slowly ran her hand across the torn hole in the sleeve of Ciri's jacket, murmuring a spell while stimulating an amulet to work. Not a trace remained of the hole. Ciri squealed with joy.

'That's magic! I'm going to have a magical jacket! Wow!'

'Only until I make you an ordinary – but good – one. Right, now take all that off, young lady, and change into something else. These

aren't your only clothes, surely?'

Ciri shook her head, lifted the lid of the trunk and showed her a faded loose dress, a dark grey tunic, a linen shirt and a woollen blouse resembling a penitent's sack.

'This is mine,' she said. 'This is what I came in. But I don't wear it now. It's woman's stuff.'

'I understand.' Triss grimaced mockingly. 'Woman's or not, for the time being you'll have to change into it. Well, get on with it, get undressed. Let me help you . . . Damn it! What's this? Ciri?'

The girl's shoulders were covered in massive bruises, suffused with blood. Most of them had already turned yellow; some were fresh.

'What the hell is this?' the magician repeated angrily. 'Who beat you like this?'

'This?' Ciri looked at her shoulders as if surprised by the number of bruises. 'Oh, this . . . That was the windmill. I was too slow.'

'What windmill? Bloody hell!'

'The windmill,' repeated Ciri, raising her huge eyes to look up at the magician. 'It's a sort of . . . Well . . . I'm using it to learn to dodge while attacking. It's got these paws made of sticks and it turns and waves the paws. You have to jump very quickly and dodge. You have to learn a lefrex. If you haven't got the lefrex the windmill wallops you with a stick. At the beginning, the windmill gave me a really terribly horrible thrashing. But now—'

'Take the leggings and shirt off. Oh, sweet gods! Dear girl! Can you really walk? Run?'

Both hips and her left thigh were black and blue with haematomas and swellings. Ciri shuddered and hissed, pulling away from the magician's hand. Triss swore viciously in Dwarvish, using inexpressibly foul language.

'Was that the windmill, too?' she asked, trying to remain calm.

'This? No. This, this was the windmill.' Ciri pointed indifferently to an impressive bruise below her left knee, covering her shin. 'And these other ones . . . They were the pendulum. I practise my fencing steps on the pendulum. Geralt says I'm already good at the pendulum. He says I've got . . . Flair. I've got flair.'

'And if you run out of flair' – Triss ground her teeth together – 'I take it the pendulum thumps you?'

‘But of course,’ the girl confirmed, looking at her, clearly surprised at this lack of knowledge. ‘It thumps you, and how.’

‘And here? On your side? What was that? A smith’s hammer?’

Ciri hissed with pain and blushed.

‘I fell off the comb . . .’

‘. . . and the comb thumped you,’ finished Triss, controlling herself with increasing difficulty. Ciri snorted.

‘How can a comb thump you when it’s buried in the ground? It can’t! I just fell. I was practising a jumping pirouette and it didn’t work. That’s where the bruise came from. Because I hit a post.’

‘And you lay there for two days? ? In pain? Finding it hard to breathe’

‘Not at all. Coën rubbed it and put me straight back on the comb. You have to, you know? Otherwise you catch fear.’

‘What?’

‘You catch fear,’ Ciri repeated proudly, brushing her ashen fringe from her forehead. ‘Didn’t you know? Even when something bad happens to you, you have to go straight back to that piece of equipment or you get frightened. And if you’re frightened you’ll be hopeless at the exercise. You mustn’t give up. Geralt said so.’

‘I have to remember that maxim,’ the enchantress murmured through her teeth. ‘And that it came from Geralt. Not a bad prescription for life although I’m not sure it applies in every situation. But it is easy to put into practise at someone else’s expense. So you mustn’t give up? Even though you are being thumped and beaten in a thousand ways, you’re to get up and carry on practising?’

‘Of course. A witcher’s not afraid of anything.’

‘Is that so? And you, Ciri? You aren’t afraid of anything? Answer truthfully.’

The girl turned away and bit her lip.

‘You won’t tell anybody?’

‘I won’t.’

‘I’m frightened of two pendulums. Two at the same time. And the windmill, but only when it’s set to go fast. And there’s also a long balance, I still have to go on that . . . with a safety de—A safety device. Lambert says I’m a sissy and a wimp but that’s not true.

Geralt told me my weight is distributed a little differently because I'm a girl. I've simply got to practise more unless . . . I wanted to ask you something. May I?'

'You may.'

'If you know magic and spells . . . If you can cast them . . . Can you turn me into a boy?'

'No,' Triss replied in an icy tone. 'I can't.'

'Hmm . . .' The little witcher-girl was clearly troubled. 'But could you at least . . .'

'At least what?'

'Could you do something so I don't have to . . .' Ciri blushed. 'I'll whisper it in your ear.'

'Go on.' Triss leaned over. 'I'm listening.'

Ciri, growing even redder, brought her head closer to the enchantress's chestnut hair.

Triss sat up abruptly, her eyes flaming.

'Today? Now?'

'Mhm.'

'Hell and bloody damnation!' the enchantress yelled, and kicked the stool so hard that it hit the door and brought down the rat skin. 'Pox, plague, shit and leprosy! I'm going to kill those cursed idiots!'

'Calm down, Merigold,' said Lambert. 'It's unhealthy to get so worked up, especially with no reason.'

'Don't preach at me! And stop calling me "Merigold"! But best of all, stop talking altogether. I'm not speaking to you. Vesemir, Geralt, have any of you seen how terribly battered this child is? She hasn't got a single healthy spot on her body!'

'Dear child,' said Vesemir gravely, 'don't let yourself get carried away by your emotions. You were brought up differently, you've seen children being brought up in another way. Ciri comes from the south where girls and boys are brought up in the same way, like the elves. She was put on a pony when she was five and when she was eight she was already riding out hunting. She was taught to use a bow, javelin and sword. A bruise is nothing new to Ciri—'

'Don't give me that nonsense,' Triss flared. 'Don't pretend you're stupid. This is not some pony or horse or sleigh ride. This is Kaer

Morhen! On these windmills and pendulums of yours, on this Killer path of yours, dozens of boys have broken their bones and twisted their necks, boys who were hard, seasoned vagabonds like you, found on roads and pulled out of gutters. Sinewy scamps and good-for-nothings, pretty experienced despite their short lives. What chance has Ciri got? Even though she's been brought up in the south with elven methods, even growing up under the hand of a battle-axe like Lioness Calanthe, that little one was and still is a princess. Delicate skin, slight build, light bones . . . She's a girl! What do you want to turn her into? A witcher?'

'That girl,' said Geralt quietly and calmly, 'that petite, delicate princess lived through the Massacre of Cintra. Left entirely to her own devices, she stole past Nilfgaard's cohorts. She successfully fled the marauders who prowled the villages, plundering and murdering anything that still lived. She survived on her own for two weeks in the forests of Transriver, entirely alone. She spent a month roaming with a pack of fugitives, slogging as hard as all the others and starving like all the others. For almost half a year, having been taken in by a peasant family, she worked on the land and with the livestock. Believe me, Triss, life has tried, seasoned and hardened her no less than good-for-nothings like us, who were brought to Kaer Morhen from the highways. Ciri is no weaker than unwanted bastards, like us, who were left with witchers in taverns like kittens in a wicker basket. And her gender ? What difference does that make?'

'You still ask? You still dare ask that?' yelled the magician. 'What difference does it make? Only that the girl, not being like you, has her days! And bears them exceptionally badly! And you want her to tear her lungs out on the Killer and some bloody windmills!'

Despite her outrage, Triss felt an exquisite satisfaction at the sight of the sheepish expressions of the young witchers, and Vesemir's jaw suddenly dropping open.

'You didn't even know.' She nodded in what was now a calm, concerned and gentle reproach. 'You're pathetic guardians. She's ashamed to tell you because she was taught not to mention such complaints to men. And she's ashamed of the weakness, the pain and the fact that she is less fit. Has any one of you thought about that? Taken any interest in it? Or tried to guess what might be the matter with her? Maybe her very first bleed happened here, in Kaer Morhen? And she cried to herself at night, unable to find any sympathy, consolation or even understanding from anyone? Has any one of you given it any thought whatsoever?'

‘Stop it, Triss,’ moaned Geralt quietly. ‘That’s enough. You’ve achieved what you wanted. And maybe even more.’

‘The devil take it,’ cursed Coën. ‘We’ve turned out to be right idiots, there’s no two ways about it, eh, Vesemir, and you—’

‘Silence,’ growled the old witcher. ‘Not a word.’

It was Eskel’s behaviour which was most unlikely; he got up, approached the enchantress, bent down low, took her hand and kissed it respectfully. She swiftly withdrew her hand. Not so as to demonstrate her anger and annoyance but to break the pleasant, piercing vibration triggered by the witcher’s touch. Eskel emanated powerfully. More powerfully than Geralt.

‘Triss,’ he said, rubbing the hideous scar on his cheek with embarrassment, ‘help us. We ask you. Help us, Triss.’

The enchantress looked him in the eye and pursed her lips. ‘With what? What am I to help you with, Eskel?’

Eskel rubbed his cheek again, looked at Geralt. The white-haired witcher bowed his head, hiding his eyes behind his hand. Vesemir cleared his throat loudly.

At that moment, the door creaked open and Ciri entered the hall. Vesemir’s hawking changed into something like a wheeze, a loud indrawn breath. Lambert opened his mouth. Triss suppressed a laugh.

Ciri, her hair cut and styled, was walking towards them with tiny steps, carefully holding up a dark-blue dress – shortened and adjusted, and still showing the signs of having been carried in a saddle-bag. Another present from the enchantress gleamed around the girl’s neck – a little black viper made of lacquered leather with a ruby eye and gold clasp.

Ciri stopped in front of Vesemir. Not quite knowing what to do with her hands, she planted her thumbs behind her belt.

‘I cannot train today,’ she recited in the utter silence, slowly and emphatically, ‘for I am . . . I am . . .’

She looked at the enchantress. Triss winked at her, smirking like a rascal well pleased with his mischief, and moved her lips to prompt the memorised lines.

‘Indisposed !’ ended Ciri loudly and proudly, turning her nose up almost to the ceiling.

Vesemir hawked again. But Eskel, dear Eskel, kept his head and

once more behaved as was fitting.

‘Of course,’ he said casually, smiling. ‘We understand and clearly we will postpone your exercises until your indisposition has passed. We will also cut the theory short and, if you feel unwell, we will put it aside for the time being, too. If you need any medication or—’

‘I’ll take care of that,’ Triss cut in just as casually.

‘Aha . . .’ Only now did Ciri blush a little – she looked at the old witcher. ‘Uncle Vesemir, I’ve asked Triss . . . that is, Miss Merigold, to . . . that is . . . Well, to stay here with us. For longer. For a long time. But Triss said you have to agree forsooth. Uncle Vesemir! Say yes!’

‘I agree . . .’ Vesemir wheezed out. ‘Of course, I agree . . .’

‘We are very happy.’ Only now did Geralt take his hand from his forehead. ‘We are extremely pleased, Triss.’

The enchantress nodded slightly towards him and innocently fluttered her eyelashes, winding a chestnut lock around her finger. Geralt’s face seemed almost graven from stone.

‘You behaved very properly and politely, Ciri,’ he said, ‘offering Miss Merigold our ongoing hospitality in Kaer Morhen. I am proud of you.’

Ciri reddened and smiled broadly. The enchantress gave her the next pre-arranged sign.

‘And now,’ said the girl, turning her nose up even higher, ‘I will leave you alone because you no doubt wish to talk over various important matters with Triss. Miss Merigold. Uncle Vesemir, gentlemen . . . I bid you goodbye. For the time being.’

She curtseyed gracefully then left the hall, walking up the stairs slowly and with dignity.

‘Bloody hell.’ Lambert broke the silence. ‘To think I didn’t believe that she really is a princess.’

‘Have you understood, you idiots?’ Vesemir cast his eye around. ‘If she puts a dress on in the morning I don’t want to see any exercises . . . Understood?’

Eskel and Coën bestowed a look which was entirely devoid of respect on the old man. Lambert snorted loudly. Geralt stared at the enchantress and the enchantress smiled back.

‘Thank you,’ he said. ‘Thank you, Triss.’

*

‘Conditions?’ Eskel was clearly worried. ‘But we’ve already promised to ease Ciri’s training, Triss. What other conditions do you want to impose?’

‘Well, maybe “conditions” isn’t a very nice phrase. So let us call it advice. I will give you three pieces of advice, and you are going to abide by each of them. If, of course, you really want me to stay and help you bring up the little one.’

‘We’re listening,’ said Geralt. ‘Go on, Triss.’

‘Above all,’ she began, smiling maliciously, ‘Ciri’s menu is to be more varied. And the secret mushrooms and mysterious greens in particular have to be limited.’

Geralt and Coën controlled their expressions wonderfully, Lambert and Eskel a little less so, Vesemir not at all. *But then*, she thought, looking at his comically embarrassed expression*, in his days the world was a better place. Duplicity was a character flaw to be ashamed of. Sincerity did not bring shame.*

‘Fewer infusions of your mystery-shrouded herbs,’ she continued, trying not to giggle, ‘and more milk. You have goats here. Milking is no great art. You’ll see, Lambert, you’ll learn how to do it in no time.’

‘Triss,’ started Geralt, ‘listen—’

‘No, you listen. You haven’t subjected Ciri to violent mutations, haven’t touched her hormones, haven’t tried any elixirs or Grasses on her. And that’s to be praised. That was sensible, responsible and humane. You haven’t harmed her with any of your poisons – all the more so you must not cripple her now.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘The mushrooms whose secrets you guard so carefully,’ she explained, ‘do, indeed, keep the girl wonderfully fit and strengthen her muscles. The herbs guarantee an ideal metabolic rate and hasten her development. All this taken together and helped along by gruelling training causes certain changes in her build, in her adipose tissue. She’s a woman, and as you haven’t crippled her hormonal system, do not cripple her physically now. She might hold it against you later if you so ruthlessly deprive her of her womanly . . . attributes. Do you understand what I’m saying?’

‘And how,’ muttered Lambert, brazenly eyeing Triss’s breasts which strained against the fabric of her dress. Eskel cleared his

throat and looked daggers at the young witcher.

‘At the moment,’ Geralt asked slowly, also gliding his eyes over this and that, ‘you haven’t noticed anything irreversible in her, I hope?’

‘No.’ She smiled. ‘Fortunately, not. She is developing healthily and normally and is built like a young dryad – it’s a pleasure to look at her. But I ask you to be moderate in using your accelerants.’

‘We will,’ promised Vesemir. ‘Thank you for the warning, child. What else? You said three . . . pieces of advice.’

‘Indeed. This is the second: Ciri must not be allowed to grow wild. She has to have contact with the world. With her peers. She has to be decently educated and prepared for a normal life. Let her wave her sword about for the time being. You won’t turn her into a witcher without mutation anyway, but having a witcher’s training won’t harm her. Times are hard and dangerous; she’ll be able to defend herself when necessary. Like an elf. But you must not bury her alive here, in the middle of nowhere. She has to enter normal life.’

‘Her normal life went up in flames along with Cintra,’ murmured Geralt, ‘but regarding this, Triss, as usual you’re right. We’ve already thought about it. In spring I’m going to take her to the Temple school. To Nenneke. To Ellander.’

‘That’s a very good idea and a wise decision. Nenneke is an exceptional woman and Goddess Melitele’s sanctuary an exceptional place. Safe, sure, and it guarantees an appropriate education for the girl. Does Ciri know yet?’

‘She does. She kicked up a fuss for a few days but finally accepted the idea. Now she is even looking forward to spring with impatience, excited by the prospect of an expedition to Temeria. She’s interested in the world.’

‘So was I at her age.’ Triss smiled. ‘And that comparison brings us dangerously close to the third piece of advice. The most important piece. And you already know what it is. Don’t pull silly faces. I’m a magician, have you forgotten? I don’t know how long it took you to recognise Ciri’s magical abilities. It took me less than half an hour. After that I knew who, or rather what, the girl is.’

‘And what is she?’

‘A Source.’

‘That’s impossible!’

‘It’s possible. Certain even. Ciri is a Source and has mediumistic powers. What is more, these powers are very, very worrying. And you, my dear witchers, are perfectly well aware of this. You’ve noticed these powers and they have worried you too. That is the one and only reason you brought me here to Kaer Morhen? Am I right? The one and only reason?’

‘Yes,’ Vesemir confirmed after a moment’s silence.

Triss breathed an imperceptible sigh of relief. For a moment, she was afraid that Geralt would be the one to confirm it.

The first snow fell the following day, fine snowflakes initially, but soon turning into a blizzard. It fell throughout the night and, in the early morning, the walls of Kaer Morhen were drowned beneath a snowdrift. There could be no question of running the Killer, especially since Ciri was still not feeling very well. Triss suspected that the witchers’ accelerants might be the cause of the girl’s menstrual problems. She could not be sure, however, knowing practically nothing about the drugs, and Ciri was, beyond doubt, the only girl in the world to whom they had been administered. She did not share her suspicions with the witchers. She did not want to worry or annoy them and preferred to apply her own methods. She gave Ciri elixirs to drink, tied a string of active jaspers around her waist, under her dress, and forbade her to exert herself in any way, especially by chasing around wildly hunting rats with a sword.

Ciri was bored. She roamed the castle sleepily and finally, for lack of any other amusement, joined Coën who was cleaning the stable, grooming the horses and repairing a harness.

Geralt – to the enchantress’s rage – disappeared somewhere and appeared only towards evening, bearing a dead goat. Triss helped him skin his prey. Although she sincerely detested the smell of meat and blood, she wanted to be near the witcher. Near him. As near as possible. A cold, determined resolution was growing in her. She did not want to sleep alone any longer.

‘Triss!’ yelled Ciri suddenly, running down the stairs, stamping. ‘Can I sleep with you tonight? Triss, please, please say yes! Please, Triss!’

The snow fell and fell. It brightened up only with the arrival of Midinváerne, the Day of the Winter Equinox.

On the third day all the children died save one, a male barely ten. Hitherto agitated by a sudden madness, he fell all at once into deep stupor. His eyes took on a glassy gaze; incessantly with his hands did he clutch at clothing, or brandish them in the air as if desirous of catching a quill. His breathing grew loud and hoarse; sweat cold, clammy and malodorous appeared on his skin. Then was he once more given elixir through the vein and the seizure it did return. This time a nose-bleed did ensue, coughing turned to vomiting, after which the male weakened entirely and became inert.

For two days more did symptoms not subside. The child's skin, hitherto drenched in sweat, grew dry and hot, the pulse ceased to be full and firm – albeit remaining of average strength, slow rather than fast. No more did he wake, nor did he scream.

Finally, came the seventh day. The male awoke and opened his eyes, and his eyes were as those of a viper . . .

Carla Demetia Crest, *The Trial of Grasses and other secret Witcher practices, seen with my own eyes*, manuscript exclusively accessible to the Chapter of Wizards

CHAPTER THREE

'Your fears were unfounded, entirely ungrounded.' Triss grimaced, resting her elbows on the table. 'The time when wizards used to hunt Sources and magically gifted children, tearing them from their parents or guardians by force or deceit, is long gone. Did you really think I might want to take Ciri away from you?'

Lambert snorted and turned his face away. Eskel and Vesemir looked at Geralt, and Geralt said nothing. He continued to gaze off to the side, playing incessantly with his silver witcher medallion, depicting the head of a snarling wolf. Triss knew the medallion reacted to magic. On such a night as Midinváerne, when the air itself was vibrating with magic, the witchers' medallions must be practically humming. It must be both irritating and bothersome.

'No, child,' Vesemir finally said. 'We know you would not do such a thing. But we also know that you do, ultimately, have to tell the Chapter about her. We've known for a long time that every wizard, male or female, is burdened with this duty. You don't take talented children from their parents and guardians any more. You observe such children so that later – at the right moment – you can fascinate them in magic, influence them—'

‘Have no fear,’ she interrupted coldly. ‘I will not tell anyone about Ciri. Not even the Chapter. Why are you looking at me like that?’

‘We’re amazed by the ease with which you pledge to keep this secret,’ said Eskel calmly. ‘Forgive me, Triss, I do not mean to offend you, but what has happened to your legendary loyalty to the Council and Chapter?’

‘A lot has happened. The war changed many things, and the battle for Sodden Hill changed even more. I won’t bore you with the politics, especially as certain issues and affairs are bound by secrets I am not allowed to divulge. But as for loyalty . . . I am loyal. And believe me, in this matter I can be loyal to both you and to the Chapter.’

‘Such double loyalty’ – Geralt looked her in the eyes for the first time that evening – ‘is devilishly difficult to manage. Rarely does it succeed, Triss.’

The enchantress turned her gaze on Ciri. The girl was sitting on a bearskin with Coën, tucked away in the far corner of the hall, and both were busy playing a hand-slapping game. The game was growing monotonous as both were incredibly quick – neither could manage to slap the other’s hand in any way. This, however, clearly neither mattered to them nor spoiled their game.

‘Geralt,’ she said, ‘when you found Ciri, on the Yaruga, you took her with you. You brought her to Kaer Morhen, hid her from the world and do not let even those closest to the child know she is alive. You did this because something – about which I know nothing – convinced you that destiny exists, holds sway over us, and guides us in everything we do. I think the same, and have always done so. If destiny wants Ciri to become a magician, she will become one. Neither the Chapter nor the Council have to know about her, they don’t have to observe or encourage her. So in keeping your secret I won’t betray the Chapter in any way. But as you know, there is something of a hitch here.’

‘Were it only one,’ sighed Vesemir. ‘Go on, child.’

‘The girl has magical abilities, and that can’t be neglected. It’s too dangerous.’

‘In what way?’

‘Uncontrolled powers are an ominous thing. For both the Source and those in their vicinity. The Source can threaten those around them in many ways. But they threaten themselves in only one.

Mental illness. Usually catatonia.'

'Devil take it,' said Lambert after a long silence. 'I am listening to you half-convinced that someone here has already lost their marbles and will, any moment now, present a threat to the rest of us. Destiny, sources, spells, hocus-pocus . . . Aren't you exaggerating, Merigold? Is this the first child to be brought to the Keep? Geralt didn't find destiny; he found another homeless, orphaned child. We'll teach the girl the sword and let her out into the world like the others. True, I admit we've never trained a girl in Kaer Morhen before. We've had some problems with Ciri, made mistakes, and it's a good thing you've pointed them out to us. But don't let us exaggerate. She is not so remarkable as to make us fall on our knees and raise our eyes to the heavens. Is there a lack of female warriors roaming the world? I assure you, Merigold, Ciri will leave here skilful and healthy, strong and able to face life. And, I warrant, without catatonia or any other epilepsy. Unless you delude her into believing she has some such disease.'

'Vesemir,' Triss turned in her chair, 'tell him to keep quiet, he's getting in the way.'

'You think you know it all,' said Lambert calmly, 'but you don't. Not yet. Look.'

He stretched his hand towards the hearth, arranging his fingers together in a strange way. The chimney roared and howled, the flames burst out violently, the glowing embers grew brighter and rained sparks. Geralt, Vesemir and Eskel glanced at Ciri anxiously but the girl paid no attention to the spectacular fireworks.

Triss folded her arms and looked at Lambert defiantly.

'The Sign of Aard,' she stated calmly. 'Did you think to impress me? With the use of the same sign, strengthened through concentration, will-power and a spell, I can blow the logs from the chimney in a moment and blast them so high you will think they are stars.'

'You can,' he agreed. 'But Ciri can't. She can't form the Sign of Aard. Or any other sign. She has tried hundreds of times, to no effect. And you know our Signs require minimal power. Ciri does not even have that. She is an absolutely normal child. She has not the least magical power – she has, in fact, a comprehensive lack of ability. And here you are telling us she's a Source, trying to threaten us—'

'A Source,' she explained coldly, 'has no control over their skills,

no command over them. They are a medium, something like a transmitter. Unknowingly they get in touch with energy, unknowingly they convert it. And when they try to control it, when they strain trying to form the Signs perhaps, nothing comes of it. And nothing will come of it, not just after hundreds of attempts but after thousands. It is one characteristic of a Source. Then, one day, a moment comes when the Source does not exert itself, does not strain, is daydreaming or thinking about cabbage and sausages, playing dice, enjoying themselves in bed with a partner, picking their nose . . . and suddenly something happens. A house might goes up in flames. Or sometimes, half a town goes up.'

'You're exaggerating, Merigold.'

'Lambert.' Geralt released his medallion and rested his hands on the table. 'First, stop calling Triss "Merigold". She has asked you a number of times not to. Second, Triss is not exaggerating. I saw Ciri's mother, Princess Pavetta, in action with my own eyes. I tell you, it was really something. I don't know if she was a Source or not, but no one suspected she had any power at all until, save by a hair's breadth, she almost reduced the royal castle of Cintra to ashes.'

'We should assume, therefore,' said Eskel, lighting the candles in yet another candle-stick, 'that Ciri could, indeed, be genetically burdened.'

'Not only could,' said Vesemir, 'she *is* so burdened. On the one hand Lambert is right. Ciri is not capable of forming Signs. On the other . . . We have all seen . . .'

He fell silent and looked at Ciri who, with a joyful squeal, acknowledged that she had the upper hand in the game. Triss spied a small smile on Coën's face and was sure he had allowed her to win.

'Precisely,' she sneered. 'You have all seen. What have you seen? Under what circumstances did you see it? Don't you think, boys, that the time has come for more truthful confessions? Hell, I repeat, I will keep your secret. You have my word.'

Lambert glanced at Geralt; Geralt nodded in assent. The younger witcher stood and took a large rectangular crystal carafe and a smaller phial from a high shelf. He poured the contents of the phial into the carafe, shook it several times and poured the transparent liquid into the chalices on the table.

'Have a drink with us, Triss.'

‘Is the truth so terrible,’ she mocked, ‘that we can’t talk about it soberly? Do I have to get drunk in order to hear it?’

‘Don’t be such a know-all. Take a sip. You will find it easier to understand.’

‘What is it?’

‘White Seagull.’

‘What?’

‘A mild remedy,’ Eskel smiled, ‘for pleasant dreams.’

‘Damn it! A witcher hallucinogenic? That’s why your eyes shine like that in the evenings!’

‘White Seagull is very gentle. It’s Black Seagull that is hallucinogenic.’

‘If there’s magic in this liquid I’m not allowed to take it!’

‘Exclusively natural ingredients,’ Geralt reassured her but he looked, she noticed, disconcerted. He was clearly afraid she would question them about the elixir’s ingredients. ‘And diluted with a great deal of water. We would not offer you anything that could harm you.’

The sparkling liquid, with its strange taste, struck her throat with its chill and then dispersed warmth throughout her body. The magician ran her tongue over her gums and palate. She was unable to recognise any of the ingredients.

‘You gave Ciri some of this . . . Seagull to drink,’ she surmised. ‘And then—’

‘It was an accident,’ Geralt interrupted quickly. ‘That first evening, just after we arrived . . . she was thirsty, and the Seagull stood on the table. Before we had time to react, she had drunk it all in one go. And fallen into a trance.’

‘We had such a fright,’ Vesemir admitted, and sighed. ‘Oh, that we did, child. More than we could take.’

‘She started speaking with another voice,’ the magician stated calmly, looking at the witchers’ eyes gleaming in the candlelight. ‘She started talking about events and matters of which she could have no knowledge. She started . . . to prophesy. Right? What did she say?’

‘Rubbish,’ said Lambert dryly. ‘Senseless drivel.’

‘Then I have no doubt’ – she looked straight at him – ‘that you

understood each other perfectly well. Drivel is your speciality – and I am further convinced of it every time you open your mouth. Do me a great favour and don't open it for a while, all right?'

'This once,' said Eskel gravely, rubbing the scar across his cheek, 'Lambert is right, Triss. After drinking Seagull Ciri really was incomprehensible. That first time it was gibberish. Only after—'

He broke off. Triss shook her head.

'It was only the second time that she started talking sense,' she guessed. 'So there was a second time, too. Also after she drank a drug because of your carelessness?'

'Triss.' Geralt raised his head. 'This is not the time for your childish spitefulness. It doesn't amuse us. It worries and upsets us. Yes, there was a second time, too, and a third. Ciri fell, quite by accident, during an exercise. She lost consciousness. When she regained it, she had fallen into another trance. And once again she spoke nonsense. Again it was not her voice. And again it was incomprehensible. But I have heard similar voices before, heard a similar way of speaking. It's how those poor, sick, demented women known as oracles speak. You see what I'm thinking?'

'Clearly. That was the second time, get to the third.'

Geralt wiped his brow, suddenly beaded with sweat, on his forearm. 'Ciri often wakes up at night,' he continued. 'Shouting. She has been through a lot. She does not want to talk about it but it is clear that she saw things no child should see in Cintra and Angren. I even fear that . . . that someone harmed her. It comes back to her in dreams. Usually she is easy to reassure and she falls asleep without any problem . . . But once, after waking . . . she was in a trance again. She again spoke with someone else's, unpleasant, menacing voice. She spoke clearly and made sense. She prophesied. Foresaw the future. And what she foretold . . .'

'What? What, Geralt?'

'Death,' Vesemir said gently. 'Death, child.'

Triss glanced at Ciri, who was shrilly accusing Coën of cheating. Coën put his arms around her and burst out laughing. The magician suddenly realised that she had never, up until now, heard any of the witchers laugh.

'For whom?' she asked briefly, still gazing at Coën.

'Him,' said Vesemir.

'And me,' Geralt added. And smiled.

‘When she woke up—’

‘She remembered nothing. And we didn’t ask her any questions.’

‘Quite so. As to the prophecy . . . Was it specific? Detailed?’

‘No.’ Geralt looked her straight in the eyes. ‘Confused. Don’t ask about it, Triss. We are not worried by the contents of Ciri’s prophecies and ravings but about what happens to her. We’re not afraid for ourselves but—’

‘Careful,’ warned Vesemir. ‘Don’t talk about it in front of her.’

Coën approached the table carrying the girl piggy-back.

‘Wish everybody goodnight, Ciri,’ he said. ‘Say goodnight to those night owls. We’re going to sleep. It’s nearly midnight. In a minute it’ll be the end of Midinváerne. As of tomorrow, every day brings spring closer!’

‘I’m thirsty.’ Ciri slipped off his back and reached for Eskel’s chalice. Eskel deftly moved the vessel beyond her reach and grabbed a jug of water. Triss stood quickly.

‘Here you are.’ She gave her half-full chalice to the girl while meaningfully squeezing Geralt’s arm and looking Vesemir in the eye. ‘Drink.’

‘Triss,’ whispered Eskel, watching Ciri drink greedily, ‘what are you doing? It’s—’

‘Not a word, please.’

They did not have to wait long for it to take effect. Ciri suddenly grew rigid, cried out, and smiled a broad, happy smile. She squeezed her eyelids shut and stretched out her arms. She laughed, spun a pirouette and danced on tiptoes. Lambert moved the stool away in a flash, leaving Coën standing between the dancing girl and the hearth.

Triss jumped up and tore an amulet from her pouch – a sapphire set in silver on a thin chain. She squeezed it tightly in her hand.

‘Child . . .’ groaned Vesemir. ‘What are you doing?’

‘I know what I’m doing,’ she said sharply. ‘Ciri has fallen into a trance and I am going to contact her psychically. I am going to enter her. I told you, she is something like a magical transmitter – I’ve got to know what she is transmitting, how, and from where she is drawing the aura, how she is transforming it. It’s Midinváerne, a favourable night for such an undertaking . . .’

‘I don’t like it.’ Geralt frowned. ‘I don’t like it at all.’

‘Should either of us suffer an epileptic fit,’ the magician said ignoring his words, ‘you know what to do. A stick between our teeth, hold us down, wait for it to pass. Chin up, boys. I’ve done this before.’

Ciri ceased dancing, sank to her knees, extended her arms and rested her head on her lap. Triss pressed the now warm amulet to her temple and murmured the formula of a spell. She closed her eyes, concentrated her willpower and gave out a burst of magic.

The sea roared, waves thundered against the rocky shore and exploded in high geysers amidst the boulders. She flapped her wings, chasing the salty wind. Indescribably happy, she dived, caught up with a flock of her companions, brushed the crests of the waves with her claws, soared into the sky again, shedding water droplets, and glided, tossed by the gale whistling through her pinfeathers. *Force of suggestion*, she thought soberly. *It is only force of suggestion. Seagull!*

Triiiss! Triiss!

Ciri? Where are you?

Triiiss!

The cry of the seagulls ceased. The magician still felt the wet splash of the breakers but the sea was no longer below her. Or it was – but it was a sea of grass, an endless plateau stretching as far as the horizon. Triss, with horror, realised she was looking at the view from the top of Sodden Hill. But it was not the Hill. It could not be the Hill.

The sky suddenly grew dark, shadows swirled around her. She saw a long column of indistinct figures slowly climbing down the mountainside. She heard murmurs superimposed over each other, mingling into an uncanny, incomprehensible chorus.

Ciri was standing nearby with her back turned to her. The wind was blowing her ashen hair about.

The indistinct, hazy figures continued past in a long, unending column. Passing her, they turned their heads. Triss suppressed a cry, watching the listless, peaceful faces and their dead, unseeing eyes. She did not know all of the faces, did not recognise them. But some of them she did know.

Coral. Vanielle. Yoël. Pox-marked Axel . . .

‘Why have you brought me here?’ she whispered. ‘Why?’

Ciri turned. She raised her arm and the magician saw a trickle of blood run down her life-line, across her palm and onto her wrist.

'It is the rose,' the girl said calmly. 'The rose of Shaerrawedd. I pricked myself. It is nothing. It is only blood. The blood of elves . . .'

The sky grew even darker, then, a moment later, flared with the sharp, blinding glare of lightning. Everything froze in the silence and stillness. Triss took a step, wanting to make sure she could. She stopped next to Ciri and saw that both of them stood on the edge of a bottomless chasm where reddish smoke, glowing as though it was lit from behind, was swirling. The flash of another soundless bolt of lightning suddenly revealed a long, marble staircase leading into the depths of the abyss.

'It has to be this way,' Ciri said in a shaky voice. 'There is no other. Only this. Down the stairs. It has to be this way because . . . Va'esse deireádh aep eigean . . .'

'Speak,' whispered the magician. 'Speak, child.'

'The Child of Elder Blood . . . Feainnewedd . . . Luned aep Hen Ichaer . . . Deithwen . . . The White Flame . . . No, no . . . No!'

'Ciri !'

'The black knight . . . with feathers in his helmet . . . What did he do to me? What happened ? I was frightened . . . I'm still frightened. It's not ended, it will never end. The lion cub must die . . . Reasons of state . . . No . . . No . . .'

'Ciri !'

'No!' The girl turned rigid and squeezed her eyelids shut. 'No, no, I don't want to! Don't touch me!'

Ciri's face suddenly changed, hardened; her voice became metallic, cold and hostile, resounding with threatening, cruel mockery.

'You have come all this way with her, Triss Merigold? All the way here? You have come too far, Fourteenth One. I warned you.'

'Who are you?' Triss shuddered but she kept her voice under control.

'You will know when the time comes.'

'I will know now!'

The magician raised her arms, extended them abruptly, putting

all her strength into a Spell of Identification. The magic curtain burst but behind it was a second . . . A third . . . A fourth . . .

Triss sank to her knees with a groan. But reality continued to burst, more doors opened, a long, endless row leading to nowhere. To emptiness.

'You are wrong, Fourteenth One,' the metallic, inhuman voice sneered. 'You've mistaken the stars reflected on the surface of the lake at night for the heavens.'

'Do not touch—Do not touch that child!'

'She is not a child.'

Ciri's lips moved but Triss saw that the girl's eyes were dead, glazed and vacant.

'She is not a child,' the voice repeated. 'She is the Flame, the White Flame which will set light to the world. She is the Elder Blood, Hen Ichaer. The blood of elves. The seed which will not sprout but burst into flame. The blood which will be defiled . . . When Tedd Deireádh arrives, the Time of End. Va'esse deireádh aep eigean!'

'Are you foretelling death?' shouted Triss. 'Is that all you can do, foretell death? For everyone? Them, her . . . Me?'

'You? You are already dead, Fourteenth One. Everything in you has already died.'

'By the power of the spheres,' moaned the magician, activating what little remained of her strength and drawing her hand through the air, 'I throw a spell on you by water, fire, earth and air. I conjure you in thought, in dream and in death, by all that was, by what is and by what will be. I cast my spell on you. Who are you? Speak!'

Ciri turned her head away. The vision of the staircase leading down into the depths of the abyss disappeared, dissolved, and in its place appeared a grey, leaden sea, foaming, crests of waves breaking. And the seagull's cries burst through the silence once more.

'Fly,' said the voice, through the girl's lips. 'It is time. Go back to where you came from, Fourteenth of the Hill. Fly on the wings of a gull and listen to the cry of other seagulls. Listen carefully!'

'I conjure you—'

'You cannot. Fly, seagull!'

And suddenly the wet salty air was there again, roaring with the gale, and there was the flight, a flight with no beginning and no end. Seagulls cried wildly, cried and commanded.

Triss?

Ciri ?

Forget about him! Don't torture him! Forget! Forget, Triss! Forget!

Triss! Triss! Trisss!

'Triss!'

She opened her eyes, tossed her head on the pillow and moved her numb hands.

'Geralt?'

'I'm here. How are you feeling?'

She cast her eyes around. She was in her chamber, lying on the bed. On the best bed in the whole of Kaer Morhen.

'What is happening to Ciri?'

'She is asleep.'

'How long—'

'Too long,' he interrupted. He covered her with the duvet and put his arms around her. As he leaned over the wolf's head medallion swayed just above her face. 'What you did was not the best of ideas, Triss.'

'Everything is all right.' She trembled in his embrace. *That's not true*, she thought. *Nothing's all right*. She turned her face so that the medallion didn't touch her. There were many theories about the properties of witcher amulets and none advised magicians to touch them during the Equinox.

'Did . . . Did we say anything during the trance?'

'You, nothing. You were unconscious throughout. Ciri . . . just before she woke up . . . said: "Va'esse deireádh aep eigean".'

'She knows the Elder Speech?'

'Not enough to say a whole sentence.'

'A sentence which means: "Something is ending".' The magician wiped her face with her hand. 'Geralt, this is a serious matter. The girl is an exceptionally powerful medium. I don't know what or who she is contacting, but I think there are no limits to her connection. Something wants to take possession of her. Something which is too

powerful for me. I am afraid for her. Another trance could end in mental illness. I have no control over it, don't know how to, can't . . . If it proved necessary, I would not be able to block or suppress her powers; I would even not be capable, if there were no other option, of permanently extinguishing them. You have to get help from another magician. A more gifted one. More experienced. You know who I'm talking about.'

'I do.' He turned his head away, clenched his lips.

'Don't resist. Don't defend yourself. I can guess why you turned to me rather than her. Overcome your pride, crush your rancour and obstinacy. There is no point to it, you'll torture yourself to death. And you are risking Ciri's health and life in the process. Another trance is liable to be more dangerous to her than the Trial of Grasses. Ask Yennefer for help, Geralt.'

'And you, Triss?'

'What about me?' She swallowed with difficulty. 'I'm not important. I let you down. I let you down . . . in everything. I was . . . I was your mistake. Nothing more.'

'Mistakes,' he said with effort, 'are also important to me. I don't cross them out of my life, or memory. And I never blame others for them. You are important to me, Triss, and always will be. You never let me down. Never. Believe me.'

She remained silent a long while.

'I will stay until spring,' she said finally, struggling against her shaking voice. 'I will stay with Ciri . . . I will watch over her. Day and night. I will be with her day and night. And when spring is here . . . when spring is here we will take her to Melitele's Temple in Ellander. The thing that wants to possess her might not be able to reach her in the temple. And then you will ask Yennefer for help.'

'All right, Triss. Thank you.'

'Geralt?'

'Yes.'

'Ciri said something else, didn't she? Something only you heard. Tell me what it was.'

'No,' he protested and his voice quivered. 'No, Triss.'

'Please.'

'She wasn't speaking to me.'

‘I know. She was speaking to me. Tell me, please.’

‘After coming to . . . When I picked her up . . . She whispered: “Forget about him. Don’t torture him.”’

‘I won’t,’ she said quietly. ‘But I can’t forget. Forgive me.’

‘I am the one who ought to be asking for forgiveness. And not only asking you.’

‘You love her that much,’ she stated, not asking.

‘That much,’ he admitted in a whisper after a long moment of silence.

‘Geralt.’

‘Yes, Triss?’

‘Stay with me tonight.’

‘Triss . . .’

‘Only stay.’

‘All right.’

Not long after Midinváerne the snow stopped falling. The frost came.

Triss stayed with Ciri day and night. She watched over her. She surrounded her with care, visible and invisible.

The girl woke up shouting almost every night. She was delirious, holding her cheek and crying with pain. The magician calmed her with spells and elixirs, put her to sleep, cuddling and rocking her in her arms. And then she herself would be unable to sleep for a long time, thinking about what Ciri had said in her sleep and after she came to. And she felt a mounting fear. Va’esse deireádh aep eigean . . . Something is ending . . .

That is how it was for ten days and nights. And finally it passed. It ended, disappeared without a trace. Ciri calmed, she slept peacefully with no nightmares, and no dreams.

But Triss kept a constant watch. She did not leave the girl for a moment. She surrounded her with care. Visible and invisible.

‘Faster, Ciri! Lunge, attack, dodge! Half-pirouette, thrust, dodge! Balance! Balance with your left arm or you’ll fall from the comb! And you’ll hurt your . . . womanly attributes!’

‘What?’

‘Nothing. Aren’t you tired? We’ll take a break, if you like.’

‘No, Lambert! I can go on. I’m not that weak, you know. Shall I try jumping over every other post?’

‘Don’t you dare! You might fall and then Merigold will tear my— my head off.’

‘I won’t fall!’

‘I’ve told you once and I’m not going to say it again. Don’t show off! Steady on your legs! And breathe, Ciri, breathe! You’re panting like a dying mammoth!’

‘That’s not true!’

‘Don’t squeal. Practise! Attack, dodge! Parry! Half-piroutte! Parry, full pirouette! Steadier on the posts, damn it! Don’t wobble! Lunge, thrust! Faster! Half-pirouette! Jump and cut! That’s it! Very good!’

‘Really? Was that really very good, Lambert?’

‘Who said so?’

‘You did! A moment ago!’

‘Slip of the tongue. Attack! Half-pirouette! Dodge! And again! Ciri, where was the parry? How many times do I have to tell you? After you dodge you always parry, deliver a blow with the blade to protect your head and shoulders! Always!’

‘Even when I’m only fighting one opponent?’

‘You never know what you’re fighting. You never know what’s happening behind you. You always have to cover yourself. Foot and sword work! It’s got to be a reflex. Reflex, understand? You mustn’t forget that. You forget it in a real fight and you’re finished. Again! At last! That’s it! See how such a parry lands? You can take any strike from it. You can cut backwards from it, if you have to. Right, show me a pirouette and a thrust backwards.’

‘Haaa!’

‘Very good. You see the point now? Has it got through to you?’

‘I’m not stupid!’

‘You’re a girl. Girls don’t have brains.’

‘Lambert! If Triss heard that!’

‘If ifs and ands were pots and pans. All right, that’s enough. Come down. We’ll take a break.’

‘I’m not tired!’

‘But I am. I said, a break. Come down from the comb.’

‘Turning a somersault?’

‘What do you think? Like a hen off its roost? Go on, jump. Don’t be afraid, I’m here for you.’

‘Haaaa!’

‘Nice. Very good – for a girl. You can take off the blindfold now.’

‘Triss, maybe that’s enough for today? What do you think? Maybe we could take the sleigh and ride down the hill? The sun’s shining, the snow’s sparkling so much it hurts the eyes! The weather’s beautiful !’

‘Don’t lean out or you’ll fall from the window.’

‘Let’s go sleighing, Triss!’

‘Suggest that again in Elder Speech and we’ll end the lesson there. Move away from the window, come back to the table . . . Ciri, how many times do I have to ask you? Stop waving that sword about and put it away.’

‘It’s my new sword! It’s real, a witcher’s sword! Made of steel which fell from heaven! Really! Geralt said so and he never lies, you know that!’

‘Oh, yes. I know that.’

‘I’ve got to get used to this sword. Uncle Vesemir had it adjusted just right for my weight, height and arm-length. I’ve got to get my hand and wrist accustomed to it!’

‘Accustom yourself to your heart’s content, but outside. Not here! Well, I’m listening. You wanted to suggest we get the sleigh out. In Elder Speech. So – suggest it.’

‘Hmmm . . . What’s “sleigh”?’

‘Sledd as a noun. Aesledde as a verb.’

‘Aha . . . Vaien aesledde, ell’ea?’

‘Don’t end a question that way, it’s impolite. You form questions using intonation.’

‘But the children from the Islands—’

‘You’re not learning the local Skellige jargon but classical Elder

Speech.'

'And why am I learning the Speech, tell me?'

'So that you know it. It's fitting to learn things you don't know. Anyone who doesn't know other languages is handicapped.'

'But people only speak the common tongue anyway!'

'True. But some speak more than just it. I warrant, Ciri, that it is better to count yourself amongst those few than amongst everyone. So, I'm listening. A full sentence: "The weather today is beautiful, so let's get the sleigh."'

'Elaine . . . Hmmm . . . Elaine tedd a'taeghane, a va'en aesledde?'

'Very good.'

'Ha! So let's get the sleigh.'

'We will. But let me finish applying my make-up.'

'And who are you putting make-up on for, exactly?'

'Myself. A woman accentuates her beauty for her own self-esteem. '

'Hmmm . . . Do you know what? I feel pretty poorly too. Don't laugh, Triss!'

'Come here. Sit on my knee. Put the sword away, I've already asked you! Thank you. Now take that large brush and powder your face. Not so much, girl, not so much! Look in the mirror. See how pretty you are?'

'I can't see any difference. I'll do my eyes, all right? What are you laughing at? You always paint your eyes. I want to too.'

'Fine. Here you are, put some shadow on your eyelids with this. Ciri, don't close both your eyes or you won't see anything – you're smudging your whole face. Take a tiny bit and only skim over the eyelids. Skim, I said! Let me, I'll just spread it a little. Close your eyes. Now open them.'

'Oooo!'

'See the difference? A tiny bit of shadow won't do any harm, even to such beautiful eyes as yours. The elves knew what they were doing when they invented eye shadow.'

'Elves?'

'You didn't know? Make-up is an elvish invention. We've learned a lot of useful things from the Elder People. And we've given bloody

little back in return. Now take the pencil and draw a thin line across your upper lids, just above the lashes. Ciri, what are you doing?'

'Don't laugh! My eyelid's trembling! That's why!'

'Part your lips a little and it'll stop trembling. See?'

'Ooooh!'

'Come on, now we'll go and stun the witchers with our beauty. It's hard to find a prettier sight. And then we'll take the sleigh and smudge our make-up in the deep snowdrifts.'

'And we'll make ourselves up again!'

'No. We'll tell Lambert to warm the bathroom and we'll take a bath.'

'Again? Lambert says we're using up too much fuel with our baths.'

'Lambert cáen me a'báeth aep arse.'

'What? I didn't understand . . .'

'With time you'll master the idioms, too. We've still got a lot of time for studying before spring. But now . . . Va'en aesledde, me elaine luned!'

*

'Here, on this engraving . . . No, damn it, not on that one . . . On this one. This is, as you already know, a ghoul. Tell us, Ciri, what you've learned about ghouls . . . Hey, look at me! What the devil have you got on your eyelids?'

'Greater self-esteem!'

'What? Never mind, I'm listening.'

'Hmm . . . The ghoul, Uncle Vesemir, is a corpse-devouring monster. It can be seen in cemeteries, in the vicinity of barrows, anywhere the dead are buried. At nec—necropolia. On battle-grounds, on fields of battle . . .'

'So it's only a danger to the dead, is that right?'

'No, not only. A ghoul may also attack the living if it's hungry or falls into a fury. If, for example, there's a battle . . . A lot of people killed . . .'

'What's the matter, Ciri?'

'Nothing . . .'

‘Ciri, listen. Forget about that. That will never return.’

‘I saw . . . In Sodden and in Transriver . . . Entire fields . . . They were lying there, being eaten by wolves and wild dogs. Birds were picking at them . . . I guess there were ghouls there too . . .’

‘That’s why you’re learning about ghouls now, Ciri. When you know about something it stops being a nightmare. When you know how to fight something, it stops being so threatening. So how do you fight a ghoul, Ciri?’

‘With a silver sword. The ghoul is sensitive to silver.’

‘And to what else?’

‘Bright light. And fire.’

‘So you can fight it with light and fire?’

‘You can, but it’s dangerous. A witcher doesn’t use light or fire because it makes it harder to see. Every light creates a shadow and shadows make it harder to get your bearings. One must always fight in darkness, by moon or starlight.’

‘Quite right. You’ve remembered it well, clever girl. And now look here, at this engraving.’

‘Eeeueeeuuueee—’

‘Oh well, true enough, it is not a beautiful cu—creature. It’s a graveir. A graveir is a type of ghoul. It looks very much like a ghoul but is considerably larger. He can also be told apart, as you can see, by these three bony combs on his skull. The rest is the same as any other corpse-eater. Take note of the short, blunt claws, adapted for digging up graves, and churning the earth. Strong teeth for shattering bones and a long, narrow tongue used to lick the decaying marrow from them. Such stinking marrow is a delicacy for the graveir . . . What’s the matter?’

‘Nnnnothing.’

‘You’re completely pale. And green. You don’t eat enough. Did you eat breakfast?’

‘Yeeees. I diiiiddddddd.’

‘What was I . . . Aha. I almost forgot. Remember, because this is important. Graveirs, like ghouls and other monsters in this category, do not have their own ecological niche. They are relicts from the age of the interpenetration of spheres. Killing them does not upset the order and interconnections of nature which prevail in our present sphere. In this sphere these monsters are foreign and there

is no place for them. Do you understand, Ciri?'

'I do, Uncle Vesemir. Geralt explained it to me. I know all that. An ecological niche is—'

'All right, that's fine. I know what it is. If Geralt has explained it to you, you don't have to recite it to me. Let us return to the graveir. Graveirs appear quite rarely, fortunately, because they're bloody dangerous sons-of-bitches. The smallest wound inflicted by a graveir will infect you with corpse venom. Which elixir is used to treat corpse venom poisoning, Ciri?'

'"Golden Oriole".'

'Correct. But it is better to avoid infection to begin with. That is why, when fighting a graveir, you must never get close to the bastard. You always fight from a distance and strike from a leap.'

'Hmm . . . And where's it best to strike one?'

'We're just getting to that. Look . . .'

'Once more, Ciri. We'll go through it slowly so that you can master each move. Now, I'm attacking you with tierce, taking the position as if to thrust . . . Why are you retreating?'

'Because I know it's a feint! You can move into a wide sinistra or strike with upper quarte. And I'll retreat and parry with a counterfeint!'

'Is that so? And if I do this?'

'Auuu! It was supposed to be slow! What did I do wrong, Coën?'

'Nothing. I'm just taller and stronger than you are.'

'That's not fair!'

'There's no such thing as a fair fight. You have to make use of every advantage and every opportunity that you get. By retreating you gave me the opportunity to put more force into the strike. Instead of retreating you should have executed a half-pirouette to the left and tried to cut at me from below, with quarte dextra, under the chin, in the cheek or throat.'

'As if you'd let me! You'll do a reverse pirouette and get my neck from the left before I can parry! How am I meant to know what you're doing?'

'You have to know. And you do know.'

'Oh, sure!'

‘Ciri, what we’re doing is fighting. I’m your opponent. I want to and have to defeat you because my life is at stake. I’m taller and stronger than you so I’m going to watch for opportunities to strike in order to avoid or break your parry – as you’ve just seen. What do I need a pirouette for? I’m already in sinistra, see? What could be simpler than to strike with a seconde, under the arm, on the inside? If I slash your artery, you’ll be dead in a couple of minutes. Defend yourself!’

‘Haaaa!’

‘Very good. A beautiful, quick parry. See how exercising your wrist has come in useful? And now pay attention – a lot of fencers make the mistake of executing a standing parry and freeze for a second, and that’s just when you can catch them out, strike – like so!’

‘Haa!’

‘Beautiful! Now jump away, jump away immediately, pirouette! I could have a dagger in my left hand! Good! Very good! And now, Ciri? What am I going to do now?’

‘How am I to know?’

‘Watch my feet! How is my body weight distributed? What can I do from this position?’

‘Anything!’

‘So spin, spin, force me to open up! Defend yourself! Good! And again! Good! And again!’

‘Owwww!’

‘Not so good.’

‘Uff . . . What did I do wrong?’

‘Nothing. I’m just faster. Take your guards off. We’ll sit for a moment, take a break. You must be tired, you’ve been running the Trail all morning.’

‘I’m not tired. I’m hungry.’

‘Bloody hell, so am I. And today’s Lambert’s turn and he can’t cook anything other than noodles . . . If he could only cook those properly . . .’

‘Coën?’

‘Aha?’

‘I’m still not fast enough—’

‘You’re very fast.’

‘Will I ever be as fast as you?’

‘I doubt it.’

‘Hmm . . . And are you—? Who’s the best fencer in the world?’

‘I’ve no idea.’

‘You’ve never known one?’

‘I’ve known many who believed themselves to be the best.’

‘Oh! What were they? What were their names? What could they do?’

‘Hold on, hold on, girl. I haven’t got an answer to those questions. Is it all that important?’

‘Of course it’s important! I’d like to know who these fencers are. And where they are.’

‘Where they are? I know that.’

‘Ah! So where?’

‘In cemeteries.’ *

*

‘Pay attention, Ciri. We’re going to attach a third pendulum now – you can manage two already. You use the same steps as for two only there’s one more dodge. Ready?’

‘Yes.’

‘Focus yourself. Relax. Breathe in, breathe out. Attack!’

‘Ouch! Owwww . . . Damn it!’

‘Don’t swear. Did it hit you hard?’

‘No, it only brushed me . . . What did I do wrong?’

‘You ran in at too even a pace, you sped the second half-pirouette up a bit too much, and your feint was too wide. And as a result you were carried straight under the pendulum.’

‘But Geralt, there’s no room for a dodge and turn there! They’re too close to each other!’

‘There’s plenty of room, I assure you. But the gaps are worked out to force you to make arrhythmic moves. This is a fight, Ciri, not ballet. You can’t move rhythmically in a fight. You have to distract the opponent with your moves, confuse his reactions. Ready for

another try?'

'Ready. Start those damn logs swinging.'

'Don't swear. Relax. Attack!'

'Ha! Ha! Well, how about that? How was that, Geralt? It didn't even brush me!'

'And you didn't even brush the second sack with your sword. So I repeat, this is a fight. Not ballet, not acrobatics—What are you muttering now?'

'Nothing.'

'Relax. Adjust the bandage on your wrist. Don't grip the hilt so tightly, it distracts you and upsets your equilibrium. Breathe calmly. Ready?'

'Yes.'

'Go!'

'Ouch! May you—Geralt, it's impossible! There's not enough room for a feint and a change of foot. And when I strike from both legs, without a feint . . .'

'I saw what happens when you strike without a feint. Does it hurt?'

'No. Not much . . .'

'Sit down next to me. Take a break.'

'I'm not tired. Geralt, I'm not going to be able to jump over that third pendulum even if I rest for ten years. I can't be any faster—'

'And you don't have to be. You're fast enough.'

'Tell me how to do it then. Half-pirouette, dodge and hit at the same time?'

'It's very simple; you just weren't paying attention. I told you before you started – an additional dodge is necessary. Displacement. An additional half-pirouette is superfluous. The second time round, you did everything well and passed all the pendulums.'

'But I didn't hit the sack because . . . Geralt, without a half-pirouette I can't strike because I lose speed, I don't have the . . . the, what do you call it . . .'

'Impetus. That's true. So gain some impetus and energy. But not through a pirouette and change of foot because there's not enough time for it. Hit the pendulum with your sword.'

‘The pendulum? I’ve got to hit the sacks!’

‘This is a fight, Ciri. The sacks represent your opponent’s sensitive areas, you’ve got to hit them. The pendulums – which simulate your opponent’s weapon – you have to avoid, dodge past. When the pendulum hits you, you’re wounded. In a real fight, you might not get up again. The pendulum mustn’t touch you. But you can hit the pendulum . . . Why are you screwing your nose up?’

‘I’m . . . not going to be able to parry the pendulum with my sword. I’m too weak . . . I’ll always be too weak! Because I’m a girl!’

‘Come here, girl. Wipe your nose, and listen carefully. No strongman, mountain-toppling giant or muscle-man is going to be able to parry a blow aimed at him by a dracolizard’s tail, gigascorpion’s pincers or a griffin’s claws. And that’s precisely the sort of weapons the pendulum simulates. So don’t even try to parry. You’re not deflecting the pendulum, you’re deflecting yourself from it. You’re intercepting its energy, which you need in order to deal a blow. A light, but very swift deflection and instantaneous, equally swift blow from a reverse half-turn is enough. You’re picking impetus up by rebounding. Do you see?’

‘Mhm.’

‘Speed, Ciri, not strength. Strength is necessary for a lumberjack axing trees in a forest. That’s why, admittedly, girls are rarely lumberjacks. Have you got that?’

‘Mhm. Start the pendulums swinging.’

‘Take a rest first.’

‘I’m not tired.’

‘You know how to now? The same steps, feint—’

‘I know.’

‘Attack!’

‘Haaa! Ha! Haaaaa! Got you! I got you, you griffin! Geraaaalt! Did you see that?’

‘Don’t yell. Control your breathing.’

‘I did it! I really did it!! I managed it! Praise me, Geralt!’

‘Well done, Ciri. Well done, girl.’

In the middle of February, the snow disappeared, whisked away by a warm wind blowing from the south, from the pass.

Whatever was happening in the world, the witchers did not want to know.

In the evenings, consistently and determinedly, Triss guided the long conversations held in the dark hall, lit only by the bursts of flames in the great hearth, towards politics. The witchers' reactions were always the same. Geralt, a hand on his forehead, did not say a word. Vesemir nodded, from time to time throwing in comments which amounted to little more than that 'in his day' everything had been better, more logical, more honest and healthier. Eskel pretended to be polite, and neither smiled nor made eye contact, and even managed, very occasionally, to be interested in some issue or question of little importance. Coën yawned openly and looked at the ceiling, and Lambert did nothing to hide his disdain.

They did not want to know anything, they cared nothing for dilemmas which drove sleep from kings, wizards, rulers and leaders, or for the problems which made councils, circles and gatherings tremble and buzz. For them, nothing existed beyond the passes drowning in snow or beyond the Gwenllech river carrying ice-floats in its leaden current. For them, only Kaer Morhen existed, lost and lonely amongst the savage mountains.

That evening Triss was irritable and restless – perhaps it was the wind howling along the great castle's walls. And that evening they were all oddly excited – the witchers, apart from Geralt, were unusually talkative. Quite obviously, they only spoke of one thing – spring. About their approaching departure for the Trail. About what the Trail would have in store for them – about vampires, wyverns, leshys, lycanthropes and basilisks.

This time it was Triss who began to yawn and stare at the ceiling. This time she was the one who remained silent – until Eskel turned to her with a question. A question which she had anticipated.

'And what is it really like in the south, on the Yaruga? Is it worth going there? We wouldn't like to find ourselves in the middle of any trouble.'

'What do you mean by trouble?'

'Well, you know . . .' he stammered, 'you keep telling us about the possibility of a new war . . . About constant fighting on the borders, about rebellions in the lands invaded by Nilfgaard. You said they're saying the Nilfgaardians might cross the Yaruga again —'

‘So what?’ said Lambert. ‘They’ve been hitting, killing and striking against each other constantly for hundreds of years. It’s nothing to worry about. I’ve already decided – I’m going to the far South, to Sodden, Mahakam and Angren. It’s well known that monsters abound wherever armies have passed. The most money is always made in places like that.’

‘True,’ Coën acknowledged. ‘The neighbourhood grows deserted, only women who can’t fend for themselves remain in the villages . . . scores of children with no home or care, roaming around . . . Easy prey attracts monsters.’

‘And the lord barons and village elders,’ added Eskel, ‘have their heads full of the war and don’t have the time to defend their subjects. They have to hire us. It’s true. But from what Triss has been telling us all these evenings, it seems the conflict with Nilfgaard is more serious than that, not just some local little war. Is that right, Triss?’

‘Even if it were the case,’ said the magician spitefully, ‘surely that suits you? A serious, bloody war will lead to more deserted villages, more widowed women, simply hordes of orphaned children—’

‘I can’t understand your sarcasm.’ Geralt took his hand away from his forehead. ‘I really can’t, Triss.’

‘Nor I, my child.’ Vesemir raised his head. ‘What do you mean? Are you thinking about the widows and children? Lambert and Coën speak frivolously, as youngsters do, but it is not the words that are important. After all, they—’

‘. . . they defend these children,’ she interrupted crossly. ‘Yes, I know. From the werewolf who might kill two or three a year, while a Nilfgaardian foray can kill and burn an entire settlement in an hour. Yes, you defend orphans. While I fight that there should be as few of those orphans as possible. I’m fighting the cause, not the effect. That’s why I’m on Foltest of Temeria’s council and sit with Fercart and Keira Metz. We deliberate on how to stop war from breaking out and, should it come to it, how to defend ourselves. Because war is constantly hovering over us like a vulture. For you it’s an adventure. For me, it’s a game in which the stakes are survival. I’m involved in this game, and that’s why your indifference and frivolity hurt and insult me.’

Geralt sat up and looked at her.

‘We’re witchers, Triss. Can’t you understand that?’

‘What’s there to understand?’ The enchantress tossed her chestnut

mane back. ‘Everything’s crystal-clear. You’ve chosen a certain attitude to the world around you. The fact that this world might at any moment fall to pieces has a place in this choice. In mine, it doesn’t. That’s where we differ.’

‘I’m not sure it’s only there we differ.’

‘The world is falling to ruins,’ she repeated. ‘We can watch it happen and do nothing. Or we can counteract it.’

‘How?’ He smiled derisively. ‘With our emotions?’

She did not answer, turning her face to the fire roaring in the hearth.

‘The world is falling to ruins,’ repeated Coën, nodding his head in feigned thoughtfulness. ‘How many times I’ve heard that.’

‘Me, too,’ Lambert grimaced. ‘And it’s not surprising – it’s a popular saying of late. It’s what kings say when it turns out that a modicum of brains is necessary to rule after all. It’s what merchants say when greed and stupidity have led them to bankruptcy. It’s what wizards say when they start to lose their influence on politics or income. And the person they’re speaking to should expect some sort of proposal straight away. So cut the introduction short, Triss, and present us with your proposition.’

‘Verbal squabbling has never amused me,’ the enchantress declared, gauging him with cold eyes, ‘or displays of eloquence which mock whoever you’re talking to. I don’t intend to take part in anything like that. You know only too well what I mean. You want to hide your heads in the sand, that’s your business. But coming from you, Geralt, it’s a great surprise.’

‘Triss.’ The white-haired witcher looked her straight in the eyes again. ‘What do you expect from me? To take an active part in the fight to save a world which is falling to pieces? Am I to enlist in the army and stop Nilfgaard? Should I, if it comes to another battle for Sodden, stand with you on the Hill, shoulder to shoulder, and fight for freedom?’

‘I’d be proud,’ she said quietly, lowering her head. ‘I’d be proud and happy to fight at your side.’

‘I believe that. But I’m not gallant enough. Nor valiant enough. I’m not suited to be a soldier or a hero. And having an acute fear of pain, mutilation and death is not the only reason. You can’t stop a soldier from being frightened but you can give him motivation to help him overcome that fear. I have no such motivation. I can’t

have. I'm a witcher: an artificially created mutant. I kill monsters for money. I defend children when their parents pay me to. If Nilfgaardian parents pay me, I'll defend Nilfgaardian children. And even if the world lies in ruin – which does not seem likely to me – I'll carry on killing monsters in the ruins of this world until some monster kills me. That is my fate, my reason, my life and my attitude to the world. And it is not what I chose. It was chosen for me.'

'You're embittered,' she stated, tugging nervously at a strand of hair. 'Or pretending to be. You forget that I know you, so don't play the unfeeling mutant, devoid of a heart, of scruples and of his own free will, in front of me. And the reasons for your bitterness, I can guess and understand. Ciri's prophecy, correct?'

'No, not correct,' he answered icily. 'I see that you don't know me at all. I'm afraid of death, just like everyone else, but I grew used to the idea of it a very long time ago – I'm not under any illusions. I'm not complaining about fate, Triss – this is plain, cold calculation. Statistics. No witcher has yet died of old age, lying in bed dictating his will. Not a single one. Ciri didn't surprise or frighten me. I know I'm going to die in some cave which stinks of carcases, torn apart by a griffin, lamia or manticore. But I don't want to die in a war, because they're not my wars.'

'I'm surprised at you,' she replied sharply. 'I'm surprised that you're saying this, surprised by your lack of motivation, as you learnedly chose to describe your supercilious distance and indifference. You were at Sodden, Angren and Transriver. You know what happened to Cintra, know what befell Queen Calanthe and many thousands of people there. You know the hell Ciri went through, know why she cries out at night. And I know, too, because I was also there. I'm afraid of pain and death too, even more so now than I was then – I have good reason. As for motivation, it seems to me that back then I had just as little as you. Why should I, a magician, care about the fates of Sodden, Brugge, Cintra or other kingdoms? The problems of having more or less competent rulers? The interests of merchants and barons? I was a magician. I, too, could have said it wasn't my war, that I could mix elixirs for the Nilfgaardians on the ruins of the world. But I stood on that Hill next to Vilgefortz, next to Artaud Terranova, next to Fercart, next to Enid Findabair and Filippa Eilhart, next to your Yennefer. Next to those who no longer exist – Coral, Yoël, Vanielle . . . There was a moment when out of sheer terror I forgot all my spells except for one – and thanks to that spell I could have teleported myself from

that horrific place back home, to my tiny little tower in Maribor. There was a moment, when I threw up from fear, when Yennefer and Coral held me up by the shoulders and hair—'

'Stop. Please, stop.'

'No, Geralt. I won't. After all, you want to know what happened there, on the Hill. So listen – there was a din and flames, there were flaming arrows and exploding balls of fire, there were screams and crashes, and I suddenly found myself on the ground on a pile of charred, smoking rags, and I realised that the pile of rags was Yoël and that thing next to her, that awful thing, that trunk with no arms and no legs which was screaming so horrifically was Coral. And I thought the blood in which I was lying was Coral's blood. But it was my own. And then I saw what they had done to me, and I started to howl, howl like a beaten dog, like a battered child—Leave me alone! Don't worry, I'm not going to cry. I'm not a little girl from a tiny tower in Maribor any more. Damn it, I'm Triss Merigold, the Fourteenth One Killed at Sodden. There are fourteen graves at the foot of the obelisk on the Hill, but only thirteen bodies. You're amazed such a mistake could have been made? Most of the corpses were in hard-to-recognise pieces – no one identified them. The living were hard to account for, too. Of those who had known me well, Yennefer was the only one to survive, and Yennefer was blind. Others knew me fleetingly and always recognised me by my beautiful hair. And I, damn it, didn't have it any more!'

Geralt held her closer. She no longer tried to push him away.

'They used the highest magics on us,' she continued in a muted voice, 'spells, elixirs, amulets and artefacts. Nothing was left wanting for the wounded heroes of the Hill. We were cured, patched up, our former appearances returned to us, our hair and sight restored. You can hardly see the marks. But I will never wear a plunging neckline again, Geralt. Never.'

The witchers said nothing. Neither did Ciri, who had slipped into the hall without a sound and stopped at the threshold, hunching her shoulders and folding her arms.

'So,' the magician said after a while, 'don't talk to me about motivation. Before we stood on that Hill the Chapter simply told us: "That is what you have to do." Whose war was it? What were we defending there? The land? The borders? The people and their cottages? The interests of kings? The wizards' influence and income? Order against Chaos? I don't know! But we defended it because that's what had to be done. And if the need arises, I'll stand

on the Hill again. Because if I don't, it will make the sacrifices made the first time futile and unnecessary.'

'I'll stand beside you!' shouted Ciri shrilly. 'Just wait and see, I'll stand with you! Those Nilfgaardians are going to pay for my grandmother, pay for everything . . . I haven't forgotten!'

'Be quiet,' growled Lambert. 'Don't butt into grown-ups' conversations—'

'Oh sure!' The girl stamped her foot and in her eyes a green fire kindled. 'Why do you think I'm learning to fight with a sword? I want to kill him, that black knight from Cintra with wings on his helmet, for what he did to me, for making me afraid ! And I'm going to kill him! That's why I'm learning it!'

'And therefore you'll stop learning,' said Geralt in a voice colder than the walls of Kaer Morhen. 'Until you understand what a sword is, and what purpose it serves in a witcher's hand, you will not pick one up. You are not learning in order to kill and be killed. You are not learning to kill out of fear and hatred, but in order to save lives. Your own and those of others.'

The girl bit her lip, shaking from agitation and anger.

'Understood ?'

Ciri raised her head abruptly. 'No.'

'Then you'll never understand. Get out.'

'Geralt, I—'

'Get out.'

Ciri spun on her heel and stood still for a moment, undecided, as if waiting – waiting for something that could not happen. Then she ran swiftly up the stairs. They heard the door slam.

'Too severe, Wolf,' said Vesemir. 'Much too severe. And you shouldn't have done it in Triss's presence. The emotional ties—'

'Don't talk to me about emotions. I've had enough of all this talk about emotions!'

'And why is that?' The magician smiled derisively and coldly. 'Why, Geralt? Ciri is normal. She has normal feelings, she accepts emotions naturally, takes them for what they really are. You, obviously, don't understand and are therefore surprised by them. It surprises and irritates you. The fact that someone can experience normal love, normal hatred, normal fear, pain and regret, normal joy and normal sadness. That it is coolness, distance and

indifference which are considered abnormal. Oh yes, Geralt, it annoys you, it annoys you so much that you are starting to think about Kaer Morhen's vaults, about the Laboratorium, the dusty demi-johns full of mutagenic poisons—'

'Triss!' called Vesemir, gazing at Geralt's face, suddenly grown pale. But the enchantress refused to be interrupted and spoke faster and faster, louder and louder.

'Who do you want to deceive, Geralt? Me? Her? Or maybe yourself? Maybe you don't want to admit the truth, a truth everyone knows except you? Maybe you don't want to accept the fact that human emotions and feelings weren't killed in you by the elixirs and Grasses! You killed them! You killed them yourself ! But don't you dare kill them in the child!'

'Silence!' he shouted, leaping from the chair. 'Silence, Merigold!'

He turned away and lowered his arms defencelessly. 'Sorry,' he said quietly. 'Forgive me, Triss.' He made for the stairs quickly, but the enchantress was up in a flash and threw herself at him, embracing him.

'You are not leaving here alone,' she whispered. 'I won't let you be alone. Not right now.'

They knew immediately where she had run to. Fine, wet snow had fallen that evening and had covered the forecourt with a thin, impeccably white carpet. In it they saw her footsteps.

Ciri was standing on the very summit of the ruined wall, as motionless as a statue. She was holding the sword above her right shoulder, the cross-guard at eye level. The fingers of her left hand were lightly touching the pommel.

On seeing them, the girl jumped, spun in a pirouette and landed softly in an identical but reverse mirror position.

'Ciri,' said the witcher, 'come down, please.'

It seemed she hadn't heard him. She did not move, not even a muscle. Triss, however, saw the reflection of the moon, thrown across her face by the blade, glisten silver over a stream of tears.

'No one's going to take the sword away from me!' she shouted. 'No one! Not even you!'

'Come down,' repeated Geralt.

She tossed her head defiantly and the next second leaped once

more. A loose brick slipped beneath her foot with a grating sound. Ciri staggered, trying to find her balance. And failed.

The witcher jumped.

Triss raised her hand, opening her mouth to utter a formula for levitation. She knew she couldn't do it in time. She knew that Geralt would not make it. It was impossible.

Geralt did make it.

He was forced down to the ground, thrown on his knees and back. He fell. But he did not let go of Ciri.

The magician approached them slowly. She heard the girl whisper and sniff. Geralt too was whispering. She could not make out the words. But she understood their meaning.

A warm wind howled in the crevices of the wall. The witcher raised his head.

'Spring,' he said quietly.

'Yes,' she acknowledged, swallowing. 'There is still snow in the passes but in the valleys . . . In the valleys, it is already spring. Shall we leave, Geralt? You, Ciri and I?'

'Yes. It is high time.'

Upriver we saw their towns, as delicate as if they were woven from the morning mist out of which they loomed. It seemed as if they would disappear a moment later, blown away on the wind which rippled the surface of the water. There were little palaces, white as nenuphar flowers; there were little towers looking as though they were plaited out of ivy; there were bridges as airy as weeping willows. And there were other things for which we could find no word or name. Yet we already had names for everything which our eyes beheld in this new, reborn world. Suddenly, in the far recesses of our memories, we found the words for dragons and griffins, mermaids and nymphs, sylphs and dryads once more. For the white unicorns which drank from the river at dusk, inclining their slender necks towards the water. We named everything. And everything seemed to be close to our hearts, familiar to us, ours.

Apart from them. They, although so resembling us, were alien. So very alien that, for a long time, we could find no word for their strangeness.

Hen Gedymdeith, *Elves and Humans*

A good elf is a dead elf.

Marshal Milan Raupenneck

CHAPTER FOUR

The misfortune behaved in the eternal manner of misfortunes and hawks – it hung over them for some while waiting for an appropriate moment before it attacked. It chose its moment, when they had passed the few settlements on the Gwenllech and Upper Buina, passed Ard Carraigh and plunged into the forest below, deserted and intersected by gorges. Like a hawk striking, this misfortune's aim was true. It fell accurately upon its victim, and its victim was Triss.

Initially it seemed nasty but not too serious, resembling an ordinary stomach upset. Geralt and Ciri discreetly tried to take no notice of the stops the enchantress's ailment necessitated. Triss, as pale as death, beaded with sweat and painfully contorted, tried to continue riding for several hours longer, but at about midday, and having spent an abnormally long time in the bushes by the road, she was no longer in any condition to sit on a saddle. Ciri tried to

help her but to no avail – the enchantress, unable to hold on to the horse's mane, slid down her mount's flank and collapsed to the ground.

They picked her up and laid her on a cloak. Geralt unstrapped the saddle-bags without a word, found a casket containing some magic elixirs, opened it and cursed. All the phials were identical and the mysterious signs on the seals meant nothing to him.

'Which one, Triss?'

'None of them,' she moaned, with both hands on her belly. 'I can't . . . I can't take them.'

'What? Why?'

'I'm sensitised—'

'You? A magician?'

'I'm allergic!' she sobbed with helpless exasperation and despairing anger. 'I always have been! I can't tolerate elixirs! I can treat others with them but can only treat myself with amulets.'

'Where is the amulet?'

'I don't know.' She ground her teeth. 'I must have left it in Kaer Morhen. Or lost it—'

'Damn it. What are we going to do? Maybe you should cast a spell on yourself?'

'I've tried. And this is the result. I can't concentrate because of this cramp . . .'

'Don't cry.'

'Easy for you to say!'

The witcher got up, pulled his saddle-bags from Roach's back and began rummaging through them. Triss curled up, her face contracted and her lips twisted in a spasm of pain.

'Ciri . . .'

'Yes, Triss?'

'Do you feel all right? No . . . unusual sensations?'

The girl shook her head.

'Maybe it's food poisoning? What did I eat? But we all ate the same thing . . . Geralt! Wash your hands. Make sure Ciri washes her hands . . .'

‘Calm down. Drink this.’

‘What is it?’

‘Ordinary soothing herbs. There’s next to no magic in them so they shouldn’t do you any harm. And they’ll relieve the cramps.’

‘Geralt, the cramps . . . they’re nothing. But if I run a fever . . . It could be . . . dysentery. Or paratyphoid.’

‘Aren’t you immune?’

Triss turned her head away without replying, bit her lip and curled up even tighter. The witcher did not pursue the question.

Having allowed her to rest for a while they hauled the enchantress onto Roach’s saddle. Geralt sat behind her, supporting her with both hands, while Ciri rode beside them, holding the reins and leading Triss’s gelding. They did not even manage a mile. The enchantress kept falling from Geralt’s hands; she could not stay in the saddle. Suddenly she started trembling convulsively, and instantly burned with a fever. The gastritis had grown worse. Geralt told himself that it was an allergic reaction to the traces of magic in his witcher’s elixir. He told himself that. But he did not believe it.

‘Oh, sir,’ said the sergeant, ‘you have not come at a good time. Indeed, you could not have arrived at a worse moment.’

The sergeant was right. Geralt could neither contest it nor argue.

The fort guarding the bridge, where there would usually be three soldiers, a stable-boy, a toll-collector and – at most – a few passersby, was swarming with people. The witcher counted over thirty lightly armed soldiers wearing the colours of Kaedwen and a good fifty shield bearers, camping around the low palisade. Most of them were lying by campfires, in keeping with the old soldier’s rule which dictates that you sleep when you can and get up when you’re woken. Considerable activity could be seen through the thrown-open gates – there were a lot of people and horses inside the fort, too. At the top of the little leaning lookout tower two soldiers were on duty, with their crossbows permanently at the ready. On the worn bridge trampled by horses’ hooves, six peasant carts and two merchant wagons were parked. In the enclosure, their heads lowered sadly over the mud and manure, stood umpteen unyoked oxen.

‘There was an assault on the fort – last night.’ The sergeant anticipated his question. ‘We just got here in time with the relief

troops – otherwise we'd have found nothing here but charred earth.'

'Who were your attackers? Bandits? Marauders?'

The soldier shook his head, spat and looked at Ciri and Triss, huddled in the saddle.

'Come inside,' he said, 'your Enchantress is going to fall out of her saddle any minute now. We already have some wounded men there; one more won't make much difference.'

In the yard, in an open, roofed shelter, lay several people with their wounds dressed with bloodied bandages. A little further, between the palisade fence and a wooden well with a sweep, Geralt made out six still bodies wrapped in sacking from which only pairs of feet in worn, dirty boots protruded.

'Lay her there, by the wounded men.' The soldier indicated the shelter. 'Oh sir, it truly is bad luck she's sick. A few of our men were hurt during the battle and we wouldn't turn down a bit of magical assistance. When we pulled the arrow out of one of them its head stuck in his guts. The lad will peter out by the morning, he'll peter out like anything . . . And the enchantress who could have saved him is tossing and turning with a fever and seeking help from us. A bad time, I say, a bad time—'

He broke off, seeing that the witcher could not tear his eyes from the sacking-wrapped bodies.

'Two guards from here, two of our relief troops and two . . . two of the others,' he said, pulling up a corner of the stiff material. 'Take a look, if you wish.'

'Ciri, step away.'

'I want to see, too!' The girl leaned out around him, staring at the corpses with her mouth open.

'Step away, please. Take care of Triss.'

Ciri huffed, unwilling, but obeyed. Geralt came closer.

'Elves,' he noted, not hiding his surprise.

'Elves,' the soldier confirmed. 'Scoia'tael.'

'Who?'

'Scoia'tael,' repeated the soldier. 'Forest bands.'

'Strange name. It means "Squirrels", if I'm not mistaken?'

'Yes, sir. Squirrels. That's what they call themselves in elvish. Some say it's because sometimes they wear squirrel tails on their fur

caps and hats. Others say it's because they live in the woods and eat nuts. They're getting more and more troublesome, I tell you.'

Geralt shook his head. The soldier covered the bodies again and wiped his hands on his tunic.

'Come,' he said. 'There's no point standing here. I'll take you to the commandant. Our corporal will take care of your patient if he can. He knows how to sear and stitch wounds and set bones so maybe he knows how to mix up medicines and what not too. He's a brainy chap, a mountain-man. Come, witcher.'

In the dim, smoky toll-collector's hut a lively and noisy discussion was underway. A knight with closely cropped hair wearing a habergeon and yellow surcoat was shouting at two merchants and a greeve, watched by the toll-collector, who had an indifferent, rather gloomy expression, and whose head was wrapped in bandages.

'I said, no!' The knight thumped his fist on the rickety table and stood up straight, adjusting the gorget across his chest. 'Until the patrols return, you're not going anywhere! You are not going to roam the highways!'

'I's to be in Daevon in two days!' the greeve yelled, shoving a short notched stick with a symbol branded into it under the knight's nose. 'I have a transport to lead! The bailiff 's going to have me head if it be late! I'll complain to the voivode!'

'Go ahead and complain,' sneered the knight. 'But I advise you to line your breeches with straw before you do because the voivode can do a mean bit of arse-kicking. But for the time being I give the orders here – the voivode is far away and your bailiff means no more to me than a heap of dung. Hey, Unist! Who are you bringing here, sergeant? Another merchant?'

'No,' answered the sergeant reluctantly. 'A witcher, sir. He goes by the name Geralt of Rivia.'

To Geralt's astonishment, the knight gave a broad smile, approached and held a hand out in greeting.

'Geralt of Rivia,' he repeated, still smiling. 'I have heard about you, and not just from gossip and hearsay. What brings you here?'

Geralt explained what brought him there. The knight's smile faded.

'You have not come at a good time. Or to a good place. We are at war here, witcher. A band of Scoia'tael is doing the rounds and there was a skirmish yesterday. I am waiting here for relief forces

and then we'll start a counterattack.'

'You're fighting elves?'

'Not just elves! Is it possible? Have you, a witcher, not heard of the Squirrels?'

'No. I haven't.'

'Where have you been these past two years? Beyond the seas? Here, in Kaedwen, the Scoia'tael have made sure everybody's talking about them, they've seen to it only too well. The first bands appeared just after the war with Nilgaard broke out. The cursed non-humans took advantage of our difficulties. We were fighting in the south and they began a guerrilla campaign at our rear. They counted on the Nilgaardians defeating us, started declaring it was the end of human rule and there would be a return to the old order. "Humans to the sea!" That's their battle cry, as they murder, burn and plunder!'

'It's your own fault and your own problem,' the greeve commented glumly, tapping his thigh with the notched stick, a mark of his position. 'Yours, and all the other noblemen and knights. You're the ones who oppressed the non-humans, would not allow them their way of life, so now you pay for it. While we've always moved goods this way and no one stopped us. We didn't need an army.'

'What's true is true,' said one of the merchants who had been sitting silently on a bench. 'The Squirrels are no fiercer than the bandits who used to roam these ways. And who did the elves take in hand first? The bandits!'

'What do I care if it's a bandit or an elf who runs me through with an arrow from behind some bushes?' the toll-collector with the bandaged head said suddenly. 'The thatch, if it's set on fire above my head in the night, burns just the same. What difference does it make who lit the fire-brand? You say, sir, that the Scoia'tael are no worse than the bandits? You lie. The bandits wanted loot, but the elves are after human blood. Not everyone has ducats, but we all have blood running through our veins. You say it's the nobility's problem, greeve? That's an even greater folly. What about the lumberjacks shot in the clearing, the tar-makers hacked to pieces at the Beeches, the refugee peasants from the burned down hamlets, did they hurt the non-humans? They lived and worked together, as neighbours, and suddenly they got an arrow in the back . . . And me? Never in my life have I harmed a non-human and look, my head is broken open by a dwarf's cutlass. And if it were not for the

soldiers you're snapping at, I would be lying beneath an ell of turf —'

'Exactly!' The knight in the yellow surcoat thumped his fist against the table once again. 'We are protecting your mangy skin, greeve, from those, as you call them, oppressed elves, who, according to you, we did not let live. But I will say something different – we have emboldened them too much. We tolerated them, treated them as humans, as equals and now they are stabbing us in the back. Nilfgaard is paying them for it, I'd stake my life, and the savage elves from the mountains are furnishing them with arms. But their real support comes from those who always lived amongst us – from the elves, half-elves, dwarves, gnomes and halflings. They are the ones who are hiding them, feeding them, supplying them with volunteers—'

'Not all of them,' said another merchant, slim, with a delicate and noble face – in no way a typical merchant's features. 'The majority of non-humans condemn the Squirrels, sir, and want nothing to do with them. The majority of them are loyal, and sometimes pay a high price for that loyalty. Remember the burgomaster from Ban Ard. He was a half-elf who urged peace and cooperation. He was killed by an assassin's arrow.'

'Aimed, no doubt, by a neighbour, some halfling or dwarf who also feigned loyalty,' scoffed the knight. 'If you ask me, none of them are loyal! Every one of them—Hey there! Who are you?'

Geralt looked around. Ciri stood right behind him casting her huge emerald eyes over everyone. As far as the ability to move noiselessly was concerned, she had clearly made enormous progress.

'She's with me,' he explained.

'Hmmm . . .' The knight measured Ciri with his eyes then turned back to the merchant with the noble face, evidently considering him the most serious partner in the discussion. 'Yes, sir, do not talk to me about loyal non-humans. They are all our enemies, it's just that some are better than others at pretending otherwise. Halflings, dwarves and gnomes have lived amongst us for centuries – in some sort of harmony, it would seem. But it sufficed for the elves to lift their heads, and all the others grabbed their weapons and took to the woods too. I tell you, it was a mistake to tolerate the free elves and dryads, with their forests and their mountain enclaves. It wasn't enough for them, and now they're yelling: "It's our world! Begone, strangers!". By the gods, we'll show them who will be gone, and of

which race even the slightest traces will be wiped away. We beat the hides off the Nilfgaardians and now we will do something about these rogue bands.'

'It's not easy to catch an elf in the woods,' said the witcher. 'Nor would I go after a gnome or dwarf in the mountains. How large are these units?'

'Bands,' corrected the knight. 'They're bands, witcher. They can count up to a hundred heads, sometimes more. They call each pack a "commando". It's a word borrowed from the gnomes. And in saying they are hard to catch you speak truly. Evidently you are a professional. Chasing them through the woods and thickets is senseless. The only way is to cut them off from their supplies, isolate them, starve them out. Seize the non-humans who are helping them firmly by the scruff of their necks. Those from the towns and settlements, villages and farms—'

'The problem is,' said the merchant with noble features, 'that we still don't know which of the non-humans are helping them and which aren't.'

'Then we have to seize them all!'

'Ah.' The merchant smiled. 'I understand. I've heard that somewhere before. Take everyone by the scruff of their neck and throw them down the mines, into enclosed camps, into quarries. Everyone. The innocent, too. Women and children. Is that right?'

The knight raised his head and slammed his hand down on his sword hilt.

'Just so, and no other way!' he said sharply. 'You pity the children yet you're like a child yourself in this world, dear sir. A truce with Nilfgaard is a very fragile thing, like an egg-shell. If not today then the war might start anew tomorrow, and anything can happen in war. If they defeated us, what do you think would happen? I'll tell you what – elven commandos would emerge from the forests, they'd emerge strong and numerous and these "loyal elements" would instantly join them. Those loyal dwarves of yours, your friendly halflings, do you think they are going to talk of peace, of reconciliation then? No, sir. They'll be tearing our guts out. Nilfgaard is going to deal with us through their hands. And they'll drown us in the sea, just as they promise. No, sir, we must not pussyfoot around them. It's either them or us. There's no third way!'

The door of the hut squeaked and a soldier in a bloodied apron stood in the doorway.

‘Forgive me for disturbing you,’ he hawked. ‘Which of you, noble sirs, be the one who brought this sick woman here?’

‘I did,’ said the witcher. ‘What’s happened?’

‘Come with me, please.’

They went out into the courtyard.

‘It bodes not well with her, sir,’ said the soldier, indicating Triss. ‘Firewater with pepper and saltpetre I gave her – but it be no good. I don’t really . . .’

Geralt made no comment because there was nothing to say. The magician, doubled over, was clear evidence of the fact that firewater with pepper and saltpetre was not something her stomach could tolerate.

‘It could be some plague.’ The soldier frowned. ‘Or that, what’s it called . . . Zintery. If it were to spread to our men—’

‘She is a wizard,’ protested the witcher. ‘Wizards don’t fall sick . . .’

‘Just so,’ the knight who had followed them out threw in cynically. ‘Yours, as I see, is just emanating good health. Geralt, listen to me. The woman needs help and we cannot offer such. Nor can I risk an epidemic amongst my troops. You understand.’

‘I understand. I will leave immediately. I have no choice – I have to turn back towards Daevon or Ard Carraigh.’

‘You won’t get far. The patrols have orders to stop everyone. Besides, it is dangerous. The Scoia’tael have gone in exactly that direction.’

‘I’ll manage.’

‘From what I’ve heard about you’ – the knight’s lips twisted – ‘I have no doubt you would. But bear in mind you are not alone. You have a gravely sick woman on your shoulders and this brat . . .’

Ciri, who was trying to clean her dung-smeared boot on a ladder rung, raised her head. The knight cleared his throat and looked down. Geralt smiled faintly. Over the last two years Ciri had almost forgotten her origins and had almost entirely lost her royal manners and airs, but her glare, when she wanted, was very much like that of her grandmother. So much so that Queen Calanthe would no doubt have been very proud of her granddaughter.

‘Yeeessss, what was I . . .’ the knight stammered, tugging at his belt with embarrassment. ‘Geralt, sir, I know what you need to do.

Cross beyond the river, south. You will catch up with a caravan which is following the trail. Night is just around the corner and the caravan is certain to stop for a rest. You will reach it by dawn.'

'What kind of caravan?'

'I don't know.' The knight shrugged. 'But it is not a merchant or an ordinary convoy. It's too orderly, the wagons are all the same, all covered . . . A royal bailiff's, no doubt. I allowed them to cross the bridge because they are following the Trail south, probably towards the fords on the Lixela.'

'Hmmm . . .' The witcher considered this, looking at Triss. 'That would be on my way. But will I find help there?'

'Maybe yes,' the knight said coldly. 'Maybe no. But you won't find it here, that's for sure.'

They did not hear or see him as he approached, engrossed as they were in conversation, sitting around a campfire which, with its yellow light, cadaverously illuminated the canvas of the wagons arranged in a circle. Geralt gently pulled up his mare and forced her to neigh loudly. He wanted to warn the caravan, which had set up camp for the night, wanted to temper the surprise of having visitors and avoid a nervous reaction. He knew from experience that the release mechanisms on crossbows did not like nervous moves.

The campers leaped up and, despite his warning, performed numerous agitated movements. Most of them, he saw at once, were dwarves. This reassured him somewhat – dwarves, although extremely irascible, usually asked questions first in situations such as these and only then aimed their crossbows.

'Who's that?' shouted one of the dwarves hoarsely and with a swift, energetic move, prised an axe from a stump by the campfire. 'Who goes there?'

'A friend.' The witcher dismounted.

'I wonder whose,' growled the dwarf. 'Come closer. Hold your hands out so we can see them.'

Geralt approached, holding his hands out so they could be seen even by someone afflicted with conjunctivitis or night blindness.

'Closer.'

He obeyed. The dwarf lowered his axe and tilted his head a little.

'Either my eyes deceive me,' he said, 'or it's the witcher Geralt of

Rivia. Or someone who looks damn like him.'

The fire suddenly shot up into flames, bursting into a golden brightness which drew faces and figures from the dark.

'Yarpen Zigrin,' declared Geralt, astonished. 'None other than Yarpen Zigrin in person, complete with beard!'

'Ha!' The dwarf waved his axe as if it were an osier twig. The blade whirred in the air and cut into a stump with a dull thud. 'Call the alarm off! This truly is a friend!'

The rest of the gathering visibly relaxed and Geralt thought he heard deep sighs of relief. The dwarf walked up to him, holding out his hand. His grip could easily rival a pair of iron pincers.

'Welcome, you warlock,' he said. 'Wherever you've come from and wherever you're going, welcome. Boys! Over here! You remember my boys, witcher ? This is Yannick Brass, this one's Xavier Moran and here's Paulie Dahlberg and his brother Regan.'

Geralt didn't remember any of them, and besides they all looked alike, bearded, stocky, practically square in their thick quilted jerkins.

'There were six of you,' one by one he squeezed the hard, gnarled hands offered him, 'if I remember correctly.'

'You've a good memory,' laughed Yarpen Zigrin. 'There were six of us, indeed. But Lucas Corto got married, settled down in Mahakam and dropped out of the company, the stupid oaf. Somehow we haven't managed to find anybody worthy of his place yet. Pity, six is just right, not too many, not too few. To eat a calf, knock back a barrel, there's nothing like six—'

'As I see,' with a nod Geralt indicated the rest of the group standing undecided by the wagons, 'there are enough of you here to manage three calves, not to mention a quantity of poultry. What's this gang of fellows you're commanding, Yarpen?'

'I'm not the one in command. Allow me to introduce you. Forgive me, Wenck, for not doing so straight away but me and my boys have known Geralt of Rivia for a long time – we've a fair number of shared memories behind us. Geralt, this is Commissar Vilfrid Wenck, in the service of King Henselt of Ard Carraigh, the merciful ruler of Kaedwen.'

Vilfrid Wenck was tall, taller than Geralt and near twice the dwarf's height. He wore an ordinary, simple outfit like that worn by greeves, bailiffs or mounted messengers, but there was a sharpness

in his movements, a stiffness and sureness which the witcher knew and could faultlessly recognise, even at night, even in the meagre light of the campfire. That was how men accustomed to wearing hauberks and belts weighed down with weapons moved. Wenck was a professional soldier. Geralt was prepared to wager any sum on it. He shook the proffered hand and gave a little bow.

'Let's sit down.' Yarpen indicated the stump where his mighty axe was still embedded. 'Tell us what you're doing in this neighbourhood, Geralt.'

'Looking for help. I'm journeying in a threesome with a woman and youngster. The woman is sick. Seriously sick. I caught up with you to ask for help.'

'Damn it, we don't have a medic here.' The dwarf spat at the flaming logs. 'Where have you left them?'

'Half a furlong from here, by the roadside.'

'You lead the way. Hey, you there! Three to the horses, saddle the spare mounts! Geralt, will your sick woman hold up in the saddle?'

'Not really. That's why I had to leave her there.'

'Get the sheepskin, canvas sheet and two poles from the wagon! Quick!'

Vilfrid Wenck, crossing his arms, hawked loudly.

'We're on the trail,' Yarpen Zigrin said sharply, without looking at him. 'You don't refuse help on the Trail.'

'Damn it.' Yarpen removed his palm from Triss's forehead. 'She's as hot as a furnace. I don't like it. What if it's typhoid or dysentery?'

'It can't be typhoid or dysentery,' Geralt lied with conviction, wrapping the horse blankets around the sick woman. 'Wizards are immune to those diseases. It's food poisoning, nothing contagious.'

'Hmm . . . Well, all right. I'll rummage through the bags. I used to have some good medicine for the runs, maybe there's still a little left.'

'Ciri,' muttered the witcher, passing her a sheepskin unstrapped from the horse, 'go to sleep, you're barely on your feet. No, not in the wagon. We'll put Triss in the wagon. You lie down next to the fire.'

'No,' she protested quietly, watching the dwarf walk away. 'I'm

going to lie down next to her. When they see you keeping me away from her, they won't believe you. They'll think it's contagious and chase us away, like the soldiers in the fort.'

'Geralt?' the enchantress moaned suddenly. 'Where . . . are we?'

'Amongst friends.'

'I'm here,' said Ciri, stroking her chestnut hair. 'I'm at your side. Don't be afraid. You feel how warm it is here? A campfire's burning and a dwarf is just going to bring some medicine for . . . For your stomach.'

'Geralt,' sobbed Triss, trying to disentangle herself from the blankets. 'No . . . no magic elixirs, remember . . .'

'I remember. Lie peacefully.'

'I've got to . . . Oooh . . .'

The witcher leaned over without a word, picked up the enchantress together with her cocoon of caparisons and blankets, and marched to the woods, into the darkness. Ciri sighed.

She turned, hearing heavy panting. Behind the wagon appeared the dwarf, hefting a considerable bundle under his arm. The campfire flame gleamed on the blade of the axe behind his belt; the rivets on his heavy leather jerkin also glistened.

'Where's the sick one?' he snarled. 'Flown away on a broomstick?'

Ciri pointed to the darkness.

'Right.' The dwarf nodded. 'I know the pain and I've known the same nasty complaint. When I was younger I used to eat everything I managed to find or catch or cut down, so I got food poisoning many a time. Who is she, this Enchantress?'

'Triss Merigold.'

'I don't know her, never heard of her. I rarely have anything to do with the Brotherhood anyway. Well, but it's polite to introduce oneself. I'm called Yarpen Zigrin. And what are you called, little goose?'

'Something other than Little Goose,' snarled Ciri with a gleam in her eyes.

The dwarf chuckled and bared his teeth.

'Ah.' He bowed with exaggeration. 'I beg your forgiveness. I didn't recognise you in the darkness. This isn't a goose but a noble young lady. I fall at your feet. What is the young lady's name, if it's

no secret?'

'It's no secret. I'm Ciri.'

'Ciri. Aha. And who is the young lady?'

'That,' Ciri turned her nose up proudly, 'is a secret.'

Yarpen snorted again.

'The young lady's little tongue is as sharp as a wasp. If the young lady will deign to forgive me, I've brought the medicine and a little food. Will the young lady accept it or will she send the old boor, Yarpen Zigrin, away?'

'I'm sorry . . .' Ciri had second thoughts and lowered her head. 'Triss really does need help, Master . . . Zigrin. She's very sick. Thank you for the medicine.'

'It's nothing.' The dwarf bared his teeth again and patted her shoulder amicably. 'Come on, Ciri, you help me. The medicine has to be prepared. We'll roll some pellets according to my grandmother's recipe. No disease sitting in the guts will resist these kernels.'

He unwrapped the bundle, extracted something shaped like a piece of turf and a small clay vessel. Ciri approached, curious.

'You should know, Ciri,' said Yarpen, 'that my grandmother knew her medicine like nobody's business. Unfortunately, she believed that the source of most disease is idleness, and idleness is best cured through the application of a stick. As far as my siblings and I were concerned, she chiefly used this cure preventively. She beat us for anything and for nothing. She was a rare old hag. And once when, out of the blue, she gave me a chunk of bread with dripping and sugar, it was such a surprise that I dropped it in astonishment, dripping down. So my gran gave me a thrashing, the nasty old bitch. And then she gave me another chunk of bread, only without the sugar.'

'My grandmother,' Ciri nodded in understanding, 'thrashed me once, too. With a switch.'

'A switch?' The dwarf laughed. 'Mine whacked me once with a pickaxe handle. But that's enough reminiscing, we have to roll the pellets. Here, tear this up and mould it into little balls.'

'What is it? It's sticky and messy . . . Eeeuuggh . . . What a stink!'

'It's mouldy oil-meal bread. Excellent medicine. Roll it into little balls. Smaller, smaller, they're for a magician, not a cow. Give me

one. Good. Now we're going to roll the ball in medicine.'

'Eeeeuuuuggggghh!'

'Stinks?' The dwarf brought his upturned nose closer to the clay pot. 'Impossible. Crushed garlic and bitter salt has no right to stink, even if it's a hundred years old.'

'It's foul, uugghh. Triss won't eat that!'

'We'll use my grandmother's method. You squeeze her nose and I'll shove the pellets in.'

'Yarpen,' Geralt hissed, emerging abruptly from the darkness with the magician in his arms. 'Watch out or I'll shove something down you.'

'It's medicine!' The dwarf took offence. 'It helps! Mould, garlic . . .'

'Yes,' moaned Triss weakly from the depths of her cocoon. 'It's true . . . Geralt, it really ought to help . . .'

'See?' Yarpen nudged Geralt with his elbow, turning his beard up proudly and pointing to Triss, who swallowed the pellets with a martyred expression. 'A wise magician. Knows what's good for her.'

'What are you saying, Triss?' The witcher leaned over. 'Ah, I see. Yarpen, do you have any angelica? Or saffron?'

'I'll have a look, and ask around. I've brought you some water and a little food—'

'Thank you. But they both need rest above all. Ciri, lie down.'

'I'll just make up a compress for Triss—'

'I'll do it myself. Yarpen, I'd like to talk to you.'

'Come to the fire. We'll broach a barrel—'

'I want to talk to *you*. I don't need an audience. Quite the contrary.'

'Of course. I'm listening.'

'What sort of convoy is this?'

The dwarf raised his small, piercing eyes at him.

'The king's service,' he said slowly and emphatically.

'That's what I thought.' The witcher held the gaze. 'Yarpen, I'm not asking out of any inappropriate curiosity.'

'I know. And I also know what you mean. But this convoy is . . .

hmm . . . special.'

'So what are you transporting?'

'Salt fish,' said Yarpen casually, and proceeded to embellish his lie without batting an eyelid. 'Fodder, tools, harnesses, various odds and ends for the army. Wenck is a quartermaster to the king's army.'

'If he's quartermaster then I'm a druid,' smiled Geralt. 'But that's your affair – I'm not in the habit of poking my nose into other people's secrets. But you can see the state Triss is in. Let us join you, Yarpen, let us put her in one of the wagons. Just for a few days. I'm not asking where you're going because this trail goes straight to the south without forking until past the Lixela and it's a ten-day journey to the Lixela. By that time the fever will have subsided and Triss will be able to ride a horse. And even if she isn't then I'll stop in a town beyond the river. Ten days in a wagon, well covered, hot food . . . Please.'

'I don't give the orders here. Wenck does.'

'I don't believe you lack influence over him. Not in a convoy primarily made up of dwarves. Of course he has to bear you in mind.'

'Who is this Triss to you?'

'What difference does it make in this situation?'

'In this situation – none. I asked out of an inappropriate curiosity born of the desire to start new rumours going around the inns. But be that as it may, you're mighty attracted to this enchantress, Geralt.'

The witcher smiled sadly.

'And the girl?' Yarpen indicated Ciri with his head as she wriggled under the sheepskin. 'Yours?'

'Mine,' he replied without thinking. 'Mine, Zigrin.'

The dawn was grey, wet, and smelled of night rain and morning mist. Ciri felt she had slept no more than a few minutes, as though she had been woken up the very minute she lay her head down on the sacks heaped on the wagon.

Geralt was just settling Triss down next to her, having brought her in from another enforced expedition into the woods. The rugs cocooning the enchantress sparkled with dew. Geralt had dark

circles under his eyes. Ciri knew he had not closed them for an instant – Triss had run a fever through the night and suffered greatly.

'Did I wake you? Sorry. Sleep, Ciri. It's still early.'

'What's happening with Triss? How is she?'

'Better,' moaned the magician. 'Better, but . . . Listen, Geralt . . . I'd like to—'

'Yes?' The witcher leaned over but Triss was already asleep. He straightened himself, stretched.

'Geralt,' whispered Ciri, 'are they going to let us travel on the wagon?'

'We'll see.' He bit his lip. 'Sleep while you can. Rest.'

He jumped down off the wagon. Ciri heard the sound of the camp packing up – horses stamping, harnesses ringing, poles squeaking, swingle-trees grating, and talking and cursing. And then, nearby, Yarpen Zigrin's hoarse voice and the calm voice of the tall man called Wenck. And the cold voice of Geralt. She raised herself and carefully peered out from behind the canvas.

'I have no categorical interdictions on this matter,' declared Wenck.

'Excellent.' The dwarf brightened. 'So the matter's settled?'

The commissar raised his hand a little, indicating that he had not yet finished. He was silent for a while, and Geralt and Yarpin waited patiently.

'Nevertheless,' Wenck said finally, 'when it comes to the safe arrival of this caravan, it's my head on the line.'

Again he said nothing. This time no one interrupted. There was no question about it – one had to get used to long intervals between sentences when speaking to the commissar.

'For its safe arrival,' he continued after a moment. 'And for its timely arrival. Caring for this sick woman might slow down the march.'

'We're ahead of schedule on the route,' Yarpen assured him, after a significant pause. 'We're ahead of time, Wenck, sir, we won't miss the deadline. And as for safety . . . I don't think the witcher's company will harm that. The Trail leads through the woods right up to the Lixela, and to the right and left there's a wild forest. And rumour has it all sorts of evil creatures roam the forest.'

‘Indeed,’ the commissar agreed. Looking the witcher straight in the eye, he seemed to be weighing out every single word. ‘One can come across certain evil creatures in Kaedwen forests, lately incited by other evil creatures. They could jeopardise our safety. King Henselt, knowing this, empowered me to recruit volunteers to join our armed escort. Geralt? That would solve your problem.’

The witcher’s silence lasted a long while, longer than Wenck’s entire speech, interspersed though it had been with regular pauses.

‘No,’ he said finally. ‘No, Wenck. Let us put this clearly. I am prepared to repay the help given Lady Merigold, but not in this manner. I can groom the horses, carry water and firewood, even cook. But I will not enter the king’s service as a soldier. Please don’t count on my sword. I have no intention of killing those, as you call them, evil creatures on the order of other creatures whom I do not consider to be any better.’

Ciri heard Yarpen Zigrin hiss loudly and cough into his rolled-up sleeve. Wenck stared at the witcher calmly.

‘I see,’ he stated dryly. ‘I like clear situations. All right then. Zigrin, see to it that the speed of our progress does not slow. As for you, Geralt . . . I know you will prove to be useful and helpful in a way you deem fit. It would be an affront to both of us if I were to treat your good stead as payment for aid offered to a suffering woman. Is she feeling better today?’

The witcher gave a nod which seemed, to Ciri, to be somewhat deeper and politer than usual. Wenck’s expression did not change.

‘That pleases me,’ he said after a normal pause. ‘In taking Lady Merigold aboard a wagon in my convoy I take on the responsibility for her health, comfort and safety. Zigrin, give the command to march out.’

‘Wenck.’

‘Yes, Geralt?’

‘Thank you.’

The commissar bowed his head, a bit more deeply and politely, it seemed to Ciri, than the usual, perfunctory politeness required.

Yarpen Zigrin ran the length of the column, giving orders and instructions loudly, after which he clambered onto the coachman’s box, shouted and whipped the horses with the reins. The wagon jolted and rattled along the forest trail. The bump woke Triss up but Ciri reassured her and changed the compress on her forehead. The

rattling had a soporific effect and the magician was soon asleep; Ciri, too, fell to dozing.

When she woke the sun was already high. She peered out between the barrels and packages. The wagon she was in was at the vanguard of the convoy. The one following them was being driven by a dwarf with a red kerchief tied around his neck. From conversations between the dwarves, she had gathered that his name was Paulie Dahlberg. Next to him sat his brother Regan. She also saw Wenck riding a horse, in the company of two bailiffs.

Roach, Geralt's mare, tethered to the wagon, greeted her with a quiet neigh. She couldn't see her chestnut anywhere or Triss's dun. No doubt they were at the rear, with the convoy's spare horses.

Geralt was sitting on the coachman's box next to Yarpen. They were talking quietly, drinking beer from a barrel perched between them. Ciri pricked up her ears but soon grew bored – the discussion concerned politics and was mainly about King Henselt's intentions and plans, and some special service or missions to do with secretly aiding his neighbour, King Demawend of Aedirn, who was being threatened by war. Geralt expressed interest about how five wagons of salted fish could help Aedirn's defence. Yarpen, ignoring the gibe in Geralt's voice, explained that some species of fish were so valuable that a few wagon-loads would suffice to pay an armoured company for a year, and each new armoured company was a considerable help. Geralt was surprised that the aid had to be quite so secretive, to which the dwarf replied that was why the secret was a secret.

Triss tossed in her sleep, shook the compress off and talked indistinctly to herself. She demanded that someone called Kevyn kept his hands to himself, and immediately after that declared that destiny cannot be avoided. Finally, having stated that everyone, absolutely everyone, is a mutant to a certain degree, she fell into a peaceful sleep.

Ciri also felt sleepy but was brought to her senses by Yarpen's chuckle, as he reminded Geralt of their past adventures. This one concerned a hunt for a golden dragon who instead of allowing itself to be hunted down had counted the hunters' bones and then eaten a cobbler called Goatmuncher. Ciri began to listen with greater interest.

Geralt asked about what had happened to the Slashers but Yarpen didn't know. Yarpen, in turn, was curious about a woman called Yennefer, at which Geralt grew oddly uncommunicative. The dwarf

drank more beer and started to complain that Yennefer still bore him a grudge although a good few years had gone by since those days.

'I came across her at the market in Gors Velen,' he recounted. 'She barely noticed me – she spat like a she-cat and insulted my deceased mother horribly. I fled for all I was worth, but she shouted after me that she'd catch up with me one day and make grass grow out of my arse.'

Ciri giggled, imagining Yarpen with the grass. Geralt grunted something about women and their impulsive natures – which the dwarf considered far too mild a description for maliciousness, obstinacy and vindictiveness. Geralt did not take up the subject and Ciri fell into dozing once more.

This time she was woken by raised voices. Yarpen's voice to be exact – he was yelling.

'Oh yes! So you know! That's what I've decided!'

'Quieter,' said the witcher calmly. 'There's a sick woman in the wagon. Understand, I'm not criticising your decisions or your resolutions . . .'

'No, of course not,' the dwarf interrupted sarcastically. 'You're just smiling knowingly about them.'

'Yarpen I'm warning you, as one friend to another: both sides despise those who sit on the fence, or at best they treat them with suspicion.'

'I'm not sitting. I'm unambiguously declaring myself to be on one side.'

'But you'll always remain a dwarf for that side. Someone who's different. An outsider. While for the other side . . .'

He broke off.

'Well !' growled Yarpen turning away. 'Well, go on, what are you waiting for? Call me a traitor and a dog on a human leash who for a handful of silver and a bowl of lousy food, is prepared to be set against his rebelling kinsmen who are fighting for freedom. Well, go on, spit it out. I don't like insinuations.'

'No, Yarpen,' said Geralt quietly. 'No. I'm not going to spit anything out.'

'Ah, you're not?' The dwarf whipped the horses. 'You don't feel like it? You prefer to stare and smile? Not a word to me, eh? But

you could say it to Wenck! “Please don’t count on my sword.” Oh, so haughtily, nobly and proudly said! Shove your haughtiness up a dog’s arse, and your bloody pride with it!’

‘I just wanted to be honest. I don’t want to get mixed up in this conflict. I want to remain neutral.’

‘It’s impossible!’ yelled Yarpen. ‘It’s impossible to remain neutral, don’t you understand that? No, you don’t understand anything. Oh, get off my wagon, get on your horse, and get out of my sight, with your arrogant neutrality. You get on my nerves.’

Geralt turned away. Ciri held her breath in anticipation. But the witcher didn’t say a word. He stood and jumped from the wagon, swiftly, softly and nimbly. Yarpen waited for him to untether his mare from the ladder, then whipped his horses once again, growling something incomprehensible, sounding terrifying under his breath.

She stood up to jump down too, and find her chestnut. The dwarf turned and measured her with a reluctant eye.

‘And you’re just a nuisance, too, little madam,’ he snorted angrily. ‘All we need are ladies and girls, damn it. I can’t even take a piss from the box – I have to stop the cart and go into the bushes!’

Ciri put her hands on her hips, shook her ashen fringe and turned up her nose.

‘Is that so?’ she shrilled, enraged. ‘Drink less beer, Zigrin, and then you won’t have to!’

‘My beer’s none of your shitin’ business, you chit!’

‘Don’t yell, Triss has just fallen asleep!’

‘It’s my wagon! I’ll yell if I want to!’

‘Stumpy!’

‘What? You impertinent brat!’

‘Stump!’

‘I’ll show you stump . . . Oh, damn it! Pprrr!’

The dwarf leaned far back, pulling at the reins at the very last moment, just as the two horses were on the point of stepping over a log blocking their way. Yarpen stood up in the box and, swearing in both human and dwarvish, whistling and roaring, brought the cart to a halt. Dwarves and humans alike, leaping from their wagons, ran up and helped lead the horses to the clear path, tugging them on by their halters and harnesses.

‘Dozing off, eh Yarpen?’ growled Paulie Dahlberg as he approached. ‘Bloody hell, if you’d ridden over that the axle would be done for, and the wheels shattered to hell. Damn it, what were you—’

‘Piss off, Paulie!’ roared Yarpen Zigrin and furiously lashed the horses’ hindquarters with the reins.

‘You were lucky,’ said Ciri, ever so sweetly, squeezing onto the box next to the dwarf. ‘As you can see, it’s better to have a witcher-girl on your wagon than to travel alone. I warned you just in time. But if you’d been in the middle of pissing from the box and ridden onto that log, well, well. It’s scary to think what might have happened—’

‘Are you going to be quiet?’

‘I’m not saying any more. Not a word.’

She lasted less than a minute.

‘Zigrin, sir?’

‘I’m not a sir.’ The dwarf nudged her with his elbow and bared his teeth. ‘I’m Yarpen. Is that clear? We’ll lead the horses together, right?’

‘Right. Can I hold the reins?’

‘If you must. Wait, not like that. Pass them over your index finger and hold them down with your thumb, like this. The same with the left. Don’t tug them, don’t pull too hard.’

‘Is that right?’

‘Right.’

‘Yarpen?’

‘Huh?’

‘What does it mean, “remain neutral”?’

‘To be indifferent,’ he muttered reluctantly. ‘Don’t let the reins hang down. Pull the left one closer to yourself!’

‘What’s indifferent? Indifferent to what?’

The dwarf leaned far out and spat under the wagon.

‘If the Scoia’tael attack us, your Geralt intends to stand by and look calmly on as they cut our throats. You’ll probably stand next to him, because it’ll be a demonstration class. Today’s subject: the witcher’s behaviour in face of conflict between intelligent races.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘That doesn’t surprise me in the least.’

‘Is that why you quarrelled with him and were angry? Who are these Scoia’tael anyway? These . . . Squirrels?’

‘Ciri,’ Yarpen tussled his beard violently, ‘these aren’t matters for the minds of little girls.’

‘Aha, now you’re angry at me. I’m not little at all. I heard what the soldiers in the fort said about the Squirrels. I saw . . . I saw two dead elves. And the knight said they also kill. And that it’s not just elves amongst them. There are dwarves too.’

‘I know,’ said Yarpen sourly.

‘And you’re a dwarf.’

‘There’s no doubt about that.’

‘So why are you afraid of the Squirrels? It seems they only fight humans.’

‘It’s not so simple as that.’ He grew solemn. ‘Unfortunately.’

Ciri stayed silent for a long time, biting her lower lip and wrinkling her nose.

‘Now I know,’ she said suddenly. ‘The Squirrels are fighting for freedom. And although you’re a dwarf, you’re King Henselt’s special secret servant on a human leash.’

Yarpen snorted, wiped his nose on his sleeve and leaned out of the box to check that Wenck had not ridden up too close. But the commissar was far away, engaged in conversation with Geralt.

‘You’ve got pretty good hearing, girl, like a marmot.’ He grinned broadly. ‘You’re also a bit too bright for someone destined to give birth, cook and spin. You think you know everything, don’t you? That’s because you’re a brat. Don’t pull silly faces. Faces like that don’t make you look any older, just uglier than usual. You’ve grasped the nature of the Scoia’taels quickly, you like the slogans. You know why you understand them so well? Because the Scoia’taels are brats too. They’re little snotheads who don’t understand that they’re being egged on, that someone’s taking advantage of their childish stupidity by feeding them slogans about freedom.’

‘But they really are fighting for freedom.’ Ciri raised her head and gazed at the dwarf with wide-open green eyes. ‘Like the dryads in the Brokilon woods. They kill people because people . . . some

people are harming them. Because this used to be your country, the dwarves' and the elves' and those . . . halflings', gnomes' and other . . . And now there are people here so the elves—'

'Elves!' snorted Yarpen. 'They – to be accurate – happen to be strangers just as much as you humans, although they arrived in their white ships a good thousand years before you. Now they're competing with each other to offer us friendship, suddenly we're all brothers, now they're grinning and saying: "we, kinsmen", "we, the Elder Races". But before, shi—Hm, hm . . . Before, their arrows used to whistle past our ears when we—'

'So the first on earth were dwarves?'

'Gnomes, to be honest. As far as this part of the world is concerned – because the world is unimaginably huge, Ciri.'

'I know. I saw a map—'

'You couldn't have. No one's drawn a map like that, and I doubt they will in the near future. No one knows what exists beyond the Mountains of Fire and the Great Sea. Even elves, although they claim they know everything. They know shit all, I tell you.'

'Hmm . . . But now . . . There are far more people than . . . Than there are you.'

'Because you multiply like rabbits.' The dwarf ground his teeth. 'You'd do nothing but screw day in day out, without discrimination, with just anyone and anywhere. And it's enough for your women to just sit on a man's trousers and it makes their bellies swell . . . Why have you gone so red, crimson as a poppy? You wanted to know, didn't you? So you've got the honest truth and faithful history of a world where he who shatters the skulls of others most efficiently and swells women's bellies fastest, reigns. And it's just as hard to compete with you people in murdering as it is in screwing—'

'Yarpen,' said Geralt coldly, riding up on Roach. 'Restrain yourself a little, if you please, with your choice of words. And Ciri, stop playing at being a coachwoman and have a care for Triss, check if she's awake and needs anything.'

'I've been awake for a long time,' the magician said weakly from the depths of the wagon. 'But I didn't want to . . . interrupt this interesting conversation. Don't disturb them, Geralt. I'd like . . . to learn more about the role of screwing in the evolution of society.'

'Can I heat some water? Triss wants to wash.'

‘Go ahead,’ agreed Yarpen Zigrin. ‘Xavier, take the spit off the fire, our hare’s had enough. Hand me the cauldron, Ciri. Oh, look at you, it’s full to the brim! Did you lug this great weight from the stream by yourself?’

‘I’m strong.’

The elder of the Dahlberg brothers burst out laughing.

‘Don’t judge her by appearances, Paulie,’ said Yarpen seriously as he skilfully divided the roasted grey hare into portions. ‘There’s nothing to laugh at here. She’s skinny but I can see she’s a robust and resilient lass. She’s like a leather belt: thin, but it can’t be torn apart in your hands. And if you were to hang yourself on it, it would bear your weight, too.’

No one laughed. Ciri squatted next to the dwarves sprawled around the fire. This time Yarpen Zigrin and his four ‘boys’ had lit their own fire at the camp because they did not intend to share the hare which Xavier Moran had shot. For them alone there was just enough for one, at most two, mouthfuls each.

‘Add some wood to the fire,’ said Yarpen, licking his fingers. ‘The water will heat quicker.’

‘That water’s a stupid idea,’ stated Regan Dahlberg, spitting out a bone. ‘Washing can only harm you when you’re sick. When you’re healthy, too, come to that. You remember old Schrader ? His wife once told him to wash, and Schrader went and died soon afterwards.’

‘Because a rabid dog bit him.’

‘If he hadn’t washed, the dog wouldn’t have bitten him.’

‘I think,’ said Ciri, checking the temperature of the water in the cauldron with her finger, ‘it’s excessive to wash every day too. But Triss asked for it – she even started crying once . . . So Geralt and I —’

‘We know.’ The elder Dahlberg nodded. ‘But that a witcher should . . . I’m constantly amazed. Hey, Zigrin, if you had a woman would you wash her and comb her hair? Would you carry her into the bushes if she had to—’

‘Shut up, Paulie.’ Yarpen cut him short. ‘Don’t say anything against that witcher, because he’s a good fellow.’

‘Am I saying anything? I’m only surprised—’

‘Triss,’ Ciri butted in cheekily, ‘is *not* his woman.’

‘I’m all the more surprised.’

‘You’re all the more a blockhead, you mean,’ Yarpen summed up. ‘Ciri, pour a bit of water in to boil. We’ll infuse some more saffron and poppy seeds for the magician. She felt better today, eh?’

‘Probably did,’ murmured Yannick Brass. ‘We only had to stop the convoy six times for her. I know it wouldn’t do to deny aid on the trail, and he’s a prick who thinks otherwise. And he who denies it would be an arch-prick and base son-of-a-bitch. But we’ve been in these woods too long, far too long, I tell you. We’re tempting fate, damn it, we’re tempting fate too much, boys. It’s not safe here. The Scoia’tael—’

‘Spit that word out, Yannick.’

‘Ptoo, ptoo. Yarpen, fighting doesn’t frighten me, and a bit of blood’s nothing new but . . . If it comes to fighting our own . . . Damn it! Why did this happen to us? This friggin’ load ought to be transported by a hundred friggin’ cavalrymen, not us! The devil take those know-alls from Ard Carraigh, may they—’

‘Shut up, I said. And pass me the pot of kasha. The hare was a snack, damn it, now we have to eat something. Ciri, will you eat with us?’

‘Of course.’

For a long while all that could be heard was the smacking of lips, munching, and the crunch of wooden spoons hitting the pot.

‘Pox on it,’ said Paulie Dahlberg and gave a long burp. ‘I could still eat some more.’

‘Me, too,’ declared Ciri and burped too, delighted by the dwarves’ unpretentious manners.

‘As long as it’s not kasha,’ said Xavier Moran. ‘I can’t stomach those milled oats any more. I’ve gone off salted meat, too.’

‘So gorge yourself on grass, if you’ve got such delicate taste-buds.’

‘Or rip the bark off the birch with your teeth. Beavers do it and survive.’

‘A beaver – now that’s something I could eat.’

‘As for me, a fish.’ Paulie lost himself in dreams as he crunched on a husk pulled from his beard. ‘I’ve a fancy for a fish, I can tell you.’

‘So let’s catch some fish.’

‘Where?’ growled Yannick Brass. ‘In the bushes?’

‘In the stream.’

‘Some stream. You can piss to the other side. What sort of fish could be in there?’

‘There are fish.’ Ciri licked her spoon clean and slipped it into the top of her boot. ‘I saw them when I went to get the water. But they’re sick or something, those fish. They’ve got a rash. Black and red spots—’

‘Trout!’ roared Paulie, spitting crumbs of husk. ‘Well, boys, to the stream double-quick! Regan! Get your breeches down! We’ll turn them into a fishing-trap.’

‘Why mine?’

‘Pull them off, at the double, or I’ll wallop you, snothead! Didn’t mother say you have to listen to me?’

‘Hurry up if you want to go fishing because dusk is just round the corner,’ said Yarpen. ‘Ciri, is the water hot yet? Leave it, leave it, you’ll burn yourself and get dirty from the cauldron. I know you’re strong but let me – I’ll carry it.’

Geralt was already waiting for them; they could see his white hair through the gap in the canvas covering the wagon from afar. The dwarf poured the water into the bucket.

‘Need any help, witcher?’

‘No, thank you, Yarpen. Ciri will help.’

Triss was no longer running a high temperature but she was extremely weak. Geralt and Ciri were, by now, efficient at undressing and washing her. They had also learned to temper her ambitious but, at present, unrealistic attempts to manage on her own. They coped exceptionally well – he supported the enchantress in his arms, Ciri washed and dried her. Only one thing had started to surprise and annoy Ciri – Triss, in her opinion, snuggled up to Geralt too tightly. This time she was even trying to kiss him.

Geralt indicated the magician’s saddle-bags with his head. Ciri understood immediately because this, too, was part of the ritual – Triss always demanded to have her hair combed. She found the comb and knelt down beside her. Triss, lowering her head towards her, put her arms around the witcher. In Ciri’s opinion, definitely a little too tightly.

‘Oh, Geralt,’ she sobbed. ‘I so regret . . . I so regret that what was between us—’

‘Triss, please.’

‘. . . it should have happened . . . now. When I’m better . . . It would be entirely different . . . I could . . . I could even—’

‘Triss.’

‘I envy Yennefer . . . I envy her you—’

‘Ciri, step out.’

‘But—’

‘Go, please.’

She jumped out of the wagon and straight onto Yarpen who was waiting, leaning against a wheel and pensively chewing a blade of grass. The dwarf put his arm around her. He did not need to lean over in order to do so, as Geralt did. He was no taller than her.

‘Never make the same mistake, little witcher-girl,’ he murmured, indicating the wagon with his eyes. ‘If someone shows you compassion, sympathy and dedication, if they surprise you with integrity of character, value it but don’t mistake it for . . . something else.’

‘It’s not nice to eavesdrop.’

‘I know. And it’s dangerous. I only just managed to jump aside when you threw out the suds from the bucket. Come on, let’s go and see how many trout have jumped into Regan’s breeches.’

‘Yarpen?’

‘Huh?’

‘I like you.’

‘And I like you, kid.’

‘But you’re a dwarf. And I’m not.’

‘And what diff—Ah, the Scoia’tael. You’re thinking about the Squirrels, aren’t you? It’s not giving you any peace, is it?’

Ciri freed herself from his heavy arm.

‘Nor you,’ she said. ‘Nor any of the others. I can plainly see that.’

The dwarf said nothing.

‘Yarpen?’

‘Yes?’

‘Who’s right? The Squirrels or you? Geralt wants to be . . . neutral. You serve King Henselt even though you’re a dwarf. And the knight in the fort shouted that everybody’s our enemy and that everyone’s got to be . . . Everyone. Even the children. Why, Yarpen? Who’s right?’

‘I don’t know,’ said the dwarf with some effort. ‘I’m not omniscient. I’m doing what I think right. The Squirrels have taken up their weapons and gone into the woods. “Humans to the sea,” they’re shouting, not realising that their catchy slogan was fed them by Nilfgaardian emissaries. Not understanding that the slogan is not aimed at them but plainly at humans, that it’s meant to ignite human hatred, not fire young elves to battle. I understood – that’s why I consider the Scoia’tael’s actions criminally stupid. What to do? Maybe in a few years time I’ll be called a traitor who sold out and they’ll be heroes . . . Our history, the history of our world, has seen events turn out like that.’

He fell silent, ruffled his beard. Ciri also remained silent.

‘Elirena . . .’ he muttered suddenly. ‘If Elirena was a hero, if what she did is heroism, then that’s just too bad. Let them call me a traitor and a coward. Because I, Yarpen Zigrin, coward, traitor and renegade, state that we should not kill each other. I state that we ought to live. Live in such a way that we don’t, later, have to ask anyone for forgiveness. The heroic Elirena . . . She had to ask. Forgive me, she begged, forgive me. To hell with that! It’s better to die than to live in the knowledge that you’ve done something that needs forgiveness.’

Again he fell quiet. Ciri did not ask the questions pressing to her lips. She instinctively felt she should not.

‘We have to live next to each other,’ Yarpen continued. ‘We and you, humans. Because we simply don’t have any other option. We’ve known this for two hundred years and we’ve been working towards it for over a hundred. You want to know why I entered King Henselt’s service, why I made such a decision? I can’t allow all that work to go to waste. For over a hundred years we’ve been trying to come to terms with the humans. The halflings, gnomes, us, even the elves – I’m not talking about rusalkas, nymphs and sylphs, they’ve always been savages, even when you weren’t here. Damn it all, it took a hundred years but, somehow or other, we managed to live a common life, next to each other, together. We managed to partially convince humans that we’re not so very different—’

‘We’re not different at all, Yarpen.’

The dwarf turned abruptly.

‘We’re not different at all,’ repeated Ciri. ‘After all, you think and feel like Geralt. And like . . . like I do. We eat the same things, from the same pot. You help Triss and so do I. You had a grandmother and I had a grandmother . . . My grandmother was killed by the Nilfgaardians. In Cintra.’

‘And mine by the humans,’ the dwarf said with some effort. ‘In Brugge. During the pogrom.’

* ‘Riders!’ shouted one of Wenck’s advance guards. ‘Riders ahead!’

The commissar trotted up to Yarpen’s wagon and Geralt approached from the other side.

‘Get in the back, Ciri,’ he said brusquely. ‘Get off the box and get in the back! Stay with Triss.’

‘I can’t see anything from there!’

‘Don’t argue!’ growled Yarpen. ‘Scuttle back there and be quick about it! And hand me the martel. It’s under the sheepskin.’

‘This?’ Ciri held up a heavy, nasty-looking object, like a hammer with a sharp, slightly curved hook at its head.

‘That’s it,’ confirmed the dwarf. He slipped the handle into the top of his boot and laid the axe on his knees. Wenck, seeming calm, watched the highway while sheltering his eyes with his hand.

‘Light cavalry from Ban Gleán,’ he surmised after a while. ‘The so-called Dun Banner – I recognise them by their cloaks and beaver hats. Remain calm. And stay sharp. Cloaks and beaver hats can be pretty quick to change owners.’

The riders approached swiftly. There were about ten of them. Ciri saw Paulie Dahlberg, in the wagon behind her, place two readied crossbows on his knee and Regan covered them with a cloak. Ciri crept stealthily out from under the canvas, hiding behind Yarpen’s broad back. Triss tried to raise herself, swore and collapsed against her bedding.

‘Halt!’ shouted the first of the riders, no doubt their leader. ‘Who are you? From whence and to where do you ride?’

‘Who asks?’ Wenck calmly pulled himself upright in the saddle. ‘And on whose authority?’

‘King Henselt’s army, inquisitive sir! Lance-corporal Zyvik asks,

and he is unused to asking twice! So answer at the double! Who are you?'

'Quartermaster's service of the King's army.'

'Anyone could claim that! I see no one here bearing the King's colours!'

'Come closer, lance-corporal, and examine this ring.'

'Why flash a ring at me?' The soldier grimaced. 'Am I supposed to know every ring, or something? Anyone could have a ring like that. Some significant sign!'

Yarpen Zigrin stood up in the box, raised his axe and with a swift move pushed it under the soldier's nose.

'And this sign,' he snarled. 'You know it? Smell it and remember how it smells.'

The lance-corporal yanked the reins and turned his horse. 'Threaten me, do you?' he roared. 'Me? I'm in the king's service!'

'And so are we,' said Wenck quietly. 'And have been for longer than you at that, I'm sure. I warn you, trooper, don't overdo it.'

'I'm on guard here! How am I to know who you are?'

'You saw the ring,' drawled the commissar. 'And if you didn't recognise the sign on the jewel then I wonder who *you* are. The colours of your unit bear the same emblem so you ought to know it.'

The soldier clearly restrained himself, influenced, no doubt, equally by Wenck's calm words and the serious, determined faces peering from the escort's carts.

'Hmm . . .' he said, shifting his fur-hat towards his left ear. 'Fine. But if you truly are who you claim to be, you will not, I trust, have anything against my having a look to see what you carry in the wagons.'

'We will indeed.' Wenck frowned. 'And very much, at that. Our load is not your business, lance-corporal. Besides, I do not understand what you think you may find there.'

'You do not understand.' The soldier nodded, lowering his hand towards the hilt of his sword. 'So I shall tell you, sir. Human trafficking is forbidden and there is no lack of scoundrels selling slaves to the Nilfgaardians. If I find humans in stocks in your wagons, you will not convince me that you are in the king's service. Even if you were to show me a dozen rings.'

‘Fine,’ said Wenck dryly. ‘If it is slaves you are looking for then look. You have my permission.’

The soldier cantered to the wagon in the middle, leaned over from the saddle and raised the canvas.

‘What’s in those barrels?’

‘What do you expect? Prisoners?’ sneered Yannick Brass, sprawled in the coachman’s box.

‘I am asking you what’s in them, so answer me!’

‘Salt fish.’

‘And in those trunks there?’ The warrior rode up to the next wagon and kicked the side.

‘Hooves,’ snapped Paulie Dahlberg. ‘And there, in the back, are buffalo skins.’

‘So I see.’ The lance-corporal waved his hand, smacked his lips at his horse, rode up to the vanguard and peered into Yarpen’s wagon.

‘And who is that woman lying there?’

Triss Merigold smiled weakly, raised herself to her elbow and traced a short, complicated sign with her hand.

‘Who am I?’ she asked in a quiet voice. ‘But you can’t see me at all.’

The soldier winked nervously, shuddered slightly.

‘Salt fish,’ he said, convinced, lowering the canvas. ‘All is in order. And this child?’

‘Dried mushrooms,’ said Ciri looking at him impudently. The soldier fell silent, frozen with his mouth open.

‘What’s that?’ he asked after a while, frowning. ‘What?’

‘Have you concluded your inspection, warrior?’ Wenck showed cool interest as he rode up on the other side of the cart. The soldier could barely look away from Ciri’s green eyes.

‘I have concluded it. Drive on, and may the gods guide you. But be on your guard. Two days ago, the Scoia’tael wiped out an entire mounted patrol up by Badger Ravine. It was a strong, large command. It’s true that Badger Ravine is far from here but elves travel through the forest faster than the wind. We were ordered to round them up, but how do you catch an elf? It’s like trying to catch the wind—’

‘Good, enough, we’re not interested,’ the commissar interrupted him brusquely. ‘Time presses and we still have a long journey ahead of us.’

‘Fare you well then. Hey, follow me!’

‘You heard, Geralt?’ snarled Yarpen Zigrin, watching the patrol ride away. ‘There are bloody Squirrels in the vicinity. I felt it. I’ve got this tingling feeling in my back all the time as if some archer was already aiming at me. No, damn it, we can’t travel blindly as we’ve been doing until now, whistling away, dozing and sleepily farting. We have to know what lies ahead of us. Listen, I’ve an idea.’

Ciri pulled her chestnut up sharply, and then launched into a gallop, leaning low in the saddle. Geralt, engrossed in conversation with Wenck, suddenly sat up straight.

‘Don’t run wild!’ he called. ‘No madness, girl! Do you want to break your neck? And don’t go too far—’

She heard no more – she had torn ahead too fiercely. She had done it on purpose, not wanting to listen to the daily cautions. Not too quickly, not too fiercely, Ciri! *Pah-pah*. Don’t go too far! *Pah-pah-pah* . Be careful! *Pah-pah! Exactly as if I were a child*, she thought. *And I’m almost thirteen and have a swift chestnut beneath me and a sharp sword across my back. And I’m not afraid of anything!*

And it’s spring!

‘Hey, careful, you’ll burn your backside!’

Yarpen Zigrin. Another know-it-all. *Pah-pah!*

Further, further, at a gallop, along the bumpy path, through the green, green grasses and bushes, through the silver puddles, through the damp golden sand, through the feathery ferns. A frightened fallow deer disappeared into the woods, flashing the black and white lantern of its tail and rump as it skipped away. Birds soared up from the trees – colourful jays and bee-eaters, screaming black magpies with their funny tails. Water splashed beneath her horse’s hooves in the puddles and the clefts.

Further, even further! The horse, which had been trudging sluggishly behind the wagon for too long, carried her joyously and briskly; happy to be allowed speed, it ran fluidly, muscles playing between her thighs, damp mane thrashing her face. The horse extended its neck as Ciri gave it free rein. *Further, dear horse, don’t feel the bit, further, at the gallop, at the gallop, sharp, sharp! Spring!*

She slowed and glanced back. There, alone at last. Far away at last. No one was going to tell her off any more, remind her of something, demand her attention, threaten that this would be the end of such rides. Alone at last, free, at ease and independent.

Slower. A light trot. After all, this wasn't just a fun ride, she also had responsibilities. Ciri was, after all, a mounted foray now, a patrol, an advance guard. *Ha*, she thought, looking around, *the safety of the entire convoy depends on me now. They're all waiting impatiently for me to return and report: the way is clear and passable, I didn't see anyone – there are no traces of wheels or hooves. I'll report it, and thin Master Wenck with his cold, blue eyes will nod his head gravely, Yarpen Zigrin will bare his yellow, horse teeth, Paulie Dahlberg will shout: 'Well done, little one!', and Geralt will smile faintly. He'll smile, although he very rarely smiles recently.*

Ciri looked around and took a mental note. Two felled birches – no problem. A heap of branches – nothing the wagons couldn't pass. A cleft washed out by the rain – a small obstacle, the wheels of the first wagon will run over it, the others will follow in the ruts. A huge clearing – a good place for a rest . . .

Traces? What traces can there be here? There's no one here. There's the forest. There are birds screeching amidst fresh, green leaves. A red fox runs leisurely across the path . . . And everything smells of spring.

The track broke off halfway up the hill, disappeared in the sandy ravine, wound through the crooked pines which clung to the slopes. Ciri abandoned the path and, wanting to scrutinise the area from a height, climbed the steep slope. And so she could touch the wet, sweet-smelling leaves . . .

She dismounted, threw the reins over a snag in a tree and slowly strolled among the junipers which covered the hill. On the other side of the hill was an open space, gaping in the thick of the forest like a hole bitten out of the trees – left, no doubt, after a fire which had raged here a very long time ago, for there was no sign of blackened or charred remains, everywhere was green with low birches and little fir trees. The trail, as far as the eye could see, seemed clear and passable.

And safe.

What are they afraid of? she thought. *The Scoia'tael? But what was there to be afraid of? I'm not frightened of elves. I haven't done anything to them.*

Elves. The Squirrels. Scoia'tael.

Before Geralt had ordered her to leave, Ciri had managed to take a look at the corpses in the fort. She remembered one in particular – his face covered by hair stuck together with darkened blood, his neck unnaturally twisted and bent. Pulled back in a ghastly, set grimace, his upper lip revealed teeth, very white and very tiny, non-human. She remembered the elf's boots, ruined and reaching up to the knees, laced at the bottom and fastened at the top with many wrought buckles.

Elves who kill humans and die in battles themselves. Geralt says you have to remain neutral . . . And Yarpen says you have to behave in such a way that you don't have to ask for forgiveness . . .

She kicked a molehill and, lost in thought, dug her heel into the sand.

Who and whom, whom and what should one forgive?

The Squirrels kill humans. And Nilfgaard pays them for it. Uses them. Incites them. Nilfgaard.

Ciri had not forgotten – although she very much wanted to forget – what had happened in Cintra. The wandering, the despair, the fear, the hunger and the pain. The apathy and torpor, which came later, much later when the druids from Transriver had found her and taken her in. She remembered it all as though through a mist, and she wanted to stop remembering it.

But it came back. Came back in her thoughts, into her dreams. Cintra. The thundering of horses and the savage cries, corpses, flames . . . And the black knight in his winged helmet . . . And later . . . Cottages in Transriver . . . A flame-blackened chimney amongst charred ruins . . . Next to it, by an unscathed well, a black cat licking a terrible burn on its side. A well . . . A sweep . . . A bucket . . .

A bucket full of blood.

Ciri wiped her face, looked down at her hand, taken aback. Her palm was wet. The girl sniffed and wiped the tears with her sleeve.

Neutrality? Indifference? She wanted to scream. *A witcher looking on indifferently? No! A witcher has to defend people. From the leshy, the vampire, the werewolf. And not only from them. He has to defend people from every evil. And in Transriver I saw what evil is.*

A witcher has to defend and save. To defend men so that they aren't hung on trees by their hands, aren't impaled and left to die. To defend fair girls from being spread-eagled between stakes rammed into the

ground. Defend children so they aren't slaughtered and thrown into a well. Even a cat burned alive in a torched barn deserves to be defended. That's why I'm going to become a witcher, that's why I've got a sword, to defend people like those in Sodden and Transriver – because they don't have swords, don't know the steps, half-turns, dodges and pirouettes. No one has taught them how to fight, they are defenceless and helpless in face of the werewolf and the Nilfgaardian marauder. They're teaching me to fight so that I can defend the helpless. And that's what I'm going to do. Never will I be neutral. Never will I be indifferent.

Never!

She didn't know what warned her – whether it was the sudden silence which fell over the forest like a cold shadow, or a movement caught out of the corner of her eye. But she reacted in a flash, instinctively – with a reaction she had learnt in the woods of Transriver when, escaping from Cintra, she had raced against death. She fell to the ground, crawled under a juniper bush and froze, motionless. *Just let the horse not neigh*, she thought.

On the other side of the ravine something moved again; she saw a silhouette show faintly, hazily amidst the leaves. An elf peered cautiously from the thicket. Having thrown the hood from his head, he looked around for a moment, pricked up his ears and then, noiselessly and swiftly, moved along the ridge. After him, two more leaned out. And then others moved. Many of them. In single file. About half were on horseback – these rode slowly, straight in their saddles, focused and alert. For a moment she saw them all clearly and precisely as, in utter silence, they flowed across a bright breach in the wall of trees, framed against the background of the sky – before they disappeared, dissolved in the shimmering shadows of the wild forest. They vanished without a rustle or a sound, like ghosts. No horse tapped its hoof or snorted, no branch cracked under foot or hoof. The weapons slung across them did not clang.

They disappeared but Ciri did not move. She lay flat on the ground under the juniper bush, trying to breathe as quietly as possible. She knew that a frightened bird or animal could give her away, and a bird or animal could be frightened by any sound or movement – even the slightest, the most careful. She got up only when the woods had grown perfectly calm and the magpies chattered again among the trees where the elves had disappeared.

She rose only to find herself in a strong grip. A black, leather glove fell across her mouth, muffled the scream of fear.

'Be quiet.'

‘Geralt?’

‘Quiet, I said.’

‘You saw them?’

‘I did.’

‘It’s them . . .’ she whispered. ‘The Scoia’tael. Isn’t it?’

‘Yes. Quick back to the horses. Watch your feet.’

They rode carefully and silently down the slope without returning to the trail; they remained in the thicket. Geralt looked around, alert. He did not allow her to ride independently; he did not give her the chestnut’s reins; he led the horse himself.

‘Ciri,’ he said suddenly. ‘Not a word about what we saw. Not to Yarpen, not to Wenck. Not to anybody. Understand?’

‘No,’ she grunted, lowering her head. ‘I don’t understand. Why shouldn’t I say anything? They have to be warned. Whose side are we on, Geralt? Whose side are we against? Who’s our friend and who’s our enemy?’

‘We’ll part with the convoy tomorrow,’ he said after a moment’s silence. ‘Triss is almost recovered. We’ll say goodbye and go our own way. We have problems of our own, our own worries and our own difficulties. Then, I hope, you’ll finally stop dividing the inhabitants of this world into friends and enemies.’

‘We’re to be . . . neutral? Indifferent, is that right? And if they attack . . .’

‘They won’t.’

‘And if—’

‘Listen to me.’ He turned to her. ‘Why do you think that such a vital load of gold and silver, King Henselt’s secret aid for Aedirn, is being escorted by dwarves and not humans? I saw an elf watching us from a tree yesterday. I heard them pass by our camp during the night. The Scoia’tael will not attack the dwarves, Ciri.’

‘But they’re here,’ she muttered. ‘They are. They’re moving around, surrounding us . . .’

‘I know why they’re here. I’ll show you.’

He turned the horse abruptly and threw the reins to her. She kicked the chestnut with her heels and moved away faster, but he motioned for her to stay behind him. They cut across the trail and reentered the wild forest. The witcher led, Ciri following in his

tracks. Neither said anything. Not for a long time.

‘Look.’ Geralt held back his horse. ‘Look, Ciri.’

‘What is it?’ she sighed.

‘Shaerrawedd.’

In front of them, as far as the woods allowed them to see, rose smoothly hewn blocks of granite and marble with blunt corners, worn away by the winds, decorated with patterns long leached out by the rains, cracked and shattered by frost, split by tree roots. Amongst the trunks’ broken columns flashed white, arcades, the remains of ornamental friezes entwined with ivy, and wrapped in a thick layer of green moss.

‘This was . . . a castle?’

‘A palace. The elves didn’t build castles. Dismount, the horses won’t manage in the rubble.’

‘Who destroyed it all? Humans?’

‘No, they did. Before they left.’

‘Why?’

‘They knew they wouldn’t be coming back. It happened following their second clash with the humans, more than two hundred years ago. Before that, they used to leave towns untouched when they retreated. Humans used to build on the foundations left by the elves. That’s how Novigrad, Oxenfurt, Wyzima, Tretogor, Maribor and Cidaris were built. And Cintra.’

‘Cintra?’

He confirmed it with a nod of the head, not taking his eyes off the ruins.

‘They left,’ whispered Ciri, ‘but now they’re coming back. Why?’

‘To have a look.’

‘At what?’

Without a word he laid his hand on her shoulder and pushed her gently before him. They jumped down the marble stairs, climbing down holding on to the springy hazel, clusters of which had burst through every gap, every crevice in the moss-covered, cracked plates.

‘This was the centre of the palace, its heart. A fountain.’

‘Here?’ she asked, surprised, gazing at the dense thicket of alders

and white birch trunks amongst the misshapen blocks and slabs. ‘Here? But there’s nothing there.’

‘Come.’

The stream feeding the fountain must have changed its course many times, patiently and constantly washing the marble blocks and alabaster plates which had sunk or fallen to form dams, once again changing the course of the current. As a result the whole area was divided up by shallow gullies. Here and there the water cascaded over the remains of the building, washing it clean of leaves, sand and litter. In these places, the marble, terracotta and mosaics were still as vibrant with colour, as fresh as if they had been lying there for three days, not two centuries.

Geralt leapt across the stream and went in amongst what remained of the columns. Ciri followed. They jumped off the ruined stairs and, lowering their heads, walked beneath the untouched arch of the arcade, half buried beneath a mound of earth. The witcher stopped and indicated with his hand. Ciri sighed loudly.

From rubble colourful with smashed terracotta grew an enormous rose bush covered with beautiful white-lilied flowers. Drops of dew as bright as silver glistened on the petals. The bush wove its shoots around a large slab of white stone and from it a sad, pretty face looked out at them; the downpours and snows had not yet managed to blur or wash away its delicate and noble features. It was a face which the chisels of plunderers digging out golden ornaments, mosaics and precious stones from the relief sculpture had not managed to disfigure.

‘Aelirenn,’ said Geralt after a long silence.

‘She’s beautiful,’ whispered Ciri, grabbing him by the hand. The witcher didn’t seem to notice. He stared at the sculpture and was far away, far away in a different world and time.

‘Aelirenn,’ he repeated after a while. ‘Known as Elirena by dwarves and humans. She led them into battle two hundred years ago. The elders of the elves were against it, they knew they had no chance. That they would not be able to pick themselves up after the defeat. They wanted to save their people, wanted to survive. They decided to destroy their towns and retreat to the inaccessible, wild mountains . . . and to wait. Elves live a long time, Ciri. By our time scale they are almost eternal. They thought humans were something that would pass, like a drought, like a heavy winter, or a plague of locust, after which comes rain, spring, a new harvest. They wanted to sit it out. Survive. They decided to destroy their towns and

palaces, amongst them their pride – the beautiful Shaerrawedd. They wanted to weather out the storm but Elirena . . . Elirena stirred up the young. They took up arms and followed her into their last desperate battle. And they were massacred. Mercilessly massacred.'

Ciri did not say anything, staring at the beautiful, still face.

'They died with her name on their lips,' the witcher continued quietly. 'Repeating her challenge, her cry, they died for Shaerrawedd. Because Shaerrawedd was a symbol. They died for this stone and marble . . . and for Aelirenn. Just as she promised them, they died with dignity, heroically and honourably. They saved their honour but they brought nothing but ruin as a result, condemned their own race to annihilation. Their own people. You remember what Yarpen told you? Those who rule the world and those who die out? He explained it to you coarsely but truly. Elves live for a long time, but only their youngsters are fertile, only the young can have offspring. And practically all the elven youngsters had followed Elirena. They followed Aelirenn, the White Rose of Shaerrawedd. We are standing in the ruins of her palace, by the fountain whose waters she listened to in the evenings. And these . . . these were her flowers.'

Ciri was silent. Geralt drew her to himself, put his arm around her.

'Do you know now why the Scoia'tael were here, do you see what they wanted to look at? And do you understand why the elven and dwarven young must not be allowed to be massacred once again? Do you understand why neither you nor I are permitted to have a hand in this massacre? These roses flower all year round. They ought to have grown wild by now, but they are more beautiful than any rose in a tended garden. Elves continue to come to Shaerrawedd, Ciri. A variety of elves. The impetuous and the foolish ones for whom the cracked stone is a symbol as well as the sensible ones for whom these immortal, forever reborn flowers are a symbol. Elves who understand that if this bush is torn from the ground and the earth burned out, the roses of Shaerrawedd will never flower again. Do you understand?'

She nodded.

'Do you understand what this neutrality is, which stirs you so? To be neutral does not mean to be indifferent or insensitive. You don't have to kill your feelings. It's enough to kill hatred within yourself. Do you understand?'

‘Yes,’ she whispered. ‘I understand. Geralt, I . . . I’d like to take one . . . One of these roses. To remind me. May I?’

‘Do,’ he said after some hesitation. ‘Do, in order to remember. Let’s go now. Let’s return to the convoy.’

Ciri pinned the rose under the lacing of her jerkin. Suddenly she cried out quietly, lifted her hand. A trickle of blood ran from her finger down her palm.

‘Did you prick yourself?’

‘Yarpen . . .’ whispered the girl, looking at the blood filling her life-line. ‘Wenck . . . Paulie . . .’

‘What?’

‘Triss!’ she shouted with a piercing voice which was not hers, shuddered fiercely and wiped her face with her arm. ‘Quick, Geralt! We’ve got to help! To the horses, Geralt!’

‘Ciri! What’s happening?’

‘They’re dying!’

She galloped with her ear almost touching the horse’s neck and spurred her mount on, kicking with her heels and shouting. The sand of the forest path flew beneath the hooves. She heard screaming in the distance, and smelt smoke.

Coming straight at them, blocking the path, raced two horses dragging a harness, reins and a broken shaft behind them. Ciri did not hold her chestnut back and shot past them at full speed, flakes of froth skimming across her face. Behind her she heard Roach neigh and Geralt’s curses as he was forced to a halt.

She tore around a bend in the path in to a large glade.

The convoy was in flames. From thickets, flaming arrows flew towards the wagons like fire birds, perforating the canvas and digging into the boards. The Scoia’tael attacked with war-cries and yells.

Ciri, ignoring Geralt’s shouts from behind her, directed her horse straight at the first two wagons brought to the fore. One was lying on its side and Yarpen Zigrin, axe in one hand, crossbow in the other, stood next to it. At his feet, motionless, with her blue dress hitched halfway up her thighs, lay . . .

‘Triiiiiisss!’ Ciri straightened in the saddle, thumping her horse

with her heels. The Scoia'tael turned towards her and arrows whistled past the girl's ears. She shook her head without slowing her gallop. She heard Geralt shout, ordering her to flee into the woods. She did not intend to obey. She leaned down and bolted straight towards the archers shooting at her. Suddenly she smelt the overpowering scent of the white rose pinned to her jerkin.

'Triiiiisss!'

The elves leaped out of the way of the speeding horses. Ciri caught one lightly with her stirrup. She heard a sharp buzz, her steed struggled, whinnied and threw itself to the side. Ciri saw an arrow dug deep, just below the withers, right by her thigh. She tore her feet from the stirrups, jumped up, squatted in the saddle, bounced off strongly and leaped.

She fell softly on the body of the overturned wagon, used her hands to balance herself and jumped again, landing with bent knees next to Yarpen who was roaring and brandishing his axe. Next to them, on the second wagon, Paulie Dahlberg was fighting while Regan, leaning back and bracing his legs against the board, was struggling to hold on to the harnessed horses. They neighed wildly, stamped their hooves and yanked at the shaft in fear of the fire devouring the canvas.

She rushed to Triss, who lay amongst the scattered barrels and chests, grabbed her by her clothes and started to drag her towards the overturned wagon. The enchantress moaned, holding her head just above the ear. Right by Ciri's side, hooves suddenly clattered and horses snorted – two elves, brandishing their swords, were pressing the madly fighting Yarpen hard. The dwarf spun like a top and agilely deflected the blows directed against him with his axe. Ciri heard curses, grunts and the whining clang of metal.

Another span of horses detached itself from the flaming convoy and rushed towards them, dragging smoke and flames behind it and scattering burning rags. The wagon-man hung inertly from the box and Yannick Brass stood next to him, barely keeping his balance. With one hand he wielded the reins, with the other he was cutting himself away from two elves galloping one at each side of the wagon. A third Scoia'tael, keeping up with the harnessed horses, was shooting arrow after arrow into their sides.

'Jump!' yelled Yarpen, shouting over the noise. 'Jump, Yannick!'

Ciri saw Geralt catch up with the speeding wagon and with a short, spare slash of his sword swipe one of the elves from his saddle while Wenck, riding up on the opposite side, hewed at the

other, the elf shooting the horses. Yannick threw the reins down and jumped off – straight under the third Scoia'tael's horse. The elf stood in his stirrups and slashed at him with his sword. The dwarf fell. At that moment the flaming wagon crashed into those still fighting, parting and scattering them. Ciri barely managed to pull Triss out from beneath the crazed horses' hooves at the last moment. The swingle-tree tore away with a crack, the wagon leaped into the air, lost a wheel and overturned, scattering its load and smouldering boards everywhere.

Ciri dragged the enchantress under Yarpen's overturned wagon. Paulie Dahlberg, who suddenly found himself next to her, helped, while Geralt covered them both, shoving Roach between them and the charging Scoia'tael. All around the wagon, battle seethed: Ciri heard shouting, blades clashing, horses snorting, hooves clattering. Yarpen, Wenck and Geralt, surrounded on all sides by the elves, fought like raging demons.

The fighters were suddenly parted by Regan's span as he struggled in the coachman's box with a halfling wearing a lynx fur hat. The halfling was sitting on Regan trying to jab him with a long knife.

Yarpen deftly leaped onto the wagon, caught the halfling by the neck and kicked him overboard. Regan gave a piercing yell, grabbed the reins and lashed the horses. The span jerked, the wagon rolled and gathered speed in a flash.

'Circle, Regan!' roared Yarpen. 'Circle! Go round!'

The wagon turned and descended on the elves again, parting them. One of them sprung up, grabbed the right lead-horse by the halter but couldn't stop him; the impetus threw him under the hooves and wheels. Ciri heard an excruciating scream.

Another elf, galloping next to them, gave a backhanded swipe with his sword. Yarpen ducked, the blade rang against the hoop supporting the canvas and the momentum carried the elf forward. The dwarf hunched abruptly and vigorously swung his arm. The Scoia'tael yelled, stiffened in the saddle and tumbled to the ground. A martel protruded between his shoulder blades.

'Come on then, you whoresons!' Yarpen roared, whirling his axe. 'Who else? Chase a circle, Regan! Go round!'

Regan, tossing his bloodied mane of hair, hunched in the box amidst the whizzing of arrows, howled like the damned, and mercilessly lashed the horses on. The span dashed in a tight circle,

creating a moving barricade belching flames and smoke around the overturned wagon beneath which Ciri had dragged the semi-conscious, battered magician.

Not far from them danced Wenck's horse, a mouse-coloured stallion. Wenck was hunched over; Ciri saw the white feathers of an arrow sticking out of his side. Despite the wound, he was skilfully hacking his way past two elves on foot, attacking him from both sides. As Ciri watched another arrow struck him in the back. The commissar collapsed forward onto his horse's neck but remained in the saddle. Paulie Dahlberg rushed to his aid.

Ciri was left alone.

She reached for her sword. The blade which throughout her training had leaped out from her back in a flash would not let itself be drawn for anything; it resisted her, stuck in its scabbard as if glued in tar. Amongst the whirl seething around her, amongst moves so swift that they blurred in front of her eyes, her sword seemed strangely, unnaturally slow; it seemed ages would pass before it could be fully drawn. The ground trembled and shook. Ciri suddenly realised that it was not the ground. It was her knees.

Paulie Dahlberg, keeping the elf charging at him at bay with his axe, dragged the wounded Wenck along the ground. Roach flitted past, beside the wagon, and Geralt threw himself at the elf. He had lost his headband and his hair streamed out behind him with his speed. Swords clashed.

Another Scoia'tael, on foot, leaped out from behind the wagon. Paulie abandoned Wenck, pulled himself upright and brandished his axe. Then froze.

In front of him stood a dwarf wearing a hat adorned with a squirrel's tail, his black beard braided into two plaits. Paulie hesitated.

The black-beard did not hesitate for a second. He struck with both arms. The blade of the axe whirred and fell, slicing into the collar-bone with a hideous crunch. Paulie fell instantly, without a moan; it looked as if the force of the blow had broken both his knees.

Ciri screamed.

Yarpen Zigrin leaped from the wagon. The black-bearded dwarf spun and cut. Yarpen avoided the blow with an agile half-turn dodge, grunted and struck ferociously, chopping in to black-beard – throat, jaw and face, right up to the nose. The Scoia'tael bent back

and collapsed, bleeding, pounding his hands against the ground and tearing at the earth with his heels.

‘Geraaaallllttt!’ screamed Ciri, feeling something move behind her. Sensing death behind her.

There was only a hazy shape, caught in a turn, a move and a flash but the girl – like lightning – reacted with a diagonal parry and feint taught her in Kaer Morhen. She caught the blow but had not been standing firmly enough, had been leaning too far to the side to receive the full force. The strength of the strike threw her against the body of the wagon. Her sword slipped from her hand.

The beautiful, long-legged elf wearing high boots standing in front of her grimaced fiercely and, tossing her hair free of her lowered hood, raised her sword. The sword flashed blindingly, the bracelets on the Squirrel’s wrists glittered.

Ciri was in no state to move.

But the sword did not fall, did not strike. Because the elf was not looking at Ciri but at the white rose pinned to her jerkin.

‘Aelirenn!’ shouted the Squirrel loudly as if wanting to shatter her hesitation with the cry. But she was too late. Geralt, shoving Ciri away, slashed her broadly across the chest with his sword. Blood spurted over the girl’s face and clothes, red drops spattered on the white petals of the rose.

‘Aelirenn . . .’ moaned the elf shrilly, collapsing to her knees. Before she fell on her face, she managed to shout one more time. Loudly, lengthily, despairingly:

‘Shaerraweeeeedd !’

Reality returned just as suddenly as it had disappeared. Through the monotonous, dull hum which filled her ears, Ciri began to hear voices. Through the flickering, wet curtain of tears, she began to see the living and the dead.

‘Ciri,’ whispered Geralt who was kneeling next to her. ‘Wake up.’

‘A battle . . .’ she moaned, sitting up. ‘Geralt, what—’

‘It’s all over. Thanks to the troops from Ban Gleán which came to our aid.’

‘You weren’t . . .’ she whispered, closing her eyes, ‘you weren’t neutral . . .’

‘No, I wasn’t. But you’re alive. Triss is alive.’

‘How is she?’

‘She hit her head falling out of the wagon when Yarpen tried to rescue it. But she’s fine now. Treating the wounded.’

Ciri cast her eyes around. Amidst the smoke from the last wagons, burning out, silhouettes of armed men flickered. And all around lay chests and barrels. Some of were shattered and the contents scattered. They had contained ordinary, grey field stones. She stared at them, astounded.

‘Aid for Demawend from Aedirn.’ Yarpen Zigrin, standing nearby, ground his teeth. ‘Secret and exceptionally important aid. A convoy of special significance!’

‘It was a trap?’

The dwarf turned, looked at her, at Geralt. Then he looked back at the stones pouring from the barrels and spat.

‘Yes,’ he confirmed. ‘A trap.’

‘For the Squirrels?’

‘No.’

The dead were arranged in a neat row. They lay next to each other, not divided – elves, humans and dwarves. Yannick Brass was amongst them. The dark-haired elf in the high boots was there. And the dwarf with his black, plaited beard, glistening with dried blood. And next to them . . .

‘Paulie!’ sobbed Regan Dahlberg, holding his brother’s head on his knees. ‘Paulie! Why?’

No one said anything. No one. Even those who knew why. Regan turned his contorted face, wet with tears, towards them.

‘What will I tell our mother?’ he wailed. ‘What am I going to say to her?’

No one said anything.

Not far away, surrounded by soldiers in the black and gold of Kaedwen, lay Wenck. He was breathing with difficulty and every breath forced bubbles of blood to his lips. Triss knelt next to him and a knight in shining armour stood over them both.

‘Well?’ asked the knight. ‘Lady enchantress? Will he live?’

‘I’ve done everything I can.’ Triss got to her feet, pinched her lips. ‘But . . .’

‘What?’

‘They used this.’ She showed him an arrow with a strange head to it and struck it against a barrel standing by them. The tip of the arrow fell apart, split into four barbed, hook-like needles. The knight cursed.

‘Fredegard . . .’ Wenck uttered with difficulty. ‘Fredegard, listen —’

‘You mustn’t speak!’ said Triss severely. ‘Or move! The spell is barely holding!’

‘Fredegard,’ the commissar repeated. A bubble of blood burst on his lips and another immediately appeared in its place. ‘We were wrong . . . Everyone was wrong. It’s not Yarpen . . . We suspected him wrongly . . . I vouch for him. Yarpen did not betray . . . Did not betr—’

‘Silence!’ shouted the knight. ‘Silence, Vilfrid! Hey, quick now, bring the stretcher! Stretcher!’ ‘No need,’ the magician said hollowly, gazing at Wenck’s lips

where no more bubbles appeared. Ciri turned away and pressed her face to Geralt’s side.

Fredegard drew himself up. Yarpen Zigrin did not look at him. He was looking at the dead. At Regan Dahlberg still kneeling over his brother.

‘It was necessary, Zigrin,’ said the knight. ‘This is war. There was an order. We had to be sure . . .’

Yarpen did not say anything. The knight lowered his eyes.

‘Forgive us,’ he whispered.

The dwarf slowly turned his head, looked at him. At Geralt. At Ciri. At them all. The humans.

‘What have you done to us?’ he asked bitterly. ‘What have you done to us? What have you made of us?’

No one answered him.

The eyes of the long-legged elf were glassy and dull. Her contorted lips were frozen in a soundless cry.

Geralt put his arms around Ciri. Slowly, he unpinned the white rose, spattered with dark stains, from her jerkin and, without a word, threw it on the Squirrel’s body.

‘Farewell,’ whispered Ciri. ‘Farewell, Rose of Shaerrawedd.

Farewell and . . .’

‘And forgive us,’ added the witcher.

They roam the land, importunate and insolent, nominating themselves the stalkers of evil, vanquishers of werewolves and exterminators of spectres, extorting payment from the gullible and, on receipt of their ignoble earnings, moving on to dispense the same deceit in the near vicinity. The easiest access they find at cottages of honest, simple and unwitting peasants who readily ascribe all misfortune and ill events to spells, unnatural creatures and monsters, the doings of windsprites or evil spirits. Instead of praying to the gods, instead of bearing rich offerings to the temple, such a simpleton is ready to give his last penny to the base witcher, believing the witcher, the godless changeling, will turn around his fate and save him from misfortune.

Anonymous*, Monstrum*, or *Description of the Witcher*

I have nothing against witchers. Let them hunt vampires. As long as they pay taxes.

Radovid III the Bold, King of Redania

If you thirst for justice, hire a witcher.

Grafitti on the wall of the Faculty of Law, University of Oxenfurt

CHAPTER FIVE

'Did you say something?'

The boy sniffed and pushed his over-sized velvet hat, a pheasant's feather hanging rakishly to the side, back from his forehead.

'Are you a knight?' he repeated, gazing at Geralt with wide eyes as blue as the sky.

'No,' replied the witcher, surprised that he felt like answering. 'I'm not.'

'But you've got a sword! My daddy's one of King Foltest's knights. He's got a sword, too. Bigger than yours!'

Geralt leaned his elbows on the railing and spat into the water eddying at the barge's wake.

'You carry it on your back,' the little snot persisted. The hat

slipped down over his eyes again.

'What?'

'The sword. On your back. Why have you got the sword on your back?'

'Because someone stole my oar.'

The little snot opened his mouth, demanding that the impressive gaps left by milk teeth be admired.

'Move away from the side,' said the witcher. 'And shut your mouth or flies will get in.'

The boy opened his mouth even wider.

'Grey-haired yet stupid!' snarled the little snot's mother, a richly attired noblewoman, pulling her offspring away by the beaver collar of his cloak. 'Come here, Everett! I've told you so many times not to be familiar with the passing rabble!'

Geralt sighed, gazing at the outline of islands and islets looming through the morning mist. The barge, as ungainly as a tortoise, trudged along at an appropriate speed – that being the speed of a tortoise – dictated by the lazy Delta current. The passengers, mostly merchants and peasants, were dozing on their baggage. The witcher unfurled the scroll once more and returned to Ciri's letter.

. . . I sleep in a large hall called a Dormitorium and my bed is terribly big, I tell you. I'm with the Intermediary Girls. There are twelve of us but I'm most friendly with Eurneid, Katye and Iola the Second. Whereas today I Ate Broth and the worst is that sometimes we have to Fast and get up very early at Dawn. Earlier than in Kaer Morhen. I will write the rest tomorrow for we shall presently be having Prayers. No one ever prayed in Kaer Morhen, I wonder why we have to here. No doubt because this is a Temple.

Geralt. Mother Nenneke has read and said I must not write Silly Things and write clearly without mistakes. And about what I'm studying and that I feel well and healthy. I feel well and am healthy if unfortunately Hungry, but Soone be Dinner. And Mother Nenneke also said write that prayer has never harmed anybody yet, neither me nor, certainly, you.

Geralt, I have some free time again, I will write therefore that I am studying. To read and write correct Runes. History. Nature. Poetry and Prose. To express myself well in the Common Speech and in the Elder Speech. I am best at the Elder Speech, I can also write Elder Runes. I will write something for you and you will see for yourself. Elaine blath,

Feainnewedd. That meant: Beautiful flower, child of the Sun. You see for yourself that I can. And also—

Now I can write again for I have found a new quill for the old one broke. Mother Nenneke read this and praised me that it was correct. That I am obedient, she told me to write, and that you should not worry. Don't worry, Geralt.

Again I have some time so I will write what happened. When we were feeding the turkey hens, I, Iola and Katye, One Enormous Turkey attacked us, a red neck it had and was Terrible Horrible. First it attacked Iola and then it wanted to attack me but I was not afraid because it was smaller and slower than the Pendulum anyway. I dodged and did a pirouette and walloped it twice with a switch until it Made Off. Mother Nenneke does not allow me to carry My Sword here, a pity, for I would have shown that Turkey what I learned in Kaer Morhen. I already know that in the Elder Runes it would be written Caer a'Muirehen and that it means Keep of the Elder Sea. So no doubt that is why there are Shells and Snails there as well as Fish imprinted on the stones. And Cintra is correctly written Xin'trea. Whereas my name comes from Zireael for that means Swallow and that means that . . .

'Are you busy reading?'

He raised his head.

'I am. So? Has anything happened? Someone noticed something?'

'No, nothing,' replied the skipper, wiping his hands on his leather jerkin. 'There's calm on the water. But there's a mist and we're already near Crane Islet—'

'I know. It's the sixth time I've sailed this way, Boatbug, not counting the return journeys. I've come to know the trail. My eyes are open, don't worry.'

The skipper nodded and walked away to the prow, stepping over travellers' packages and bundles stacked everywhere. Squeezed in amidships, the horses snorted and pounded their hooves on the deck-boards. They were in the middle of the current, in dense fog. The prow of the barge ploughed the surface of water lilies, parting their clumps. Geralt turned back to his reading.

. . . that means I have an elven name. But I am not, after all, an elf, Geralt, there is also talk about the Squirrels here. Sometimes even the Soldiers come and ask questions and say that we must not treat wounded elves. I have not squealed a word to anyone about what happened in spring, don't worry. And I also remember to practise, don't think otherwise. I go to the park and train when I have time. But not

always, for I also have to work in the kitchen or in the orchard like all the girls. And we also have a terrible amount of studying to do. But never mind, I will study. After all, you too studied in the Temple, Mother Nenneke told me. And she also told me that just any idiot can brandish a sword but a witcher-girl must be wise.

Geralt, you promised to come. Come.
Your Ciri

PS Come, come.

PS II. Mother Nenneke told me to end with Praise be to Great Melitele, may her blessing and favour always go with you. And may nothing happen to you.

Ciri

I'd like to go to Ellander, he thought, putting away the letter. *But it's dangerous. I might lead them to—These letters have got to end. Nenneke makes use of temple mail but still . . . Damn it, it's too risky.*

'Hmmm . . . Hmm . . .'

'What now, Boatbug? We've passed Crane Islet.'

'And without incident, thank the gods,' sighed the skipper. 'Ha, Geralt, I see this is going to be another peaceful trip. Any moment now the mist is going to clear and when the sun peeps through, the fear is over. The monster won't show itself in the sunlight.'

'That won't worry me in the least.'

'So I should think.' Boatbug smiled wryly. 'The company pays you by the trip. Regardless whether something happens or not a penny falls into your pouch, doesn't it?'

'You ask as if you didn't know. What is this – envy talking? That I earn money standing leaning against the side, watching the lapwings? And what do you get paid for? The same thing. For being on board. When everything is going smoothly you haven't got anything to do. You stroll from prow to stern, grinning at the women or trying to entice merchants to have a drink. I've been hired to be on board too. Just in case. The transport is safe because a witcher is on board. The cost of the witcher is included in the price of the trip, right?'

'Well, that certainly is true,' sighed the skipper. 'The company won't lose out. I know them well. This is the fifth year I sail the Delta for them from Foam to Novigrad, from Novigrad to Foam.

Well, to work, witcher, sir. You go on leaning against the side and I'll go for a stroll from prow to stern.'

The mist thinned a little. Geralt extracted another letter from his bag, one he had recently received from a strange courier. He had already read it about thirty times.

Dear friend . . .

The witcher swore quietly, looking at the sharp, angular, even runes drawn with energetic sweeps of the pen, faultlessly reflecting the author's mood. He felt once again the desire to try to bite his own backside in fury. When he was writing to the enchantress a month ago he had spent two nights in a row contemplating how best to begin. Finally, he had decided on 'Dear friend'. Now he had his just deserts.

Dear friend, your unexpected letter – which I received not quite three years after we last saw each other – has given me much joy. My joy is all the greater as various rumours have been circulating about your sudden and violent death. It is a good thing that you have decided to disclaim them by writing to me; it is a good thing, too, that you are doing so so soon. From your letter it appears that you have lived a peaceful, wonderfully boring life, devoid of all sensation. These days such a life is a real privilege, dear friend, and I am happy that you have managed to achieve it.

I was touched by the sudden concern which you deigned to show as to my health, dear friend. I hasten with the news that, yes, I now feel well; the period of indisposition is behind me, I have dealt with the difficulties, the description of which I shall not bore you with.

It worries and troubles me very much that the unexpected present you received from Fate brings you worries. Your supposition that this requires professional help is absolutely correct. Although your description of the difficulty – quite understandably – is enigmatic, I am sure I know the Source of the problem. And I agree with your opinion that the help of yet another magician is absolutely necessary. I feel honoured to be the second to whom you turn. What have I done to deserve to be so high on your list?

Rest assured, my dear friend; and if you had the intention of supplicating the help of additional magicians, abandon it because there is no need. I leave without delay, and go to the place which you indicated in an oblique yet, to me, understandable way. It goes without saying that I leave in absolute secrecy and with great caution. I will surmise the nature of the trouble on the spot and will do all that is in my power to calm the gushing source. I shall try, in so doing, not to appear

any worse than other ladies to whom you have turned, are turning or usually turn with your supplications. I am, after all, your dear friend. Your valuable friendship is too important to me to disappoint you, dear friend.

Should you, in the next few years, wish to write to me, do not hesitate for a moment. Your letters invariably give me boundless pleasure.

Your friend Yennefer

The letter smelled of lilac and gooseberries.

Geralt cursed.

He was torn from his reverie by the movement on deck and a rocking of the barge that indicated they were changing course. Some of the passengers crowded starboard. Skipper Boatbug was yelling orders from the bow; the barge was slowly and laboriously turning towards the Temerian shore, leaving the fairway and ceding right of way to two ships looming through the mist. The witcher watched with curiosity.

The first was an enormous three-masted galliass at least a hundred and forty yards long, carrying an amaranth flag with a silver eagle. Behind it, its forty oars rhythmically hard at work, glided a smaller, slim galley adorned with a black ensign with gold-red chevron.

'Ooohh, what huge dragons,' said Boatbug standing next to the witcher. 'They're pushing a heck of a wave, the way they're ploughing the river.'

'Interesting,' muttered Geralt. 'The galliass is sailing under the Redanian flag but the galley is from Aedirn.'

'From Aedirn, very much so,' confirmed the skipper. 'And it carries the Governor of Hagge's pennon. But note, both ships have sharp keels, near on four yards' draught. That means they're not sailing to Hagge itself – they wouldn't cross the rapids and shallows up the river. They're heading to Foam or White Bridge. And look, there are swarms of soldiers on the decks. These aren't merchants. They're war ships, Geralt.'

'Someone important is on that galliass. They've set up a tent on deck.'

'That's right, that's how the nobles travel.' Boatbug nodded, picking his teeth with a splinter peeled from the barge's side. 'It's safer by river. Elven commandos are roaming the forests. There's no knowing which tree an arrow's going to come flying from. But on

the water there's no fear. Elves, like cats, don't like water. They prefer dwelling in brushwood . . .'

'It's got to be someone really important. The tent is rich.'

'That's right, could be. Who knows, maybe King Vizimir himself is favouring the river with his presence? All sorts of people are travelling this way now . . . And while we're at it, in Foam you asked me to keep my ears open in case anyone was interested in you, asking about you. Well, that weakling there, you see him?'

'Don't point, Boatbug. Who is he?'

'How should I know? Ask him yourself, he's coming over. Just look at his stagger! And the water's as still as a mirror, pox on it; if it were to swell just a little he'd probably be on all fours, the oaf.'

The 'oaf ' turned out to be a short, thin man of uncertain age, dressed in a large, woollen and none-too-clean cloak pinned in place with a circular brass broach. Its pin, clearly lost, had been replaced by a crooked nail with a flattened head. The man approached, cleared his throat and squinted with his myopic eyes.

'Hmm . . . Do I have the pleasure of speaking to Geralt of Rivia, the witcher?'

'Yes, sir. You do.'

'Allow me to introduce myself. I am Linus Pitt, Master Tutor and Lecturer in Natural History at the Oxenfurt Academy.'

'My very great pleasure.'

'Hmm . . . I've been told that you, sir, are on commission from the Malatius and Grock Company to protect this transport. Apparently from the danger of some monster attack. I wonder what this "monster" could be.'

'I wonder myself.' The witcher leaned against the ship's side, gazing at the dark outline of the marshy meadows on the Temerian river bank looming in the mist. 'And have come to the conclusion that I have most likely been hired as a precaution against an attack from a Scoia'tael commando force said to be roaming the vicinity. This is my sixth journey between Foam and Novigrad and no aeschna has shown itself—'

'Aeschna? That's some kind of common name. I would rather you used the scientific terminology. Hmm . . . aeschna . . . I truly do not know which species you have in mind—'

'I'm thinking of a bumpy and rough-skinned monster four yards

in length resembling a stump overgrown with algae and with ten paws and jaws like cut-saws.'

'The description leaves a lot to be desired as regards scientific precision. Could it be one of the species of the *Hyphydridae* family?'

'I don't exclude the possibility,' sighed Geralt. 'The aeschna, as far as I know, belongs to an exceptionally nasty family for which no name can be abusive. The thing is, Master Tutor, that apparently a member of this unsympathetic clan attacked the Company's barge two weeks ago. Here, on the Delta, not far from where we are.'

'He who says this' – Linus Pitt gave a screeching laugh – 'is either an ignoramus or a liar. Nothing like that could have happened. I know the fauna of the Delta very well. The family *Hyphydridae* does not appear here at all. Nor do any other quite so dangerous predatory species. The considerable salinity and atypical chemical composition of the water, especially during high tide—'

'During high tide,' interrupted Geralt, 'when the incoming tide wave passes the Novigrad canals, there is no water – to use the word precisely – in the Delta at all. There is a liquid made up of excrement, soapsuds, oil and dead rats.'

'Unfortunately, unfortunately.' The Master Tutor grew sad. 'Degradation of the environment . . . You may not believe it, but of more than two thousand species of fish living in this river only fifty years ago, not more than nine hundred remain. It is truly sad.'

They both leaned against the railing and stared into the murky green depths. The tide must have already been coming in because the stench of the water was growing stronger. The first dead rats appeared.

'The white-finned bullhead has died off completely.' Linus Pitt broke the silence. 'The mullet has died, as have the snakehead, the kithara, the striped loach, the redbelly dace, the long-barbel gudgeon, the king pickerel . . .'

At a distance of about twenty yards from the ship's side, the water surged. For a moment, both men saw a twenty-pound or more specimen of the king pickerel swallowing a dead rat and disappearing into the depths, having gracefully flashed its tail fin.

'What was that?' The Master Tutor shuddered.

'I don't know.' Geralt looked at the sky. 'A penguin maybe?'

The scholar glanced at him and bit his lips.

'In all certainty it was not, however, your mythical aeschna! I

have been told that witchers possess considerable knowledge about some rare species. But you, you not only repeat rumours and tales, you are also mocking me in a most crude manner . . . Are you listening to me at all?'

'The mist isn't going to lift,' said Geralt quietly.

'Huh?'

'The wind is still weak. When we sail into the arm of the river, between the islets, it will be even weaker. It is going to be misty right up to Novigrad.'

'I'm not going to Novigrad. I get off at Oxenfurt,' declared Pitt dryly. 'And the mist? It is surely not so thick as to render navigation impossible; what do you think?'

The little boy in the feathered hat ran past them and leaned far out, trying, with his stick, to fish out a rat bouncing against the boat. Geralt approached and tore the stick from him.

'Scram. Don't get near the side!'

'Muuuummyyyy!'

'Everett! Come here immediately!'

The Master Tutor pulled himself up and glared at the witcher with piercing eyes.

'It seems you really do believe we are in some danger?'

'Master Pitt,' said Geralt as calmly as he could, 'two weeks ago something pulled two people off the deck of one of the Company's barges. In the mist. I don't know what it was. Maybe it was your hyphydra or whatever its name is. Maybe it was a long-barbel gudgeon. But I think it was an aeschna.

The scholar pouted. 'Conjecture,' he declared, 'should always be based on solid scientific foundations, not on rumours and gossip. I told you, the hyphydra, which you persist in calling an aeschna, does not appear in the waters of the Delta. It was wiped out a good half-century ago, due – incidentally – to the activity of individuals such as yourself who are prepared to kill anything that does not instantly look right, without forethought, tests, observation or considering its ecological niche.'

For a moment, Geralt felt a sincere desire to tell the scholar where he could put the aeschna and its niche, but he changed his mind.

'Master Tutor,' he said calmly, 'one of those pulled from the deck

was a young pregnant girl. She wanted to cool her swollen feet in the water. Theoretically, her child could, one day, have become chancellor of your college. What do you have to say to such an approach to ecology?'

'It is unscientific; it is emotional and subjective. Nature is governed by its own rules and although these rules are cruel and ruthless, they should not be amended. It is a struggle for survival !' The Master Tutor leaned over the railing and spat into the water. 'And nothing can justify the extermination of a species, even a predatory one. What do you say to that?'

'I say that it's dangerous to lean out like that. There might be an aeschna in the vicinity. Do you want to try out the aeschna's struggle for survival on your own skin?'

Linus Pitt let go of the railing and abruptly jumped away. He turned a little pale but immediately regained his self-assurance and pursed his lips again.

'No doubt you know a great deal about these fantastical aeschna, witcher?'

'Certainly less than you. So maybe we should make use of the opportunity? Enlighten me, Master Tutor, expound a little upon your knowledge of aquatic predators. I'll willingly listen, and the journey won't seem so long.'

'Are you making fun of me?'

'Not at all. I would honestly like to fill in the gaps in my education.'

'Hmmm . . . If you really . . . Why not? Listen then to me. The *Hyphydridae* family, belonging to the *Amphipoda* order, includes four species known to science. Two live exclusively in tropical waters. In our climate, on the other hand, one can come across – though very rarely now – the not-so-large *Hyphydra longicauda* and the somewhat larger *Hyphydra marginata*. The biotope of both species is stagnant water or water which flows very slowly. The species are, indeed, predatory, preferring to feed on warm-blooded creatures . . . Have you anything to add?'

'Not right now. I'm listening with bated breath.'

'Yes, hmm . . . Mention can also be found, in the great books, of the subspecies *Pseudohyphydra*, which lives in the marshy waters of Angren. However, the learned Bumbler of Aldersberg recently proved that this is an entirely different species, one from the

Mordidae family. It feeds exclusively on fish and small amphibians. It has been named *Ichtyovorax bumbleri*.'

'The monster's lucky,' smiled the witcher. 'That's the third time he was named.'

'How come?'

'The creature you're talking about is an ilyocoris, called a cinerea in Elder Speech. And if the learned Bumbler states that it feeds exclusively on fish then I assume he has never bathed in a lake with an ilyocoris. But Bumbler is right on one account: the aeschna has as much in common with a cinerea as I do with a fox. We both like to eat duck.'

'What cinerea?' The Master Tutor bridled. 'The cinerea is a mythical creature! Indeed, your lack of knowledge disappoints me. Truly, I am amazed—'

'I know,' interrupted Geralt. 'I lose a great deal of my charm when one gets to know me better. Nevertheless I will permit myself to correct your theories a little further, Master Pitt. So, aeschnae have always lived in the Delta and continue to do so. Indeed, there was a time when it seemed that they had become extinct. For they lived off those small seals—'

'River porpoises,' corrected the Master Tutor. 'Don't be an ignoramus. Don't mistake seals for—'

'—they lived off porpoises and the porpoises were killed off because they looked like seals. They provided seal-like skins and fat. Then, later, canals were dug out in the upper reaches of the river, dams and barriers built. The current grew weaker; the Delta got silted up and overgrown. And the aeschnae underwent mutation. It adapted.'

'Huh?'

'Humans have rebuilt its food chain. They supplied warm-blooded creatures in the place of porpoises. Sheep, cattle, swine began to be transported across the Delta. The aeschnae learned in a flash that every barge, raft or barque on the Delta was, in fact, a large platter of food.'

'And the mutation? You spoke of mutation!'

'This liquid manure' – Geralt indicated the green water – 'seems to suit the aeschna. It enhances its growth. The damn thing can become so large, apparently, that it can drag a cow off a raft with no effort whatsoever. Pulling a human off a deck is nothing.

Especially the deck of one of these scows the Company uses to transport passengers. You can see for yourselves how low it sits in the water.'

The Master Tutor quickly backed away from the ship's side, as far as the carts and baggage allowed.

'I heard a splash!' he gasped, staring at the mist between the islets. 'Witcher! I heard—'

'Calm down. Apart from the splashing you can also hear oars squeaking in rowlocks. It's the customs officers from the Redanian shore. You'll see them in a moment and they'll cause more of a commotion than three, or even four, aeschnae.'

Boatbug ran past. He cursed obscenely as the little boy in the feathered hat got under his feet. The passengers and messengers, all extremely nervous, were going through their possessions trying to hide any smuggled goods.

After a little while, a large boat hit the side of the barge and four lively, angry and very noisy individuals jumped on board. They surrounded the skipper, bawled threateningly in an effort to make themselves and their positions seem important, then threw themselves enthusiastically at the baggage and belongings of the travellers.

'They check even before we land!' complained Boatbug, coming up to the witcher and the Master Tutor. 'That's illegal, isn't it? After all, we're not on Redanian soil yet. Redania is on the right bank, half a mile from here!'

'No,' contradicted the Master Tutor. 'The boundary between Redania and Temeria runs through the centre of the Pontar current.'

'And how the shit do you measure a current? This is the Delta! Islets, shoals and skerries are constantly changing its layout – the Fairway is different every day! It's a real curse! Hey! You little snot! Leave that boathook alone or I'll tan your arse black and blue! Honourable lady! Watch your child! A real curse!'

'Everett! Leave that alone or you'll get dirty!'

'What's in that chest?' shouted the customs officers. 'Hey, untie that bundle! Whose is that cart? Any currency? Is there any currency, I say? Temerian or Nilfgaardian money?'

'That's what a customs war looks like,' Linus Pitt commented on the chaos with a wise expression on his face. 'Vizimir forced Novigrad to introduce the *ius stapulae*. Foltest of Temeria retaliated

with a retortive, absolute *ius stapulae* in Wyzima and Gors Velen. That was a great blow for Redanian merchants so Vizimir increased the tax on Temerian products. He is defending the Redanian economy. Temeria is flooded with cheap goods coming from Nilfgaardian manufactories. That's why the customs officers are so keen. If too many Nilfgaardian goods were to cross the border, the Redanian economy would collapse. Redania has practically no manufactories and the craftsmen wouldn't be able to cope with competition.'

'In a nutshell,' smiled Geralt, 'Nilfgaard is slowly taking over with its goods and gold that which it couldn't take with arms. Isn't Temeria defending itself? Hasn't Foltest blocked his southern borders?'

'How? The goods are coming through Mahakam, Brugge, Verden and the ports in Cidaris. Profit is all the merchants are interested in, not politics. If King Foltest were to block his borders, the merchants' guilds would raise a terrible outcry—'

'Any currency?' snarled an approaching customs officer with bloodshot eyes. 'Anything to declare?'

'I'm a scholar!'

'Be a prince if you like! I'm asking what you're bringing in?'

'Leave them, Boratek,' said the leader of the group, a tall, broad-shouldered customs officer with a long, black moustache. 'Don't you recognise the witcher? Greetings, Geralt. Do you know him? Is he a scholar? So you're going to Oxenfurt, are you, sir? With no luggage?'

'Quite so. To Oxenfurt. With no luggage.'

The customs officer pulled out an enormous handkerchief and wiped his forehead, moustache and neck.

'And how's it going today, Geralt?' he asked. 'The monster show itself?'

'No. And you, Olsen, seen anything?'

'I haven't got time to look around. I'm working.'

'My daddy,' declared Everett, creeping up without a sound, 'is one of King Foltest's knights! And he's got an even bigger moustache than you!'

'Scram, kid,' said Olsen, then sighed heavily. 'Got any vodka, Geralt?'

‘No.’

‘But I do.’ The learned man from the Academy, pulling a flat skin from his bag, surprised them all.

‘And I’ve got a snack,’ boasted Boatbug looming up as if from nowhere. ‘Smoked burbot!’

‘And my daddy—’

‘Scarper, little snot.’

They sat on coils of rope in the shade of the carts parked amidship, sipping from the skin and devouring the burbot in turn. Olsen had to leave them momentarily when an argument broke out. A dwarven merchant from Mahakam was demanding a lower tax and trying to convince the customs officers that the furs he was bringing in were not silver fox but exceptionally large cats. The mother of the nosey and meddlesome Everett, on the other hand, did not want to undergo an inspection at all, shrilly evoking her husband’s rank and the privileges of nobility.

The ship, trailing braids of gathered nenuphars, water lilies and pond-weed at its sides, slowly glided along the wide strait amongst shrub-covered islets. Bumble bees buzzed menacingly amongst the reeds, and tortoises whistled from time to time. Cranes, standing on one leg, gazed at the water with stoical calm, knowing there was no point in getting worked up – sooner or later a fish would swim up of its own accord.

‘And what do you think, Geralt?’ Boatbug uttered, licking the burbot’s skin clean. ‘Another quiet voyage? You know what I’d say? That monster’s no fool. It knows you’re lying in ambush. Hearken to this – at home in our village, there was a river and in that river lived an otter which would creep into the yard and strangle hens. It was so crafty that it never crept in when Father was home, or me and my brothers. It only showed up when Grandpa was left by himself. And our grandpa, hearken, was a bit feeble in the head and paralysis had taken his legs. It was as if the otter, that son-of-a-bitch, knew. Well then, one day our pa—’

‘Ten per cent *ad valorem*!’ yelled the dwarven merchant from amidships, waving the fox skin about. ‘That’s how much I owe you and I’m not going to pay a copper more!’

‘Then I’ll confiscate the lot!’ roared Olsen angrily. ‘And I’ll let the Novigrad guards know so you’ll go to the clink together with your “Valorem”! Boratek, charge him to the penny! Hey, have you left anything for me? Have you guzzled it down to the dregs?’

‘Sit down, Olsen.’ Geralt made room for him on the ropes. ‘Stressful job you’ve got, I see.’

‘Ah, I’ve had it up to my ears,’ sighed the customs officer, then took a swig from the skin and wiped his moustache. ‘I’m throwing it in, I’m going back to Aedirn. I’m an honest Vengerberger who followed his sister and brother-in-law to Redania but now I’m going back. You know what, Geralt? I’m set on enlisting in the army. They say King Demawend is recruiting for special troops. Half a year’s training in a camp and then it’s a soldier’s pay, three times what I get here, bribes included. This burbot’s too salty.’

‘I’ve heard about this special army,’ confirmed Boatbug. ‘It’s getting ready for the Squirrels because the legurar army can’t deal with the elven commandos. They particularly want half-elves to enlist, I hear. But that camp where they teach them to fight is real hell apparently. They leave fifty-fifty, some to get soldier’s pay, some to the burial ground, feet first.’

‘And so it should be,’ said the customs officer. ‘The special army, skipper, isn’t just any old unit. It’s not some shitty shield-bearers who just need to be shown which end of the javelin pricks. A special army has to know how to fight like nobody’s business!’

‘So you’re such a fierce warrior, are you, Olsen? And the Squirrels, aren’t you afraid of them? That they’ll spike your arse with arrows?’

‘Big deal! I know how to draw a bow too. I’ve already fought Nilfgaard, so elves are nothing to me.’

‘They say,’ Boatbug said with a shudder, ‘if someone falls into their hands alive, the Scoia’taels’ . . . It’s better they hadn’t been born. They’ll be tortured horrifically.’

‘Ah, do yourself a favour and shut your face, skipper. You’re babbling like a woman. War is war. You whack the enemy in the backside, and they whack you back. Captured elves aren’t pampered by our men either, don’t you worry.’

‘The tactic of terror.’ Linus Pitt threw the burbot’s head and backbone overboard. ‘Violence breeds violence. Hatred has grown into hearts . . . and has poisoned kindred blood . . .’

‘What?’ Olsen grimaced. ‘Use a human language!’

‘Hard times are upon us.’

‘So they are, true,’ agreed Boatbug. ‘There’s sure to be a great war. Every day the sky is thick with ravens, they smell the carrion

already. And the seeress Ithlin foretold the end of the world. White Light will come to be, the White Chill will then follow. Or the other way round, I've forgotten how it goes. And people are saying signs were also visible in the sky—'

'You keep an eye on the fairway, skipper, 'stead of the sky, or this skiff of yours is going to end up in the shallows. Ah, we're already level with Oxenfurt. Just look, you can see the Cask!'

The mist was clearly less dense now so that they could see the hillocks and marshy meadows of the right bank and, rising above them, a part of the aqueduct.

'That, gentlemen, is the experimental sewage purification plant,' boasted the Master Tutor, refusing his turn to drink. 'A great success for science, a great achievement for the Academy. We repaired the old elven aqueduct, canals and sediment trap and we're already neutralising the sewers of the university, town and surrounding villages and farms. What you call the Cask is a sediment trap. A great success for science—'

'Heads down, heads down!' warned Olsen, ducking behind the rail. 'Last year, when that thing exploded, the shit flew as far as Crane Islet.'

The barge sailed in between islands and the squat tower of the sediment trap and the aqueduct disappeared in the mist. Everyone sighed with relief.

'Aren't you sailing straight by way of the Oxenfurt arm, Boatbug?' asked Olsen.

'I'm putting in at Acorn Bay first. To collect fish traders and merchants from the Temerian side.'

'Hmm . . .' The customs officer scratched his neck. 'At the Bay . . . Listen, Geralt, you aren't in any conflict with the Temerians by any chance, are you?'

'Why? Was someone asking about me?'

'You've guessed it. As you see, I remember you asked me to keep an eye out for anyone interested in you. Well, just imagine, the Temerian Guards have been enquiring about you. The customs officers there, with whom I have a good understanding, told me. Something smells funny here, Geralt.' 'The water?' Linus Pitt was afraid, glancing nervously at the aqueduct and the great scientific success.

'That little snotrag?' Boatbug pointed to Everett who was still

milling around nearby.

‘I’m not talking about that.’ The customs officer winced. ‘Listen, Geralt, the Temerian customs men said these Guards were asking strange questions. They know you sail with the Malatius and Grock barges. They asked . . . if you sail alone. If you have—Bloody hell, just don’t laugh! They were going on about some underage girl who has been seen in your company, apparently.’

Boatbug chuckled. Linus Pitt looked at the witcher with eyes filled with the distaste which befitted someone looking at a white-haired man who has drawn the attention of the law on account of his preference for underage girls.

‘That’s why,’ Olsen hawked, ‘the Temerian customs officers thought it might be some private matters being settled, into which the Guards had been drawn. Like . . . Well, the girl’s family or her betrothed. So the officers cautiously asked who was behind all this. And they found out. Well, apparently it’s a nobleman with a tongue ready as a chancellor’s, neither poor nor miserly, who calls himself . . . Rience, or something like that. He’s got a red mark on his left cheek as if from a burn. Do you know anyone like that?’

Geralt got up.

‘Boatbug,’ he said. ‘I’m disembarking in Acorn Bay.’

‘How’s that? And what about the monster?’

‘That’s your problem.’

‘Speaking of problems,’ interrupted Olsen, ‘just look starboard, Geralt. Speak of the devil.’

From behind an island, from the swiftly lifting mist, loomed a lighter. A black burgee dotted with silver lilies fluttered lazily from its mast. The crew consisted of several men wearing the pointed hats of Temerian Guards.

Geralt quickly reached into his bag and pulled out both letters – the one from Ciri and the one from Yennefer. He swiftly tore them into tiny shreds and threw them into the river. The customs officer watched him in silence.

‘Whatever are you doing, may I ask?’

‘No. Boatbug, take care of my horse.’

‘You want to . . .’ Olsen frowned. ‘You intend to—’

‘What I intend is my business. Don’t get mixed up in this or there’ll be an incident. They’re sailing under the Temerian flag.’

‘Bugger their flag.’ The customs officer moved his cutlass to a more accessible place on his belt and wiped his enamelled gorget, an eagle on a red background, with his sleeve. ‘If I’m on board carrying out an inspection, then this is Redania. I will not allow—’

‘Olsen,’ the witcher interrupted, grabbing him by the sleeve, ‘don’t interfere, please. The man with a burned face isn’t on the lighter. And I have to know who he is and what he wants. I’ve got to see him face to face.’

‘You’re going to let them put you in the stocks? Don’t be a fool! If this is a private settling of scores, privately commissioned revenge, then as soon as you get past the islet, on the Whirl, you’ll fly overboard with an anchor round your neck. You’ll be face to face all right, but it’ll be with crabs at the bottom of the river!’

‘They’re Temerian Guards, not bandits.’

‘Is that so? Then just look at their mugs! Besides, I’ll know instantly who they really are. You’ll see.’

The lighter, approaching rapidly, reached the barge. One of the Guards threw the rope over while another attached the boathook to the railing.

‘I be the skipper!’ Boatbug blocked the way as three men leaped on deck. ‘This is a ship belonging to the Malatius and Grock Company! What . . .’

One of the men, stocky and bald, pushed him brusquely aside with his arm, thick as the branch of an oak.

‘A certain Gerald, called Gerald of Rivia!’ he thundered, measuring the skipper with his eyes. ‘Is such a one on board?’

‘No.’

‘I am he.’ The witcher stepped over the bundles and packages and drew near. ‘I am Geralt, and called Geralt. What is this about?’

‘I arrest you in the name of the law.’ The bald man’s eyes skimmed over the passengers. ‘Where’s the girl?’

‘I’m alone.’

‘You lie!’

‘Hold it, hold it.’ Olsen emerged from behind the witcher’s back and put his hand on his shoulder. ‘Keep calm, no shouting. You’re too late, Temerians. He has already been arrested and in the name of the law at that. I caught him. For smuggling. I’m taking him to the guardhouse in Oxenfurt according to orders.’

‘What’s that?’ The bald man frowned. ‘And the girl?’

‘There is no girl here, nor has there been.’

The Guards looked at each other in uncertain silence. Olsen grinned broadly and turned up his black moustache.

‘You know what we’ll do?’ he snorted. ‘Sail with us to Oxenfurt, Temerians. We and you are simple folk, how are we to know the ins and outs of law? The commandant of the Oxenfurt guardhouse is a wise and worldly man, he’ll judge the matter. You know our commandant, don’t you? Because he knows yours, the one from the Bay, very well. You’ll present your case to him . . . Show him your orders and seals . . . You do have a warrant with all the necessary seals, don’t you, eh?’

The bald man just stared grimly at the customs officer.

‘I don’t have the time or the inclination to go to Oxenfurt!’ he suddenly bawled. ‘I’m taking the rogue to our shore and that’s that! Stran, Vitek! Get on with it, search the barge! Find me the girl, quick as a flash!’

‘One minute, slow down.’ Olsen was not perturbed by the yelling and drew out his words slowly and distinctly. ‘You’re on the Redanian side of the Delta, Temerians. You don’t have anything to declare, by any chance, do you? Or any contraband? We’ll have a look presently. We’ll do a search. And if we do find something then you will have to take the trouble to go to Oxenfurt for a while, after all. And we, if we wish to, we can always find something. Boys! Come here!’

‘My daddy,’ squeaked Everett all of a sudden, appearing at the bald man’s side as if from nowhere, ‘is a knight! He’s got an even bigger blade than you!’

In a flash, the bald man caught the boy by his beaver collar and snatched him up from the deck, knocking his feathered hat off. Wrapping his arm around the boy’s waist he put the cutlass to his throat.

‘Move back!’ he roared. ‘Move back or I’ll slash the brat’s neck!’

‘Evereeeeett!’ howled the noblewoman.

‘Curious methods,’ said the witcher slowly, ‘you Temerian Guards use. Indeed, so curious that it makes it hard to believe you’re Guards.’

‘Shut your face!’ yelled the bald one, shaking Everett, who was squealing like a piglet. ‘Stran, Vitek, get him! Fetter him and take

him to the lighter ! And you, move back! Where's the girl, I'm asking you? Give her to me or I'll slaughter this little snot!'

'Slaughter him then,' drawled Olsen giving a sign to his men and pulling out his cutlass. 'Is he mine or something? And when you've slaughtered him, we can talk.'

'Don't interfere!' Geralt threw his sword on the deck and, with a gesture, held back the customs officers and Boatbug's sailors. 'I'm yours, liar-guard, sir. Let the boy go.'

'To the lighter!' The bald man retreated to the side of the barge without letting Everett go, and grabbed a rope. 'Vitek, tie him up! And all of you, to the stern! If any of you move, the kid dies!'

'Have you lost your mind, Geralt?' growled Olsen.

'Don't interfere!'

'Evereeeett!'

The Temerian lighter suddenly rocked and bounced away from the barge. The water exploded with a splash and two long green, coarse paws bristling with spikes like the limbs of a praying mantis, shot out. The paws, grabbed the Guard holding the boathook and, in the wink of an eye, dragged him under water. The bald Guard howled savagely, released Everett, and clung onto the ropes which dangled from the lighter's side. Everett plopped into the already-reddening water. Everybody – those on the barge and those on the lighter – started to scream as if possessed.

Geralt tore himself away from the two men trying to bind him. He thumped one in the chin then threw him overboard. The other took a swing at the witcher with an iron hook, but faltered and drooped into Olsen's hands with a cutlass buried to the hilt in his ribs.

The witcher leaped over the low railing. Before the water – thick with algae – closed in over his head, he heard Linus Pitt, the Lecturer of Natural History at the Academy of Oxenfurt, shout, 'What is that? What species? No such animal exists!'

He emerged just by the Temerian lighter, miraculously avoiding the fishing spear which one of baldy's men was jabbing at him. The Guard didn't have time to strike him again before he splashed into the water with an arrow in his throat. Geralt, catching hold of the dropped spear, rebounded with his legs against the side of the boat, dived into the seething whirlpool and forcefully jabbed at something, hoping it was not Everett.

‘It’s impossible!’ he heard the Master Tutor’s cries. ‘Such an animal can’t exist! At least, it shouldn’t!’

I agree with that last statement entirely, thought the witcher, jabbing the aeschna’s armour, bristling with its hard bumps. The corpse of the Temerian Guard was bouncing up and down inertly in the sickle-shaped jaws of the monster, trailing blood. The aeschna swung its flat tail violently and dived to the bottom, raising clouds of silt.

He heard a thin cry. Everett, stirring the water like a little dog, had caught hold of baldy’s legs as he was trying to climb on to the lighter by the ropes hanging down the side. The ropes gave way and both the Guard and the boy disappeared with a gurgle under the surface of the water. Geralt threw himself in their direction and dived. The fact that he almost immediately came across the little boy’s beaver collar was nothing but luck. He tore Everett from the entangled algae, swam out on his back and, kicking with his legs, reached the barge.

‘Here, Geralt! Here!’ He heard cries and shouts, each louder than the other: ‘Give him here!’, ‘The rope! Catch hold of the rope!’, ‘Pooooox!’, ‘The rope! Geraaalt!’, ‘With the boathook, with the boathook!’, ‘My booyyyy!’.

Someone tore the boy from his arms and dragged him upwards. At the same moment, someone else caught Geralt from behind, struck him in the back of the head, covered him over with his bulk and pushed him under the water. Geralt let go of the fishing spear, turned and caught his assailant by the belt. With his other hand he tried to grab him by the hair but in vain. It was baldy.

Both men emerged, but only for an instant. The Temerian lighter had already moved a little from the barge and both Geralt and baldy, locked in an embrace, were in between them. Baldy caught Geralt by the throat; the witcher dug a thumb in his eye. The Guard yelled, let go and swam away. Geralt could not swim – something was holding him by the leg and dragging him into the depths. Next to him, half a body bounced to the surface like a cork. And then he knew what was holding him; the information Linus Pitt yelled from the barge deck was unnecessary.

‘It’s an anthropod! Order *Amphipoda*! Group Mandibulatissimae!’

Geralt violently thrashed his arms in the water, trying to yank his leg from the aeschna’s claws as they pulled him towards the rhythmical snap of its jaws. The Master Tutor was correct once again. The jaws were anything but small.

‘Grab hold of the rope!’ yelled Olsen. ‘The rope, grab it!’

A fishing spear whistled past the witcher’s ear and plunged with a smack into the monster’s algae-ridden armour as it surfaced. Geralt caught hold of the shaft, pressed down on it, bounced forcefully away, brought his free leg in and kicked the aeschna violently. He tore himself away from the spiked paws, leaving his boot, a fair part of his trousers and a good deal of skin behind. More fishing spears and harpoons whizzed through the air, most of them missing their mark. The aeschna drew in its paws, swished its tail and gracefully dived into the green depths.

Geralt seized the rope which fell straight onto his face. The boathook, catching him painfully in the side, caught him by the belt. He felt a tug, rode upwards and, taken up by many hands, rolled over the railing and tumbled on deck dripping with water, slime, weeds and blood. The passengers, barge crew and customs officers crowded around him. Leaning over the railings, the dwarf with the fox furs and Olsen were firing their bows. Everett, wet and green with algae, his teeth clattering, sobbed in his mother’s arms explaining to everybody that he hadn’t meant to do it.

‘Geralt!’ Boatbug yelled at his ear, ‘are you dead?’

‘Damn it . . .’ The witcher spat out seaweed. ‘I’m too old for this sort of thing . . . Too old . . .’

Nearby, the dwarf released his bowstring and Olsen roared joyously.

‘Right in the belly! Ooh-ha-ha! Great shot, my furry friend! Hey, Boratek, give him back his money! He deserves a tax reduction for that shot!’

‘Stop . . .’ wheezed the witcher, attempting in vain to stand up. ‘Don’t kill them all, damn it! I need one of them alive!’

‘We’ve left one,’ the customs officer assured him. ‘The bald one who was bickering with me. We’ve shot the rest. But baldy is over there, swimming away. I’ll fish him out right away. Give us the boathooks!’

‘Discovery! A great discovery!’ shouted Linus Pitt, jumping up and down by the barge side. ‘An entirely new species unknown to science! Absolutely unique! Oh, I’m so grateful to you, witcher! As of today, this species is going to appear in books as . . . As *Geraltia maxiliosa pitti*!’

‘Master Tutor,’ Geralt groaned, ‘if you really want to show me

your gratitude, let that damn thing be called *Everetia*.'

'Just as beautiful,' consented the scholar. 'Oh, what a discovery! What a unique, magnificent specimen! No doubt the only one alive in the Delta—'

'No,' uttered Boatbug suddenly and grimly. 'Not the only one. Look!'

The carpet of water lilies adhering to the nearby islet trembled and rocked violently. They saw a wave and then an enormous, long body resembling a rotting log, swiftly paddling its many limbs and snapping its jaw. The bald man looked back, howled horrifically and swam away, stirring up the water with his arms and legs.

'What a specimen, what a specimen,' Pitt quickly noted, thrilled no end. 'Prehensile cephalic limbs, four pairs of chelae . . . Strong tail-fan . . . Sharp claws . . .'

The bald man looked back again and howled even more horribly. And the *Everetia maxiliosa pitti* extended its prehensile cephalic limbs and swung its tail-fan vigorously. The bald man surged the water in a desperate, hopeless attempt to escape.

'May the water be light to him,' said Olsen. But he did not remove his hat.

'My daddy,' rattled Everett with his teeth, 'can swim faster than that man!'

'Take the child away,' growled the witcher.

The monster spread its claws, snapped its jaws. Linus Pitt grew pale and turned away.

Baldy shrieked briefly, choked and disappeared below the surface. The water throbbed dark red.

'Pox.' Geralt sat down heavily on the deck. 'I'm too old for this sort of thing . . . Far, far too old . . .'

What can be said? Dandilion simply adored the town of Oxenfurt.

The university grounds were surrounded by a wall and around this wall was another ring – that of the huge, loud, breathless, busy and noisy townlet. The wooden, colourful town of Oxenfurt with its narrow streets and pointed roofs. The town of Oxenfurt which lived off the Academy, off its students, lecturers, scholars, researchers and their guests, who lived off science and knowledge, off what accompanies the process of learning. In the town of Oxenfurt, from

the by-products and chippings of theory, practice, business and profit were born.

The poet rode slowly along a muddy, crowded street, passing workshops, studios, stalls, shops small and large where, thanks to the Academy, tens of thousands of articles and wonderful things were produced and sold which were unattainable in other corners of the world where their production was considered impossible, or pointless. He passed inns, taverns, stands, huts, counters and portable grills from which floated the appetising aromas of elaborate dishes unknown elsewhere in the world, seasoned in ways not known elsewhere, with garnishes and spices neither known of nor used anywhere else. This was Oxenfurt, the colourful, joyful, noisy and sweet-smelling town of miracles into which shrewd people, full of initiative, had turned dry and useless theories drawn little by little from the university. It was also a town of amusements, constant festivities, permanent holidays and incessant revelry. Night and day the streets resounded with music, song, and the clinking of chalices and tankards, for it is well known that nothing is such thirsty work as the acquisition of knowledge. Although the chancellor's orders forbade students and tutors to drink and play before dusk, drinking and playing took place around the clock in Oxenfurt, for it is well known that if there is anything that makes men thirstier than the acquisition of knowledge it is the full or partial prohibition of drinking.

Dandilion smacked his lips at his bay gelding and rode on, making his way through the crowds roaming the streets. Vendors, stall-holders and travelling charlatans advertised their wares and services loudly, adding to the confusion which reigned all around them.

'Squid! Roast squid!'

'Ointment for all spots'n'boils! Only sold here! Reliable, miraculous ointment!'

'Cats, mouse-catching, magic cats! Just listen, my good people, how they miaow!'

'Amulets! Elixirs! Philtres, love potions, guaranteed aphrodisiacs! One pinch and even a corpse will regain its vigour ! Who'll buy, who'll buy?'

'Teeth extracted! Almost painless! Cheap, very cheap!'

'What do you mean by cheap?' Dandilion was curious as he bit into a stick-skewered squid as tough as a boot.

‘Two farthings an hour!’

The poet shuddered and spurred his gelding on. He looked back surreptitiously. Two people who had been following in his tracks since the town hall stopped at the barber-shop pretending to ponder over the price of the barber’s services displayed on a chalkboard. Dandilion did not let himself be deceived. He knew what really interested them.

He rode on. He passed the enormous building of the bawdy-house The Rosebud, where he knew refined services either unknown or simply unpopular in other corners of the world were offered. For some time his rational mind struggled against his character and that desire to enter for an hour. Reason triumphed. Dandilion sighed and rode on towards the university trying not to look in the direction of the taprooms from which issued the sounds of merriment.

Yes, what more can be said – the troubadour loved the town of Oxenfurt.

He looked around once more. The two individuals had not made use of the barber’s services, although they most certainly should have. At present they were standing outside a musical instrument shop, pretending to ponder over the clay ocarinas. The shopkeeper was falling over himself praising his goods and counting on making some money. Dandilion knew there was nothing to count on.

He directed his horse towards the Philosophers’ Gate, the main gate to the Academy. He dealt swiftly with the formalities, which consisted of signing into a guest book and someone taking his gelding to the stables.

Beyond the Philosophers’ Gate a different world greeted him. The college land was excluded from the ordinary infrastructure of town buildings; unlike the town it was not a place of dogged struggle for every square yard of space. Everything here was practically as the elves had left it. Wide lanes – laid with colourful gravel – between neat, eye-pleasing little palaces, open-work fences, walls, hedges, canals, bridges, flower-beds and green parks had been crushed in only a few places by some huge, crude mansion constructed in later, post-elven times. Everything was clean, peaceful and dignified – any kind of trade or paid service was forbidden here, not to mention entertainment or carnal pleasures.

Students, absorbed in large books and parchments, strolled along the lanes. Others, sitting on benches, lawns and in flower-beds, repeated their homework to each other, discussed or discreetly played at evens or odds, leapfrog, pile-up or other games

demanding intelligence. Professors engrossed in conversation or debate also strolled here with dignity and decorum. Younger tutors milled around with their eyes glued to the backsides of female students. Dandilion ascertained with joy that, since his day, nothing had changed in the Academy.

A breeze swept in from the Delta carrying the faint scent of the sea and the somewhat stronger stink of hydrogen sulphide from the direction of the grand edifice of the Department of Alchemy which towered above the canal. Grey and yellow linnets warbled amongst the shrubs in the park adjacent to the students' dormitories, while an orang-utan sat on the poplar having, no doubt, escaped from the zoological gardens in the Department of Natural History.

Not wasting any time, the poet marched briskly through the labyrinth of lanes and hedges. He knew the University grounds like the back of his hand – and no wonder, considering he had studied there for four years, then had lectured for a year in the Faculty of Trouvereship and Poetry. The post of lecturer had been offered to him when he had passed his final exams with full marks, to the astonishment of professors with whom he had earned the reputation of lazybones, rake and idiot during his studies. Then, when, after several years of roaming around the country with his lute, his fame as a minstrel had spread far and wide, the Academy had taken great pains to have him visit and give guest lectures. Dandilion yielded to their requests only sporadically, for his love of wandering was constantly at odds with his predilection for comfort, luxury and a regular income. And also, of course, with his liking for the town of Oxenfurt.

He looked back. The two individuals, not having purchased any ocarinas, pipes or violins, strode behind him at a distance, paying great attention to the treetops and façades.

Whistling lightheartedly the poet changed direction and made towards the mansion which housed the Faculty of Medicine and Herbology. The lane leading to the faculty swarmed with female students wearing characteristic pale green cloaks. Dandilion searched intently for familiar faces.

'Shani !'

A young medical student with dark red hair cropped just below her ears raised her head from a volume on anatomy and got up from her bench.

'Dandilion!' She smiled, squinting her happy, hazel eyes. 'I haven't seen you for years! Come on, I'll introduce you to my

friends. They adore your poems—'

'Later,' muttered the bard. 'Look discreetly over there, Shani. See those two?'

'Snoops.' The medical student wrinkled her upturned nose and snorted, amazing Dandilion – not for the first time – with how easily students could recognise secret agents, spies and informers. Students' aversion to the secret service was legendary, if not very rational. The university grounds were extraterritorial and sacred, and students and lecturers were untouchable while there – and the service, although it snooped, did not dare to bother or annoy academics.

'They've been following me since the market place,' said Dandilion, pretending to embrace and flirt with the medical student. 'Will you do something for me, Shani?'

'Depends what.' The girl tossed her shapely neck like a frightened deer. 'If you've got yourself into something stupid again . . .'

'No, no,' he quickly reassured her. 'I only want to pass on some information and can't do it myself with these shits stuck to my heels —'

'Shall I call the lads? I've only got to shout and you'll have those snoops off your back.'

'Oh, come on. You want a riot to break out? The row over the bench ghetto for non-humans has just about ended and you can't wait for more trouble? Besides, I loathe violence. I'll manage the snoops. However, if you could . . .'

He brought his lips closer to the girl's hair and took a while to whisper something. Shani's eyes opened wide.

'A witcher? A real witcher?'

'Quiet, for the love of gods. Will you do that, Shani?'

'Of course.' The medical student smiled readily. 'Just out of curiosity to see, close up, the famous—'

'Quieter, I asked you. Only remember: not a word to anyone.'

'A physician's secret.' Shani smiled even more beautifully and Dandilion was once more filled with the desire to finally compose a ballad about girls like her – not too pretty but nonetheless beautiful, girls of whom one dreams at night when those of classical beauty are forgotten after five minutes.

'Thank you, Shani.'

‘It’s nothing, Dandilion. See you later. Take care.’

Duly kissing each other’s cheeks, the bard and the medical student briskly moved off in opposite directions – she towards the faculty, he towards Thinkers’ Park.

He passed the modern, gloomy Faculty of Technology building, dubbed the ‘Deus ex machina’ by the students, and turned on to Guildenstern Bridge. He did not get far. Two people lurked around a corner in the lane, by the flowerbed with a bronze bust of the first chancellor of the Academy, Nicodemus de Boot. As was the habit of all snoops in the world, they avoided meeting other’s eyes and, like all snoops in the world, they had coarse, pale faces. These they tried very hard to furnish with an intelligent expression, thanks to which they resembled demented monkeys.

‘Greetings from Dijkstra,’ said one of the spies. ‘We’re off.’

‘Likewise,’ the bard replied impudently. ‘Off you go.’

The spies looked at each other then, rooted to the spot, fixed their eyes on an obscene word which someone had scribbled in charcoal on the plinth supporting the chancellor’s bust. Dandilion sighed.

‘Just as I thought,’ he said, adjusting the lute on his shoulder. ‘So am I going to be irrevocably forced to accompany you somewhere, gentlemen? Too bad. Let’s go then. You go first, I’ll follow. In this particular instance, age may go before beauty.’

Dijkstra, head of King Vizimir of Redania’s secret service, did not resemble a spy. He was far from the stereotype which dictated that a spy should be short, thin, rat-like, and have piercing eyes forever casting furtive glances from beneath a black hood. Dijkstra, as Dandilion knew, never wore hoods and had a decided preference for bright coloured clothing. He was almost seven foot tall and probably only weighed a little under two quintals. When he crossed his arms over his chest – which he did with habitual pleasure – it looked as if two cachalots had prostrated themselves over a whale. As far as his features, hair colour and complexion were concerned, he looked like a freshly scrubbed pig. Dandilion knew very few people whose appearance was as deceptive as Dijkstra’s – because this porky giant who gave the impression of being a sleepy, sluggish moron, possessed an exceptionally keen mind. And considerable authority. A popular saying at King Vizimir’s court held that if Dijkstra states it is noon yet darkness reigns all around, it is time to start worrying about the fate of the sun.

At present, however, the poet had other reasons to worry.

'Dandilion,' said Dijkstra sleepily, crossing the cachalots over the whale, 'you thick-headed halfwit. You unmitigated dunce. Do you have to spoil everything you touch? Couldn't you, just once in your life, do something right? I know you can't think for yourself. I know you're almost forty, look almost thirty, think you're just over twenty and act as though you're barely ten. And being aware of this, I usually furnish you with precise instructions. I tell you what you have to do, when you have to do it and how you're to go about it. And I regularly get the impression that I'm talking to a stone wall.'

'I, on the other hand,' retorted the poet, feigning insolence, 'regularly have the impression that you talk simply to exercise your lips and tongue. So get to the point, and eliminate the figures of speech and fruitless rhetoric. What are you getting at this time?'

They were sitting at a large oak table amongst bookshelves crammed with volumes and piled with rolls of parchment, on the top floor of the vice-chancellor's offices, in leased quarters which Dijkstra had amusingly named the Faculty of Most Contemporary History and Dandilion called the Faculty of Comparative Spying and Applied Sabotage. There were, including the poet, four present – apart from Dijkstra, two other people took part in the conversation. One of these was, as usual, Ori Reuven, the aged and eternally sniffing secretary to the chief of Redanian spies. The other was no ordinary person.

'You know very well what I'm getting at,' Dijkstra replied coldly. 'However, since you clearly enjoy playing the idiot I won't spoil your game and will explain using simple words. Or maybe you'd like to make use of this privilege, Philippa?'

Dandilion glanced at the fourth person present at the meeting, who until then had remained silent. Philippa Eilhart must have only recently arrived in Oxenfurt, or was perhaps intending to leave at once, since she wore neither a dress nor her favourite black agate jewellery nor any sharp makeup. She was wearing a man's short jacket, leggings and high boots – a 'field' outfit as the poet called it. The enchantress's dark hair, usually loose and worn in a picturesque mess, was brushed smooth and tied back at the nape of her neck.

'Let's not waste time,' she said, raising her even eyebrows. 'Dandilion's right. We can spare ourselves the rhetoric and slick eloquence which leads nowhere when the matter at hand is so simple and trivial.'

'Ah, even so.' Dijkstra smiled. 'Trivial. A dangerous Nilfgaardian

agent, who could now be trivially locked away in my deepest dungeon in Tretogor, has trivially escaped, trivially warned and frightened away by the trivial stupidity of two gentlemen known as Dandilion and Geralt. I've seen people wander to the scaffolds over lesser trivialities. Why didn't you inform me about your ambush, Dandilion? Did I not instruct you to keep me informed about all the witcher's intentions?'

'I didn't know anything about Geralt's plans,' Dandilion lied with conviction. 'I told you that he went to Temeria and Sodden to hunt down this Rience. I also told you that he had returned. I was convinced he had given up. Rience had literally dissolved into thin air, the witcher didn't find the slightest trail, and this – if you remember – I also told you—'

'You lied,' stated the spy coldly. 'The witcher did find Rience's trail. In the form of corpses. That's when he decided to change his tactics. Instead of chasing Rience, he decided to wait for Rience to find *him*. He signed up to the Malatius and Grock Company barges as an escort. He did so intentionally. He knew that the Company would advertise it far and wide, that Rience would hear of it and then venture to try something. And so Rience did. The strange, elusive Master Rience. The insolent, self-assured Master Rience who does not even bother to use aliases or false names. Master Rience who, from a mile off, smells of Nilfgaardian chimney smoke. And of being a renegade sorcerer. Isn't that right, Philippa?'

The magician neither affirmed nor denied it. She remained silent, watching Dandilion closely and intently. The poet lowered his eyes and hawked hesitantly. He did not like such gazes.

Dandilion divided women – including magicians – into very likeable, likeable, unlikeable and very unlikeable. The very likeable reacted to the proposition of being bedded with joyful acquiescence, the likeable with a happy smile. The unlikeable reacted unpredictably. The very unlikeable were counted by the troubadour to be those to whom the very thought of presenting such a proposition made his back go strangely cold and his knees shake.

Philippa Eilhart, although very attractive, was decidedly very unlikeable.

Apart from that, Philippa Eilhart was an important figure in the Council of Wizards, and King Vizimir's trusted court magician. She was a very talented enchantress. Word had it that she was one of the few to have mastered the art of polymorphy. She looked thirty.

In truth she was probably no less than three hundred years old.

Dijkstra, locking his chubby fingers together over his belly, twiddled his thumbs. Philippa remained silent. Ori Reuven coughed, sniffed and wriggled, constantly adjusting his generous toga. His toga resembled a professor's but did not look as if it had been presented by a senate. It looked more as if it had been found on a rubbish heap.

'Your witcher, however,' suddenly snarled the spy, 'underestimated Master Rience. He set a trap but – demonstrating a complete lack of common sense – banked on Rience troubling himself to come in person. Rience, according to the witcher's plan, was to feel safe. Rience wasn't to smell a trap anywhere, wasn't to spy Master Dijkstra's subordinates lying in wait for him. Because, on the witcher's instructions, Master Dandilion had not squealed to Master Dijkstra about the planned ambush. But according to the instructions received, Master Dandilion was duty bound to do so. Master Dandilion had clear, explicit instructions in this matter which he deigned to ignore.'

'I am not one of your subordinates.' The poet puffed up with pride. 'And I don't have to comply with your instructions and orders. I help you sometimes but I do so out of my own free will, from patriotic duty, so as not to stand by idly in face of the approaching changes—'

'You spy for anyone who pays you,' Dijkstra interrupted coldly. 'You inform on anyone who has something on you. And I've got a few pretty good things on you, Dandilion. So don't be saucy.'

'I won't give in to blackmail!'

'Shall we bet on it?'

'Gentlemen.' Philippa Eilhart raised her hand. 'Let's be serious, if you please. Let's not be diverted from the matter in hand.'

'Quite right.' The spy sprawled out in the armchair. 'Listen, poet.

What's done is done. Rience has been warned and won't be duped a second time. But I can't let anything like this happen in the future. That's why I want to see the witcher. Bring him to me. Stop wandering around town trying to lose my agents. Go straight to Geralt and bring him here, to the faculty. I have to talk to him. Personally, and without witnesses. Without the noise and publicity which would arise if I were to arrest the witcher. Bring him to me, Dandilion. That's all I require of you at present.'

‘Geralt has left,’ the bard lied calmly. Dijkstra glanced at the magician. Dandilion, expecting an impulse to sound out his mind, tensed but he did not feel anything. Philippa was watching him, her eyes narrowed, but nothing indicated that she was using spells to verify his truthfulness.

‘Then I’ll wait until he’s back,’ sighed Dijkstra, pretending to believe him. ‘The matter I want to see him about is important so I’ll make some changes to my schedule and wait for the witcher. When he’s back, bring him here. The sooner the better. Better for many people.’

‘There might be a few difficulties,’ Dandilion grimaced, ‘in convincing Geralt to come here. He – just imagine it – harbours an inexplicable aversion to spies. Although to all intents and purposes he seems to understand it is a job like any other, he feels repulsion for those who execute it. Patriotic reasons, he’s wont to say, are one thing, but the spying profession attracts only out-and-out scoundrels and the lowest—’

‘Enough, enough.’ Dijkstra waved his hand carelessly. ‘No platitudes, please, platitudes bore me. They’re so crude.’

‘I think so, too,’ snorted the troubadour. ‘But the witcher’s a simple soul, a straightforward honest simpleton in his judgement, nothing like us men-of-the-world. He simply despises spies and won’t want to talk to you for anything in the world, and as for helping the secret services, there’s no question about it. And you haven’t got anything on him.’

‘You’re mistaken,’ said the spy. ‘I do. More than one thing. But for the time being that brawl on the barge near Acorn Bay is enough. You know who those men who came on board were? They weren’t Rience’s men.’

‘That’s not news to me,’ said the poet casually. ‘I’m sure they were a few scoundrels of the likes of which there is no shortage in the Temerian Guards. Rience has been asking about the witcher and no doubt offering a nice sum for any news about him. It’s obvious that the witcher is very important to him. So a few crafty dogs tried to grab Geralt, bury him in some cave and then sell him to Rience, dictating their conditions and trying to bargain as much out of him as possible. Because they would have got very little, if anything at all, for mere information.’

‘My congratulations on such perspicacity. The witcher’s, of course, not yours – it would never have occurred to you. But the matter is more complex than you think. My colleagues, men

belonging to King Foltest's secret service, are also, as it turns out, interested in Master Rience. They saw through the plan of those – as you called them – crafty dogs. It is they who boarded the barge, they who wanted to grab the witcher. Perhaps as bait for Rience, perhaps for a different end. At Acorn Bay, Dandilion, the witcher killed Temerian agents. Their chief is very, very angry. You say Geralt has left? I hope he hasn't gone to Temeria. He might never return.'

'And that's what you have on him?'

'Indeed. That's what I have. I can pacify the Temerians. But not for nothing. Where has the witcher gone, Dandilion?'

'Novigrad,' the troubadour lied without thinking. 'He went to look for Rience there.'

'A mistake, a mistake,' smiled the spy, pretending not to have caught the lie. 'You see what a shame it is he didn't overcome his repulsion and get in touch with me. I'd have saved him the effort. Rience isn't in Novigrad. Whereas there's no end of Temerian agents there. Probably all waiting for the witcher. They've caught on to something I've known for a long time. Namely, that Geralt, the witcher from Rivia, can answer all kinds of questions if he's asked in the right manner. Questions which the secret services of each of the Four Kingdoms are beginning to ask themselves. The arrangement is simple: the witcher comes here, to the department, and gives me the answers to these questions. And he'll be left in peace. I'll calm the Temerians and guarantee his safety.'

'What questions are you talking about? Maybe I can answer them?'

'Don't make me laugh, Dandilion.'

'Yet,' Philippa Eilhart said suddenly, 'perhaps he can? Maybe he can save us time? Don't forget, Dijkstra, our poet is mixed up to his ears in this affair and we've got him here but we haven't got the witcher. Where is the child seen with Geralt in Kaedwen? The girl with ashen hair and green eyes? The one Rience asked you about back in Temeria when he caught and tortured you? Eh, Dandilion? What do you know about the girl? Where has the witcher hidden her? Where did Yennefer go when she received Geralt's letter? Where is Triss Merigold hiding, and why is she hiding?'

Dijkstra did not stir, but his swift glance at the magician showed Dandilion that the spy was taken aback. The questions Philippa had raised had clearly been asked too soon. And directed to the wrong

person. The questions appeared rash and careless. The trouble was that Philippa Eilhart could be accused of anything but rashness and carelessness.

‘I’m very sorry,’ he said slowly, ‘but I don’t know the answer to any of the questions. I’d help you if I could. But I can’t.’

Philippa looked him straight in the eyes.

‘Dandilion,’ she drawled. ‘If you know where that girl is, tell us. I assure you that all that I and Dijkstra care about is her safety. Safety which is being threatened.’

‘I have no doubt,’ lied the poet, ‘that’s all you care about. But I really don’t know what you’re talking about. I’ve never seen the child you’re so interested in. And Geralt—’

‘Geralt,’ interrupted Dijkstra, ‘never confided in you, never said a word even though, no doubt, you inundated him with questions. Why do you think that might be, Dandilion? Could it be that this simple soul, this simpleton who despises spies, sensed who you really are? Leave him alone, Philippa, it’s a waste of time. He knows shit-all, don’t be taken in by his cocksure expressions and ambiguous smirks. He can help us in only one way. When the witcher emerges from his hide-out, he’ll get in touch with him, no one else. Just imagine, he considers him to be a friend.’

Dandilion slowly raised his head.

‘Indeed,’ he confirmed. ‘He considers me to be such. And just imagine, Dijkstra, that it’s not without reason. Finally accept the fact and draw your conclusions. Have you drawn them? Right, so now you can try blackmail.’

‘Well, well,’ smiled the spy. ‘How touchy you are on that point. But don’t sulk, poet. I was joking. Blackmail between us comrades? Out of the question. And believe me, I don’t wish that witcher of yours any ill nor am I thinking of harming him. Who knows – maybe I’ll even come to some understanding with him, to the advantage of us both? But in order for that to happen I’ve got to see him. When he appears, bring him to me. I ask you sincerely, Dandilion, very sincerely. Have you understood how sincerely?’

The troubadour snorted. ‘I’ve understood how sincerely.’

‘I’d like to believe that’s true. Well, go now. Ori, show our troubadour to the door.’

‘Take care.’ Dandilion got to his feet. ‘I wish you luck in your work and your personal life. My regards, Philippa. Oh, and Dijkstra!

Those agents traipsing after me. Call them off.'

'Of course,' lied the spy. 'I'll call them off. Is it possible you don't believe me?'

'Nothing of the kind,' lied the poet. 'I believe you.'

Dandilion stayed on the Academy premises until evening. He kept looking around attentively but didn't spot any snoops following him. And that was precisely what worried him most.

At the Faculty of Trouvereship he listened to a lecture on classical poetry. Then he slept sweetly through a seminar on modern poetry. He was woken up by some tutors he knew and together they went to the Department of Philosophy to take part in a long-enduring stormy dispute on 'The essence and origins of life'. Before it had even grown dark, half of the participants were outright drunk while the rest were preparing for blows, out-shouting each other and creating a hullabaloo hard to describe. All this proved handy for the poet.

He slipped unseen into the garret, clambered out by the window vent, slid down by way of the gutter onto the roof of the library, and – nearly breaking his leg – jumped across onto the roof of the dissecting theatre. From there he got into the garden adjacent to the wall. Amidst the dense gooseberry bushes he found a hole which he himself had made bigger when a student. Beyond the hole lay the town of Oxenfurt.

He merged into the crowd, then quickly sneaked down the backstreets, dodging like a hare chased by hounds. When he reached the coach house he waited a good half hour, hidden in the shadows. Not spotting anything suspicious, he climbed the ladder to the thatch and leaped onto the roof of the house belonging to Wolfgang Amadeus Goatbeard, a brewer he knew. Gripping the moss-covered roof tiles, he finally arrived at the window of the attic he was aiming for. An oil lamp was burning inside the little room. Perched precariously on the guttering, Dandilion knocked on the lead frames. The window was not locked and gave way at the slightest push.

'Geralt! Hey, Geralt!'

'Dandilion? Wait . . . Don't come in, please . . .'

'What's that, don't come in? What do you mean, don't come in?' The poet pushed the window. 'You're not alone or what? Are you

bedding someone right now?'

Neither receiving nor waiting for an answer he clambered onto the sill, knocking over the apples and onions lying on it.

'Geralt . . .' he panted and immediately fell silent. Then cursed under his breath, staring at the light green robes of a medical student strewn across the floor. He opened his mouth in astonishment and cursed once more. He could have expected anything. But not this.

'Shani.' He shook his head. 'May the—'

'No comments, thank you very much.' The witcher sat down on the bed. And Shani covered herself, yanking the sheet right up to her upturned nose.

'Well, come in then.' Geralt reached for his trousers. 'Since you're coming by way of the window, this must be important. Because if it isn't I'm going to throw you straight back out through it.'

Dandilion clambered off the sill, knocking down the rest of the onions. He sat down, pulling the high-backed, wooden chair closer with his foot. The witcher gathered Shani's clothes and his own from the floor. He looked abashed and dressed in silence. The medical student, hiding behind him, was struggling with her shirt. The poet watched her insolently, searching in his mind for similes and rhymes for the golden colour of her skin in the light of the oil lamp and the curves of her small breasts.

'What's this about, Dandilion?' The witcher fastened the buckles on his boots. 'Go on.'

'Pack your bags,' he replied dryly. 'Your departure is imminent.'

'How imminent?'

'Exceptionally.'

'Shani . . .' Geralt cleared his throat. 'Shani told me about the snoops following you. You lost them, I understand?'

'You don't understand anything.'

'Rience?'

'Worse.'

'In that case I really don't understand . . . Wait. The Redanians? Tretogor? Dijkstra?'

'You've guessed.'

'That's still no reason—'

‘It’s reason enough,’ interrupted Dandilion. ‘They’re not concerned about Rience any more, Geralt. They’re after the girl and Yennefer. Dijkstra wants to know where they are. He’s going to force you to disclose it to him. Do you understand now?’

‘I do now. And so we’re fleeing. Does it have to be through the window?’

‘Absolutely. Shani? Will you manage?’

The student of medicine smoothed down her robe.

‘It won’t be my first window.’

‘I was sure of that.’ The poet scrutinised her intently, counting on seeing a blush worthy of rhyme and metaphor. He miscalculated. Mirth in her hazel eyes and an impudent smile were all he saw.

A big grey owl glided down to the sill without a sound. Shani cried out quietly. Geralt reached for his sword.

‘Don’t be silly, Philippa,’ said Dandilion.

The owl disappeared and Phillippa Eilhart appeared in its place, squatting awkwardly. The magician immediately jumped into the room, smoothing down her hair and clothes.

‘Good evening,’ she said coldly. ‘Introduce me, Dandilion.’

‘Geralt of Rivia. Shani of Medicine. And that owl which so craftily flew in my tracks is no owl. This is Philippa Eilhart from the Council of Wizards, at present in King Vizimir’s service and pride of the Tretogor court. It’s a shame we’ve only got one chair in here.’

‘It’s quite enough.’ The enchantress made herself comfortable in the high-backed chair vacated by Dandilion, and cast a smouldering glance over those present, fixing her eyes somewhat longer on Shani. The medical student, to Dandilion’s surprise, suddenly blushed.

‘In principle, what I’ve come about is the sole concern of Geralt of Rivia,’ Philippa began after a short pause. ‘I’m aware, however, that to ask anybody to leave would be tactless, and so . . .’

‘I can leave,’ said Shani hesitantly.

‘You can’t,’ muttered Geralt. ‘No one can until the situation’s made clear. Isn’t that so, my lady?’

‘Philippa to you,’ smiled the enchantress. ‘Let’s throw formalities aside. And no one has to go – no one’s presence bothers me. Astonishes me, at most, but what to do? – life is an endless train of

surprises . . . as one of my friends says . . . As our mutual friend says, Geralt. You're studying medicine, are you, Shani? What year?'

'Third,' grunted the girl.

'Ah,' Philippa Eilhart was looking not at her but at the witcher, 'seventeen, what a beautiful age. Yennefer would give a lot to be that age again. What do you reckon, Geralt? Because I'll ask her when I get the chance.'

The witcher smiled nastily.

'I've no doubt you will ask. I've no doubt you'll follow the question with a commentary. I've no doubt it'll amuse you no end. Now come to the point, please.'

'Quite right.' The magician nodded, growing serious. 'It's high time. And you haven't got much time. Dandilion has, no doubt, already informed you that Dijkstra has suddenly acquired the wish to see and talk to you to establish the location of a certain girl. Dijkstra has orders from King Vizimir in this matter and so I think he will be very insistent that you reveal this place to him.'

'Of course. Thank you for the warning. Only one thing puzzles me a little. You say Dijkstra received instructions from the king. And you didn't receive any? After all, you hold a prominent seat in Vizimir's council.'

'Indeed.' The magician was not perturbed by the gibe. 'I do. I take my responsibilities seriously, and they consist of warning the king against making mistakes. Sometimes – as in this particular instance – I am not allowed to tell the king outright that he is committing a mistake, or to dissuade him from a hasty action. I simply have to render it impossible for him to make a mistake. You understand what I'm saying?'

The witcher confirmed with a nod. Dandilion wondered whether he really did understand, because he knew that Philippa was lying through her teeth.

'So I see,' said Geralt slowly, proving that he understood perfectly well, 'that the Council of Wizards is also interested in my ward. The wizards wish to find out where my ward is. And they want to get to her before Vizimir or anybody else does. Why, Philippa? What is it about my ward? What makes her so very interesting?'

The magician's eyes narrowed. 'Don't you know?' she hissed. 'Do you know so little about her? I wouldn't like to draw any hasty conclusions but such a lack of knowledge would indicate that your

qualifications as her guardian amount to nothing. In truth, I'm surprised that being so unaware and so lacking in information, you decided to look after her. And not only that – you decided to deny the right to look after her to others, others who have both the qualifications and the right. And, on top of that, you ask why? Careful, Geralt, or your arrogance will be the end of you. Watch out. And guard that child, damn it! Guard that girl as though she's the apple of your eye! And if you can't do so yourself, ask others to!'

For a moment Dandilion thought the witcher was going to mention the role undertaken by Yennefer. He would not be risking anything, and would flatten Philippa's arguments. But Geralt said nothing. The poet guessed why. Philippa knew everything. Philippa was warning him. And the witcher understood her warning.

He concentrated on observing their eyes and faces, wondering whether by any chance something in the past had tied the two together. Dandilion knew that similar duels of words and allusions – demonstrating a mutual fascination – waged between the witcher and enchantresses very often ended in bed. But observation, as usual, gave him nothing. There was only one way to find out whether something had tied the witcher to anyone – one had to enter through the window at the appropriate moment.

'To look after someone,' the enchantress continued after a while, 'means to take upon oneself the responsibility for the safety of a person unable to assure that safety for herself. If you expose your ward . . . If she comes to any misfortune, the responsibility falls on you, Geralt. Only you.'

'I know.'

'I'm afraid you still know too little.'

'So enlighten me. What makes so many people suddenly want to free me from the burden of that responsibility, want to take on my duties and care for my ward? What does the Council of Wizards want from Ciri? What do Dijkstra and King Vizimir want from her? What do the Temerians want from her? What does a certain Rience, who has already murdered three people in Sodden and Temeria who were in touch with me and the girl two years ago, want from her? Who almost murdered Dandilion trying to extract information about her? Who is this Rience, Philippa?'

'I don't know,' said the magician. 'I don't know who Rience is. But, like you, I'd very much like to find out.'

‘Does this Rience – ’ Shani unexpectedly – ‘have a third-degree burn on his face? If so, then I know who he is. And I know where he is.’

In the silence which fell the first drops of rain knocked on the gutter outside the window.

Murder is always murder, regardless of motive or circumstance. Thus those who murder or who prepare to murder are malefactors and criminals, regardless of who they may be: kings, princes, marshals or judges. None who contemplates and commits violence has the right to consider himself better than an ordinary criminal. Because it is in the nature of all violence to lead inevitably to crime.

Nicodemus de Boot, *Meditations on Life, Happiness and Prosperity*

CHAPTER SIX

'Let us not commit a mistake,' said Vizimir, King of Redania, sliding his ringed fingers through the hair at his temples. 'We can't afford to make a blunder or mistake now.'

Those assembled said nothing. Demawend, ruler of Aedirn, sprawled in his armchair staring at the tankard of beer resting on his belly. Foltest, the Lord of Temeria, Pontar, Mahakam and Sodden, and recently Senior Protector of Brugge, presented his noble profile to everyone by turning his head towards the window. At the opposite side of the table sat Henselt, King of Kaedwen, running his small, piercing eyes – glistening from a face as bearded as a brigand's – over the other participants of the council. Meve, Queen of Lyria, toyed pensively with the enormous rubies in her necklace, occasionally twisting her beautiful full lips into an ambiguous grimace.

'Let us not commit a mistake,' repeated Vizimir, 'because a mistake could cost us too much. Let us make use of the experience of others. When our ancestors landed on the beaches five hundred years ago the elves also hid their heads in the sand. We tore the country away from them piece by piece, and they retreated, thinking all the while that *this* would be the last border, that we would encroach no further. Let us be wiser! Because now it is our turn. Now we are the elves. Nilfgaard is at the Yaruga and I hear: "So, let them stay there". I hear: "They won't come any further". But they will, you'll see. So I repeat, let us not make the same mistake as the elves!'

Raindrops knocked against the window panes and the wind howled eerily. Queen Meve raised her head. She thought she heard the croaking of ravens and crows, but it was only the wind. The wind and rain.

'Do not compare us to the elves,' said Henselt of Kaedwen. 'You

dishonour us with such a comparison. The elves did not know how to fight – they retreated before our ancestors and hid in the mountains and forests. The elves did not treat our ancestors to a Sodden. But we showed the Nilfgaardians what it means to pick a quarrel with us. Do not threaten us with Nilfgaard, Vizimir, don't sow the seeds of propaganda. Nilfgaard, you say, is at the Yaruga? I say that Nilfgaard is sitting as quiet as a church mouse beyond the river. Because we broke their spine at Sodden. We broke them militarily, and above all we broke their morale. I don't know whether it is true that Emhyr var Emreis was, at the time, against aggression on such a scale, that the attack on Cintra was the work of some party hostile to him – I take it that if they had defeated us, he would be applauding, and distributing privileges and endowments amongst them. But after Sodden it suddenly turns out he was against it, and that everything which occurred was due to his marshals' insubordination. And heads fell. The scaffolds flowed with blood. These are certain facts, not rumours. Eight solemn executions, and many more modest ones. Several apparently natural yet mysterious deaths, a good many cases of people suddenly choosing to retire. I tell you, Emhyr fell into a rage and practically finished off his own commanders. So who will lead their army now? The sergeants?'

'No, not the sergeants,' said Demawend of Aedirn coldly. 'It will be young and gifted officers who have long waited for such an opportunity and have been trained by Emhyr for an equally long time. Those whom the older marshals stopped from taking command, prevented from being promoted. The young, gifted commanders about whom we already hear. Those who crushed the uprisings in Metinna and Nazair, who rapidly broke up the rebels in Ebbing. Commanders who appreciate the roles of outflanking manoeuvres, of far-reaching cavalry raids, of swift infantry marches and of landing operations from the sea. They use the tactics of crushing assaults in specific directions, they use the newest siege techniques instead of relying on the uncertainties of magic. They must not be underestimated. They are itching to cross the Yaruga and prove that they have learned from the mistakes of their old marshals.'

'If they have truly learned anything,' Henselt shrugged, 'they will not cross the Yaruga. The river estuary on the border between Cintra and Verden is still controlled by Ervyll and his three strongholds: Nastrog, Rozrog and Bodrog. They cannot be seized just like that – no new technology is going to help them there. Our flank is defended by Ethain of Cidaris's fleet, and thanks to it we

control the shore. And also thanks to the pirates of Skellige. Jarl Crach an Craite, if you remember, didn't sign a truce with Nilfgaard, and regularly bites them, attacking and setting fire to their maritime settlements and forts in the Provinces. The Nilfgaardians have nicknamed him Tirth ys Muire, Sea Boar. They frighten children with him!'

'Frightening Nilfgaardian children,' smiled Vizimir wryly, 'will not ensure our safety.'

'No,' agreed Henselt. 'Something else will. Without control of the estuary or the shore and with a flank exposed, Emhyr var Emreis will be in no position to ensure provisions reach any detachments he might care to send across the Yaruga. What swift marches, what cavalry raids? Ridiculous. The army will come to a standstill within three days of crossing the river. Half will lay siege to the stronghold and the rest will be slowly dispersed to plunder the region in search of fodder and food. And when their famed cavalry has eaten most of its own horses, we'll give them another Sodden. Damn it, I'd like them to cross the river! But don't worry, they won't.'

'Let us say,' Meve of Lyria said suddenly, 'that they do not cross the Yaruga. Let us say that Nilfgaard will simply wait. Now let us consider: who would that suit, them or us? Who can let themselves wait and do nothing and who can't?'

'Exactly!' picked up Vizimir. 'Meve, as usual, does not say much but she hits the nail on the head. Emhyr has time on his hands, gentlemen, but we don't. Can't you see what is happening? Three years ago, Nilfgaard disturbed a small stone on the mountainside and now they are calmly waiting for an avalanche. They can simply wait while new stones keep pouring down the slope. Because, to some, that first small stone looked like a boulder which would be impossible to move. And since it turned out that a mere touch sufficed to set it rolling, others appeared for whom an avalanche would prove convenient. From the Grey Mountains to Bremervoord, elven commandos rove the forests – this is no longer a small group of guerrilla fighters, this is war. Just wait and we'll see the free elves of Dol Blathanna rising to fight. In Mahakam the dwarves are rebelling, the dryads of Brokilon are growing bolder and bolder. This is war, war on a grand scale. Civil war. Domestic. Our own. While Nilfgaard waits . . . Whose side you think time is on? The Scoia'tael commandos have thirty- or forty-year old elves fighting for them. And they live for three hundred years! They have time, we don't!'

'The Scoia'tael,' admitted Henselt, 'have become a real thorn in

the backside. They're paralysing my trade and transport, terrorising the farmers . . . we have to put an end to this!'

'If the non-humans want war, they will get it,' threw in Foltest of Temeria. 'I have always been an advocate of mutual agreement and co-existence but if they prefer a test of strength then we will see who is the stronger. I am ready. I undertake to put an end to the Squirrels in Temeria and Sodden within six months. Those lands have already run with elven blood once, shed by our ancestors. I consider the blood-letting a tragedy, but I do not see an alternative – the tragedy will be repeated. The elves have to be pacified.'

'Your army will march against the elves if you give the order,' nodded Demawend. 'But will it march against humans? Against the peasantry from which you muster your infantry? Against the guilds? Against the free towns? Speaking of the Scoia'tael, Vizimir described only one stone in the avalanche. Yes, yes, gentlemen, do not gape at me like that! Word is already going round the villages and towns that on the lands already taken by the Nilfgaard, peasants, farmers and craftsmen are having an easier life, freer and richer, and that merchants' guilds have more privileges . . . We are inundated with goods from Nilfgaardian manufactories. In Brugge and Verden their coin is ousting local currency. If we sit and do nothing we will be finished, at odds with our neighbours, embroiled in conflict, tangled up in trying to quell rebellions and riots, and slowly subdued by the economic strength of the Nilfgaardians. We will be finished, suffocating in our own stuffy parochial corner because – understand this – Nilfgaard is cutting off our route to the South and we have to develop, we have to be expansive, otherwise there won't be enough room here for our grandchildren!'

Those gathered said nothing. Vizimir of Redania sighed deeply, grabbed one of the chalices standing on the table and took a long draught. Rain battered against the windows throughout the prolonged silence, and the wind howled and pounded against the shutters.

'All the worries of which we talk,' said Henselt finally, 'is the work of Nilfgaard. It is Emhyr's emissaries who are inciting the non-humans, spreading propaganda and calling for riots. It is they who are throwing gold around and promising privileges to corporations and guilds, assuring barons and dukes they will receive high positions in the provinces they plan to create in place of our kingdoms. I don't know what it's like in your countries, but in Kaedwen we've been inundated with clerics, preachers, fortune-tellers and other shitty mystics all appearing out of the blue, all

preaching the end of the world . . .'

'It's the same in my country,' agreed Foltest. 'Damn it, for so many years there was peace. Ever since my grandfather showed the clerics their place and decimated their ranks, those who remained stuck to useful tasks. They studied books and instilled knowledge in children, treated the sick, took care of the poor, the handicapped and the homeless. They didn't get mixed up in politics. And now all of a sudden they've woken up and are yelling nonsense to the rabble – and the rabble is listening and believes they know, at last, why their lives are so hard. I put up with it because I'm less impetuous than my grandfather and less sensitive about my royal authority and dignity than he was. What sort of dignity or authority would it be, anyway, if it could be undermined by the squealings of some deranged fanatic. But my patience is coming to an end. Recently the main topic of preaching has been of a Saviour who will come from the south. From the south! From beyond the Yaruga!'

'The White Flame,' muttered Demawend. 'White Chill will come to be, and after it the White Light. And then the world will be reborn through the White Flame and the White Queen . . . I've heard it, too. It's a travesty of the prophecy of Ithlinne aep Aevenien, the elven seeress. I gave orders to catch one cleric who was going on about it in the Vengerberg market place and the torturer asked him politely and at length how much gold the prophet had received from Emhyr for doing it . . . But the preacher only prattled on about the White Flame and the White Queen . . . the same thing, to the very end.'

'Careful, Demawend,' grimaced Vizimir. 'Don't make any martyrs. That's exactly what Emhyr is after. Catch all the Nilfgaardian agents you please, but do not lay hands on clerics, the consequences are too unpredictable. They still are held in regard and have an important influence on people. We have too much trouble with the Squirrels to risk riots in our towns or war against our own peasants.'

'Damn it!' snorted Foltest, 'let's not do this, let's not risk that, we mustn't this, we mustn't that . . . Have we gathered here to talk about all we can't do? Is that why you dragged us all to Hagge, Demawend, to cry our hearts out and bemoan our weakness and helplessness? Let us finally do something! Something must be done! What is happening has to be stopped!'

'I've been saying that from the start.' Vizimir pulled himself up. 'I propose action.'

‘What sort of action?’

‘What can we do?’

Silence fell again. The wind blustered, the shutters banged against the castle wall.

‘Why,’ said Meve suddenly, ‘are you all looking at me?’

‘We’re admiring your beauty,’ Henselt mumbled from the depths of his tankard.

‘That too,’ seconded Vizimir. ‘Meve, we all know you can find a solution to everything. You have a woman’s intuition, you’re a wise wo—’

‘Stop flattering me.’ The Queen of Lyria clasped her hands in her lap and fixed her gaze on the darkened tapestries with their depictions of hunting scenes. Hounds, extended in a leap, were turning their muzzles up towards the flanks of a fleeing white unicorn. *I’ve never seen a live unicorn*, thought Meve. *Never. And I probably never will.*

‘The situation in which we find ourselves,’ she said after a while, tearing her eyes away from the tapestry, ‘reminds me of long, winter evenings in Rivian Castle. Something always hung in the air. My husband would be contemplating how to get his hands on yet another maid-of-honour. The marshal would be working out how to start a war which would make him famous. The wizard would imagine he was king. The servants wouldn’t feel like serving, the jester would be sad, gloomy and excruciatingly dull, the dogs would howl with melancholy and the cats sleep, careless of any mice that might be scuttling around on the table. Everybody was waiting for something. Everyone was scowling at me. And I . . . then I . . . I showed them. I showed them all what I was capable of, in a way that made the very walls shake and the local grizzly bears wake in their winter lairs. And any silly thoughts disappeared from their heads in a trice. Suddenly everyone knew who ruled.’

No one uttered a word. The wind howled a little louder. The guards on the buttresses outside hailed each other casually. The patter of drops on the panes in the lead window frames grew to a frenzied staccato.

‘Nilfgaard is watching and waiting,’ continued Meve slowly, toying with her necklace. ‘Nilfgaard is observing us. Something is hanging in the air, silly thoughts are springing up in many heads. So let us show them what we are capable of. Let us show them who is really king here. Let us shake the walls of this great castle

plunged into a winter torpor!'l'

'Eradicate the Squirrels,' said Henselt quickly. 'Start a huge joint military operation. Treat the non-humans to a blood bath. Let the Pontar, Gwenllech and Buina flow with elven blood from source to estuary!'

'Send a penal expedition to smother the free elves of Dol Blathanna,' added Demawend, frowning. 'March an interventionary force into Mahakam. Allow Ervyll of Verden a chance, at last, to get at the dryads in Brokilon. Yes, a blood bath! And any survivors – to the reservations!'

'Set Crach an Craite at the Nilfgaardian shores,' picked up Vizimir. 'Support him with Ethain of Cidaris's fleet, let them go ravaging from the Yaruga to Ebbing! A show of strength—'

'Not enough.' Foltest shook his head. 'All of that is still not enough. We need . . . I know what we need.'

'So tell us!'

'Cintra.'

'What?'

'To take Cintra back from the Nilfgaardians. Let us cross the Yaruga, be the first to attack. Now, while they don't expect it. Let us throw them out, back beyond the Marnadal.'

'How? We've just said that it's impossible for an army to cross the Yaruga—'

'Impossible for Nilfgaard. But we have control of the river. We hold the estuary in our grasp, and the supply routes, and our flank is protected by Skellige, Cidaris and the strongholds in Verden. For Nilfgaard, getting forty or fifty thousand men across the river is a considerable effort. We can get far more across to the left bank. Don't gape, Vizimir. You wanted something to put an end to the waiting? Something spectacular? Something which will make us true kings again? That something is Cintra. Cintra will bind us and our rule together because Cintra is a symbol. Remember Sodden! If it were not for the massacre of that town and Calanthe's martyrdom, there would not have been such a victory then. The forces were equal – no one counted on our crushing them like that. But our armies threw themselves at their throats like wolves, like rabid dogs, to avenge the Lioness of Cintra. And there are those whose fury was not quelled by the blood spilt on the field of Sodden. Remember Crach an Craite, the Wild Boar of the Sea!'

‘That is true,’ nodded Demawend. ‘Crach swore bloody vengeance on Nilfgaard. For Eist Tuirseach, killed at Marnadal. And for Calanthe. If we were to strike at the left bank, Crach would back us up with all the strength of Skellige. By the gods, this has a chance at success! I back Foltest! Let us not wait, let us strike first, let us liberate Cintra and chase those sons-of-bitches beyond the Amell pass!’

‘Slow down,’ snarled Henselt. ‘Don’t be in such a hurry to tug the lion’s whiskers, because this lion is not dead yet. That is for starters. Secondly, if we are the first to strike, we will put ourselves in the position of aggressors. We will be breaking the truce to which we all put our seals. We will not be backed by Niedamir and his League, we will not be backed by Esterad Thyssen. I don’t know how Ethain of Cidaris will react. An aggressive war will also be opposed by our guilds, merchants, nobles . . . And above all, the wizards. Do not forget the wizards!’

‘The wizards won’t back an assault on the left bank,’ confirmed Vizimir. ‘The peace agreement was the work of Vilgefortz of Roggeveen. It is well known that his plan was for the armistice to gradually turn into permanent peace. Vilgefortz will not back a war. And the Chapter, believe me, will do whatever Vilgefortz wishes. After Sodden he has become the most important person in the Chapter – let other magicians say what they will, Vilgefortz plays first fiddle there.’

‘Vilgefortz, Vilgefortz,’ bridled Foltest. ‘He has grown too large for us, that magician. Taking into account Vilgefortz’s and the Chapter’s plans – plans which I am not acquainted with anyway, and which I do not understand at that – is beginning to annoy me. But there is a way around that, too, gentlemen. What if it were Nilfgaard who was the aggressor ? At Dol Angra for example? Against Aedirn and Lyria? We could arrange that somehow . . . could stage some tiny provocation . . . A border incident caused by them? An attack on a border fort, let us say? We will, of course, be prepared – we will react decisively and forcefully, with everybody’s full acceptance, including that of Vilgefortz and the entire Chapter of Wizards. And when Emhyr var Emreis turns his eyes from Sodden and Transriver, the Cintrians will demand their country back – all those the emigrants and refugees who are gathering themselves in Brugge under Vissegerd’s leadership. Nearly eight thousand of them are armed. Could there be a better spearhead ? They live in the hope of regaining the country they were forced to flee. They are burning to fight. They are ready to strike the left bank. They await

only the battle cry.'

'The battle cry,' bore out Meve, 'and the promise that we will back them up. Because Emhyr can command eight thousand men at his border garrison; with that strength he won't even have to send for relief troops. Vissegerd knows this very well and won't move until he has the assurance that your armies, Foltest, reinforced by Redanian corps, will disembark on the left bank at his heels. But above all Vissegerd is waiting for the Lion Cub of Cintra. Apparently the queen's granddaughter survived the slaughter. Allegedly, she was seen amongst the refugees, but the child mysteriously disappeared. The emigrants persist in their search for her . . . Because they need someone of royal blood to sit on their regained throne. Someone of Calanthe's blood.'

'Nonsense,' said Foltest coldly. 'More than two years have passed. If the child has not been found by now, she's dead. We can forget that myth. Calanthe is no more and there is no Lion Cub, no royal blood to whom the throne belongs. Cintra . . . will never again be what it was during the Lioness's lifetime. Obviously, we cannot say that to Vissegerd's emigrants.'

'So you are going to send Cintrian guerrillas to their deaths?' Meve narrowed her eyes. 'In the line of attack? Not telling them that Cintra can only be reborn as a vassal country under your protectorship? You are proposing, to all of us, an attack on Cintra for your own gain? You have suborned Sodden and Brugge for yourself, are sharpening your teeth on Verden and now you have caught a whiff of Cintra, is that right?'

'Admit it, Foltest,' snapped Henselt. 'Is Meve right? Is that why you are inciting us to this affair?'

'Come on, leave it.' The ruler of Temeria furrowed his noble brow and bristled angrily. 'Don't make me out as some conqueror dreaming of an empire. What are you talking about? Sodden and Brugge? Ekkehard of Sodden was my mother's half-brother. Are you surprised that following his death the Free States brought the crown to me, his relative? Blood not water! And yes Venzlav of Brugge paid me homage as a vassal – but without coercion! He did it to protect his country because, on a fine day, he can see Nilfgaardian lances flashing on the left bank of the Yaruga!'

'And we are talking about the left bank,' drawled out the Queen of Lyria. 'The bank we are to strike. And the left bank is Cintra. Destroyed, burned out, ruined, decimated and occupied . . . but still Cintra. The Cintrians won't bring you their crown, Foltest, nor will

they pay you homage. Cintra will not agree to be a vassal state. Blood, not water!'

'Cintra, if we . . . When we liberate it, should it become our joint protectorate,' said Demawend of Aedirn. 'Cintra is at the mouth of the Yaruga, in too important a strategic position to allow ourselves to lose control over it.'

'It has to be a free country,' objected Vizimir. 'Free, independent and strong. A country which will be an iron gateway, a bulwark to the north, and not a strip of burned ground over which the Nilfgaardian cavalry will be able to gather speed!'

'Is it possible to rebuild such a Cintra? Without Calanthe?'

'Don't get all worked up, Foltest,' pouted Meve. 'I've already told you, the Cintrians will never accept a protectorate or foreign blood on their throne. If you try to force yourself on them as their lord the tables will be turned. Vissegerd will again prepare his troops for battle, but this time under Emhyr's wings. And one day those detachments are going to assail us in the vanguard of a Nilfgaardian onslaught. As the spear point, as you just vividly described it.'

'Foltest knows that,' snorted Vizimir. 'That's why he's searching so hard for this Lion Cub, for Calanthe's granddaughter. Don't you understand? Blood not water, the crown through marriage. It's enough for him to find the girl and force her to marry—'

'Are you out of your mind?' choked out the King of Temeria. 'The Lion Cub is dead! I'm not looking for the girl at all, but if I were . . . It has not even occurred to me to force her to do such a thing—'

'You wouldn't have to force her,' interrupted Meve, smiling charmingly. 'You are still a strapping, handsome man, cousin. And Calanthe's blood runs through the Lion Cub. Very hot blood. I knew Cali when she was young. When she saw a fellow she liked, she leaped up and down so fast that if you put dry twigs beneath her feet they would have caught real fire. Her daughter, Pavetta, the Lion Cub's mother, was exactly the same. So, no doubt, the Lion Cub has not fallen far from the apple tree. A bit of effort, Foltest, and the girl would not be long in resisting. That is what you are counting on, admit it.'

'Of course he's counting on it,' chuckled Demawend. 'Our king has thought up a cunning little plan for himself! We assail the left bank and before we realise it our Foltest will have found the girl, won her heart and have a young wife whom he will place on the throne of Cintra while her people cry for joy and pee in their

knickers for happiness. For they will have their queen, blood of the blood and flesh of the flesh of Calanthe. They will have a queen . . . albeit one who comes with a king. King Foltest.'

'What rubbish!' yelled Foltest, turning red then white in turn. 'What's got into you? There's not a grain of sense in your prattling!'

'There is a whole lot of sense,' said Vizimir dryly. 'Because I know that someone is searching for the child very earnestly. Who, Foltest?'

'It's obvious! Vissegerd and the Cintrians!'

'No, it's not them. At least, not just them. Someone else is, too. Someone who is leaving a trail of corpses behind them. Someone who does not shrink from blackmail, bribery or torture . . . While we are on the subject, is a gentleman by the name of Rience in any of your services? Ah, I see from your expressions that either he isn't or you won't admit it – which comes to the same thing. I repeat: they are searching for Calanthe's granddaughter, and searching in such a way as to make you think twice about their intentions. Who is looking for her, I ask?'

'Hell !' Foltest thumped his fist on the table. 'It's not me! It never occurred to me to marry some child for some throne! After all, I—'

'After all, you have been secretly sleeping with the Baroness La Valette for the past four years.' Meve smiled again. 'You love each other like two turtle doves and just wait for the old baron to finally kick the bucket. What are you staring at? We all know about it. What do you think we pay our spies for? But for the throne of Cintra, cousin, many a king would be prepared to sacrifice his personal happiness—'

'Hold on.' Henselt scratched his beard with a rasp. 'Many a king, you say. Then leave Foltest in peace for a moment. There are others. In her time, Calanthe wanted to give her granddaughter's hand to Ervyll of Verden's son. Ervyll, too, might have caught a whiff of Cintra. And not just him . . .'

'Hmm . . .' muttered Vizimir. 'True. Ervyll has three sons . . . And what about those present here who also have male descendants? Huh? Meve? Are you not, by any chance, pulling wool over our eyes?'

'You can count me out.' The Queen of Lyria smiled even more charmingly. 'It is true, two of my offspring are roaming the world – the fruits of delightful abandon – if they have not been brought to the gallows yet. I doubt that either of them would suddenly desire

to be king. They were neither predisposed nor inclined that way. Both were even stupider than their father, may he rest in peace. Whoever knew my deceased husband will understand what I mean.'

'That's a fact,' agreed the King of Redania. 'I knew him. Are your sons really more stupid? Damn it, I thought it wasn't possible to get any more stupid . . . Forgive me, Meve . . .'

'It's nothing, Vizimir.'

'Who else has sons?'

'You do, Henselt.'

'My son is married!'

'And what is poison for? For the throne of Cintra, as someone here so wisely said, many would sacrifice their personal happiness. It would be worth it!'

'I will not permit such insinuations! And leave me alone! Others have sons, too!'

'Niedamir of Hengfors has two. And is a widower himself. And he isn't old. And don't forget Esterad Thyssen of Kovir.'

'I would count those out.' Vizimir shook his head. 'The Hengfors League and Kovir are planning a dynastic union with each other. They are not interested in Cintra or the south. Hmm . . . But Ervyll of Verden . . . It's not so far from him.'

'There is someone else who is just as near,' remarked Demawend suddenly.

'Who?'

'Emhyr var Emreis. He is not married. And he is younger than you, Foltest.'

'Bloody hell.' The King of Redania frowned. 'If that were true . . . Emhyr would bugger us without grease! It's obvious that the people and nobility of Cintra will follow Calanthe's blood. Imagine what would happen if Emhyr were to get his hands on the Lion Cub? Damn it, that's all we need! Queen of Cintra, and Empress of Nilfgaard!'

'Empress!' snorted Henselt. 'You exaggerate, Vizimir. What does Emhyr need the girl for, what the hell does he need to get married for? The throne of Cintra? Emhyr already has Cintra! He conquered the country and made it a province of Nilfgaard ! He's got his whole butt on the throne and still has enough room to wriggle about!'

‘Firstly,’ noted Foltest, ‘Emhyr grips Cintra by law, or rather by an aggressor’s lawlessness. If he had the girl and married her, he could rule legally. You understand? Nilfgaard bound in marriage to Calanthe’s blood is no longer Nilfgaard the invader, at which the entire north bares its teeth. It is Nilfgaard the neighbour whom one has to take into account. How would you want to force such a Nilfgaard beyond Marnadal, beyond the Amell passes? Attacking a kingdom whose throne is legally occupied by the Lion Cub, granddaughter of the Lioness of Cintra? Pox! I don’t know who’s looking for that child. I’m not looking for her. But I declare that now I’m going to start to. I still believe the girl is dead, but we can’t take the risk. It looks as if she is too important. If she survived then we must find her!’

‘And shall we decide now who she will marry when we find her?’ Henselt grimaced. ‘Such matters should not be left to chance. We could, for that matter, hand her over to Vissegerd’s guerrillas as a battle standard, tied to a long pole – they could carry her before the front line as they attack the left bank. But if the recaptured Cintra is to be useful to us all . . . Surely you see what I mean? If we attack Nilfgaard and retrieve Cintra, the Lion Cub can be put on the throne. But the Lion Cub can have only one husband. One who will look after our interests at the mouth of the Yaruga. Who of those present is going to volunteer?’

‘Not me,’ joked Meve. ‘I waive the privilege.’

‘I wouldn’t exclude those who aren’t present here,’ said Demawend seriously. ‘Neither Ervyll, nor Niedamir, nor the Thyssens. And bear in mind that Vissegerd could surprise you and put the standard attached to a long pole to unexpected use. You’ve heard about morganatic marriages? Vissegerd is old and as ugly as cow’s dung but with enough decoctions of absinthe and damiana down her throat, the Lion Cub might unexpectedly fall in love with him! Is King Vissegerd included in our plans?’

‘No,’ muttered Foltest, ‘not in mine.’

‘Hmm . . .’ Vizimir hesitated. ‘Nor in mine. Vissegerd is a tool, not a partner, that’s the role he is to play in our plans for attacking Nilfgaard – that and no other. Besides, if the one who is so earnestly seeking the Lion Cub is indeed Emhyr var Emreis, we cannot take the risk.’

‘Absolutely not,’ seconded Foltest. ‘The Lion Cub cannot fall into Emhyr’s hands. She cannot fall into anybody’s—Into the wrong hands . . . Alive.’

‘Infanticide?’ Meve grimaced. ‘An ugly solution, my kings. Unworthy. And surely unnecessarily drastic. First of all, let us find the girl – because we still don’t have her. And when we have found her, give her to me. I’ll keep her in some castle in the mountains for a couple of years, and marry her off to one of my knights. When you see her again, she will already have two children and a belly out here.’

‘Leading to, if I count correctly, at least three future eventual pretenders and usurpers?’ Vizimir nodded. ‘No, Meve. It is ugly, indeed, but the Lion Cub, if she has survived, must now die. For reasons of state. Gentlemen?’

The rain hammered against the windows. The gale howled among the towers of Hagge castle.

The kings grew silent.

‘Vizimir, Foltest, Demawend, Henselt and Meve,’ repeated the marshal. ‘They met in a secret council in Hagge Castle on the Pontar. They conferred in privacy.’

‘How symbolic,’ said the slender, black-haired man wearing an elk tunic marked with the imprints of armour and rust stains, without looking round. ‘After all, it was at Hagge, not forty years ago, that Virfuril defeated Medell’s armies, strengthened his control over the Pontar Valley and established today’s borders between Aedirn and Temeria. And today Demawend, Virfuril’s son, invites Foltest, Medell’s son, to Hagge, summoning Vizimir of Tretogor, Henselt of Ard Carraigh and the merry widow Meve of Lyria to complete the set. They are meeting now and holding council in secrecy. Can you guess what they are discussing, Coehoorn?’

‘I can,’ the marshal replied succinctly. He did not say a word more. He knew that the man with his back turned hated anyone to display any eloquence or comment on obvious facts in his presence.

‘They did not invite Ethain of Cidaris.’ The man in the elk tunic turned away from the window, clasped his hands behind his back and strolled slowly from the window to the table and then back again. ‘Nor Ervyll of Verden. They did not invite Esterad Thyssen or Niedamir. Which means they are either very sure of themselves, or very unsure. They did not invite anyone from the Chapter of Wizards. Which is interesting, and significant. Coehoorn, try to see to it that the wizards learn of this council. Let them know that their monarchs do not treat them as equals. It seems to me that the

wizards of the Chapter have had some doubts in this respect. Disperse them.'

'It's an order.'

'Any news from Rience?'

'None.'

The man paused at the window and stood there for a long while gazing at the hills drenched in rain. Coehoorn waited, restlessly clenching and unclenching his fist around the pommel of his sword. He was afraid he would be forced to listen to a long monologue. The marshal knew that the man standing at the window considered his monologues a conversation, and viewed conversation as a privilege and proof of trust. He knew this, but still didn't like listening to the monologues.

'How do you find the country, Governor? Have you grown to like your new province?'

He shuddered, taken unawares. He did not expect the question. But he did not ponder the answer for long. Insincerity and indecisiveness could cost him a great deal.

'No, your Highness. I haven't. That country is so . . . gloomy.'

'It was different once,' the man replied without looking round. 'And it will be different again. You will see. You will still see a beautiful, happy Cintra, Coehoorn. I promise you. But don't be saddened, I shan't keep you here long. Someone else will take over the governorship of the province. I'll be needing you in Dol Angra. You'll leave immediately once the rebellion is quashed. I need someone responsible in Dol Angra. Someone who will not allow himself to be provoked. The merry widow of Lyria or Demawend . . . will want to provoke us. You'll take the young officers in hand. Cool their hot heads. You will let yourselves be provoked only when I give the order. No sooner.'

'Yes, sir!'l'

The clatter of arms and spurs and the sound of raised voices came from the antechamber. Someone knocked on the door. The man in the elk tunic turned away from the window and nodded his head in consent. The marshal bowed a little and left.

The man returned to the table, sat down and lowered his head over some maps. He studied them for a long time then finally rested his brow on his interlocked hands. The enormous diamond in his ring sparkled in the candlelight as if a thousand flames.

‘Your Highness?’ The door squeaked faintly.

The man did not change his position. But the marshal noticed that his hands twitched. He spotted it by the flash of the diamond. He closed the door carefully and quietly behind him.

‘News, Coehoorn? From Rience maybe?’

‘No, your Highness. But good news. The rebellion in the province has been quelled. We have broken up the rebels. Only a few managed to escape to Verden. And we’ve caught their leader, Duke Windhalm of Attre.’

‘Good,’ said the man after a while, still not raising his head from his hands. ‘Windhalm of Attre . . . Order him to be beheaded. No . . . Not beheaded. Executed in some other way. Spectacularly, lengthily and cruelly. And publicly, it goes without saying. A terrifying example is necessary. Something that will frighten others. Only please, Coehoorn, spare me the details. You don’t have to bother with a vivid description in your report. I take no pleasure from it.’

The marshal nodded, then swallowed hard. He too found no pleasure in it. No pleasure whatsoever. He intended to leave the preparation and performance of the execution to the specialists, and he did not have the least intention of asking those specialists for details. And, above all, he did not intend to be there.

‘You will be present at the execution.’ The man raised his head, picked a letter up from the table and broke the seal. ‘Officially. As the Governor of the Province of Cintra. You will stand in for me. I don’t intend to watch it. That’s an order, Coehoorn.’

‘Yes, sir!’ The marshal did not even try to hide his embarrassment and discomfort. The man who had given the order did not allow anything to be kept from him. And rarely did anyone succeed in doing so.

The man glanced at the open letter and almost immediately threw it into the fire, into the hearth.

‘Coehoorn.’

‘Yes, your Highness?’

‘I am not going to wait for Rience’s report. Set the magicians to work and have them prepare a telecommunication link with their point of contact in Redania. Let them pass on my verbal orders, which must immediately be sent to Rience. The order is to run as follows: Rience is to stop pussyfooting around, and to stop playing

with the witcher. Else it could end badly. No one toys with the witcher. I know him, Coehoorn. He is too clever to lead Rience to the Trail. I repeat, Rience is to organise the assassination immediately, to take the witcher out of the game at once. He's to kill him, and then disappear, bide his time and await my orders. If he comes across the enchantress's trail before that he is to leave her alone. Not a hair on Yennefer's head is to be harmed. Have you remembered that, Coehoorn?'

'Yes, sir.'

'The communiqué is to be coded and firmly secured against any magical deciphering. Forewarn the wizards about this. If they bungle it, if any undesirables learn of my order, I will hold them responsible.'

'Yes, sir.' The marshal hawked and pulled himself up straight.

'What else, Coehoorn?'

'The count . . . He is here already, your Highness. He came at your command.'

'Already?' He smiled. 'Such speed is worthy of admiration. I hope he didn't exhaust that black horse of his everyone envies so much. Have him come in.'

'Am I to be present during the conversation, your Highness?'

'Of course, Governor of Cintra.'

Summoned from the antechambers, the knight entered the chamber with an energetic, strong and noisy stride, his black armour grating. He stopped short, drew himself up proudly, threw his wet, muddy black cloak back from his shoulder, and laid his hand on the hilt of his mighty sword. He leaned his black helmet, adorned with wings of a bird of prey, on his hip. Coehoorn looked at the knight's face. He saw there the hard pride of a warrior, and impudence. He did not see any of the things that should have been visible in the face of one who had spent the past two years incarcerated in a place from which – as everything had indicated – he would only leave for the scaffold. A faint smile touched the marshal's lips. He knew that the disdain for death and crazy courage of youngsters stemmed from a lack of imagination. He knew that perfectly well. He had once been such a youngster himself.

The man sitting at the table rested his chin on his interlaced fingers and looked at the knight intently. The youngster pulled

himself up taut as a string.

'In order for everything to be perfectly clear,' the man behind the table addressed him, 'you should understand that the mistake you made in this town two years ago has not been forgiven. You are getting one more chance. You are getting one more order. My decision as to your ultimate fate depends on the way in which you carry it out.'

The young knight's face did not twitch, and nor did a single feather on the wings adorning the helmet at his hip.

'I never deceive anyone, I never give anyone false illusions,' continued the man. 'So let it be known that, naturally, the prospect of saving your neck from the executioner's axe exists only if you do not make a mistake this time. Your chances of a full pardon are small. Your chances of my forgiving and forgetting are . . . non-existent. '

The young knight in the black armour did not flinch this time either, but Coehoorn detected the flash in his eyes. *He doesn't believe him*, he thought. *He doesn't believe him and is deluding himself. He is making a great mistake.*

'I command your full attention,' continued the man behind the table. 'Yours, too, Coehoorn, because the orders I am about to give concern you too. They come in a moment, for I have to give some thought to their substance and delivery.'

Marshal Menno Coehoorn, Governor of the Province of Cintra and future Commander-in-Chief of the Dol Angra army, lifted his head and stood to attention, his hand on the pommel of his sword. The same attitude was assumed by the knight in black armour with the bird-of-prey-winged helmet. They both waited. In silence. Patiently. The way one should wait for orders, the substance and presentation of which were being pondered by the Emperor of Nilfgaard, Emhyr var Emreis, Deithwen Addan yn Carn aep Morvudd, the White Flame Dancing on the Grave-Mounds of Enemies.

Ciri woke.

She was lying, or rather half-sitting, with her head resting high on several pillows. The compresses on her forehead had grown warm and only slightly damp. She threw them off, unable to bear their unpleasant weight and their stinging against her skin. She found it hard to breathe. Her throat was dry and her nose almost completely blocked with clots of blood. But the elixirs and spells

had worked – the pain which had exploded within her skull and dimmed her sight a few hours ago had disappeared and given way to a dull throbbing and a sensation of pressure on her temples.

Carefully she touched her nose with the back of her hand. It was no longer bleeding.

What a strange dream I had, she thought. *The first dream for many days. The first where I wasn't afraid. The first which wasn't about me. I was an . . . observer. I saw everything as if from above, from high up . . . As if I were a bird . . . A night bird . . .*

A dream in which I saw Geralt.

In the dream it was night. And the rain, which furrowed the surface of the canal, spattered on the shingle roofs and thatches of sheds, glistened on the planks of foot-bridges and the decks of boats and barges . . . And Geralt was there. Not alone. There was a man with him in a funny hat with a feather, limp from the damp. And a slim girl in a green cloak with a hood . . . All three were walking slowly and carefully along a wet foot-bridge . . . *And I saw them from above. As if I were a bird. A night bird . . .*

Geralt had stopped short. 'Is it still far?' he had asked. 'No,' the slim girl had answered, shaking the water off her green cloak. 'We're almost there . . . Hey, Dandilion, don't lag behind or you'll get lost in these cul-de-sacs . . . And where the hell is Philippa? I saw her a moment ago, she was flying alongside the canal . . . What foul weather . . . Let's go. Lead on, Shani. And between you and me, where do you know this charlatan from? What have you got to do with him?'

'I sometimes sell him medicaments looted from the college workshop. What are you staring at me like that for? My stepfather can barely pay for my tuition . . . I sometimes need a little money . . . And the charlatan, having real medicaments, treats people . . . Or at least he doesn't poison them . . . Well, let's get going.'

Strange dream, thought Ciri. *Shame I woke up. I'd like to have seen what was going to happen . . . I'd like to know what they were doing there. Where they were going . . .*

From the chamber next door came the sound of voices, the voices which had woken her. Mother Nenneke was speaking quickly, clearly worked up, agitated and angry. 'You betrayed my trust,' she was saying. 'I shouldn't have allowed it. I might have guessed that your dislike of her would lead to disaster. I shouldn't have allowed you to—Because, after all, I know you. You're ruthless, you're cruel,

and to make matters worse, it turns out you're also irresponsible and careless. You're torturing that child mercilessly, forcing her to try things which she can't possibly do. You've no heart.

'You really have no heart, Yennefer.'

Ciri pricked up her ears, wanting to hear the enchantress's reply, her cold, hard and melodious voice. Wanting to hear how she reacted, how she sneered at the high priestess, how she ridiculed her over-protectiveness. She wanted to hear her say what she usually said – that using magic is no joke, that it isn't an occupation for young ladies made of porcelain, for dolls blown from thin glass. But Yennefer answered quietly, so quietly that the girl could neither understand nor even make out the individual words.

I'll fall asleep, she thought, carefully and delicately feeling her nose which was still tender, painful and blocked with clotted blood. *I'll go back to my dream. I'll see what Geralt is doing there, in the night, in the rain, by the canal . . .*

Yennefer was holding her by the hand. They were both walking down a long, dark corridor, between stone columns or, perhaps, statues. Ciri could not make out their forms in the thick darkness. But there was someone there, in that darkness, someone hiding and observing them as they walked. She heard whispers, quiet as the rustle of the wind.

Yennefer was holding her by the hand, walking briskly and assuredly, full of decisiveness, so much so that Ciri could barely keep up with her. Doors opened before them in succession, one after another. An infinite number of doors with gigantic, heavy leaves opened up before them noiselessly.

The darkness thickened. Ciri saw yet another great door in front of her. Yennefer did not slow her stride but Ciri suddenly knew that this door would not open of its own accord. And she suddenly had an overwhelming certainty that this door must not be opened. That she must not go through it. That, behind this door, something was waiting for her . . .

She stopped short, tried to pull away, but Yennefer's hand was strong and unyielding and unrelentingly dragged her forward. And Ciri finally understood that she had been betrayed, deceived, sold out. That, ever since the first meeting, from the very beginning, from the first day, she had been no more than a marionette, a puppet on a string. She tugged harder, tore herself away from that grip. The darkness undulated like smoke and the whispering in the dark, all of a sudden, died away. The magician took a step forward,

stopped, turned round and looked at her.

If you're afraid, turn back.

That door mustn't be opened. You know that.

I do.

But you're still leading me there.

If you're afraid, turn back. You still have time to turn back. It's not too late.

And you?

For me, it is.

Ciri looked around. Despite the omnipresent darkness she saw the door which they had passed through – and a long, distant vista. And there, from a distance, from the darkness, she heard . . .

The clatter of hooves. The grating of black armour. And the flutter of the wings of a bird of prey. And the voice. That quiet voice, boring into her skull . . .

You have made a mistake. You mistook the stars reflected in the surface of the lake at night for the heavens.

She woke and lifted her head abruptly, displacing the compress, fresh because it was still cool and wet. She was drenched in sweat; the dull pain was ringing and throbbing in her temples again. Yennefer was sitting beside on the bed. Her head was turned away so that Ciri did not see her face. She saw only the tempest of black hair.

'I had a dream . . .' whispered Ciri. 'In the dream . . .'

'I know,' the magician said in a strange voice not her own. 'That's why I'm here. I'm beside you.'

Beyond the window, in the darkness, the rain rustled in the leaves of the trees.

'Damn it,' snarled Dandilion, shaking water from the brim of his hat, soggy from the rain. 'It's a veritable fortress, not a house. What's that fraud frightened of, fortifying himself like that?'

Boats and barges moored to the bank rocked lazily on water furrowed by the rain, bumping against each other, creaking and rattling their chains.

'It's the port,' explained Shani. 'There's no shortage of thugs and

scum, both local and just passing through. Quite a few people visit Myhrman, bringing money . . . Everybody knows that. And that he lives alone. So he's secured himself. Are you surprised?'

'Not in the least.' Geralt looked at the mansion built on stakes dug into the bottom of the canal some ten yards from the shore. 'I'm trying to work out how to get to that islet, to that waterside cottage. We'll probably have to borrow one of those boats on the quiet—'

'No need,' said the student of medicine. 'There's a drawbridge.'

'And how are you going to persuade that charlatan to lower it? Besides, there's also the door, and we didn't bring a battering ram with us—'

'Leave it to me.'

An enormous grey owl landed soundlessly on the deck's railing, fluttered its wings, ruffled its feathers and turned into Philippa Eilhart, equally ruffled and wet.

'What am I doing here?' the magician mumbled angrily. 'What am I doing here with you, damn it? Balancing on a wet bar . . . And on the edge of betraying the state. If Dijktra finds out I was helping you . . . And on top of it all, this endless drizzle! I hate flying in the rain. Is this it? This is Myhrman's house?'

'Yes,' confirmed Geralt. 'Listen, Shani, we'll try . . .'

They bunched together and started whispering, concealed in the dark under the eaves of a hut's reed roof. A strip of light fell on the water from the tavern on the opposite side of the canal. Singing, laughter and yelling resounded. Three bargemen rolled out on to the shore. Two were arguing, tugging, shoving each other and repeatedly swearing the same curses to the point of boredom. The third, leaning against a stake, was peeing into the canal and whistling. He was out of tune.

Dong, metallically reverberated the iron sheet tied by a strap to a pole by the deck. *Dong*.

The charlatan Myhrman opened a tiny window and peered out. The lantern in his hand only blinded him, so he set it aside.

'Who the devil is ringing at this time of the night?' he bawled furiously. 'Whack yourself in that empty head of yours, you shit, you lame dick, when you get the urge to knock! Get out, get lost you old soaks, right now! I've got my crossbow at the ready here! Does one of you want six inches of crossbow bolt in their arse?'

'Master Myhrman! It's me, Shani!'

‘Eh?’ The charlatan leaned out further. ‘Miss Shani? Now, in the night? How come?’

‘Lower the bridge, Master Myhrman! I’ve brought you what you asked for!’

‘Right now, in the dark? Couldn’t you do it during the day, miss?’

‘Too many eyes here, during the day.’ A slim outline in a green cloak loomed on the deck. ‘If words gets out about what I’m bringing you they’ll throw me out of the Academy. Lower the bridge, I’m not going to stand around in the rain, I’m soaked!’

‘You’re not alone, miss,’ the charlatan noted suspiciously. ‘You usually come alone. Who’s there with you?’

‘A friend, a student like me. Was I supposed to come alone, at night, to this forsaken neighbourhood of yours? What, you think I don’t value my maidenhood or something? Let me in, damn it!’

Muttering under his breath, Myhrman released the stopper on the winch and the bridge creaked down, hitting the planks of the deck. The old fraud minced to the door and pulled back the bolts and locks. Without putting his crossbow aside, he carefully peered out.

He didn’t notice the fist clad in a black silver-studded glove as it flew towards the side of his head. But although the night was dark, the moon was new and the sky overcast, he suddenly saw ten thousand dazzlingly bright stars.

Toublanc Michelet drew the whetstone over the blade of his sword once more, looking totally engrossed in this activity.

‘So we are to kill one man for you.’ He set the stone aside, wiped the blade with a piece of greased rabbit skin and closely examined the blade. ‘An ordinary fellow who walks around the streets of Oxenfurt by himself, without a guard, an escort or bodyguards. Doesn’t even have any knaves hanging about. We won’t have to clamber into any castles, town halls, mansion houses or garrisons to get at him . . . Is that right, honourable Rience? Have I understood you correctly?’

The man with a face disfigured by a burn nodded, narrowing his moist eyes with their unpleasant expression a little.

‘On top of that,’ Toublanc continued, ‘after killing this fellow we won’t be forced to remain hidden somewhere for the next six months because no one is going to chase or follow us. No one is going to set a posse or reward seekers on us. We won’t get drawn

into any blood feuds or vendettas. In other words, Master Rience, we're to finish off an ordinary, common fool of no importance to you?'

The man with the scar did not reply. Toublanc looked at his brothers sitting motionless and stiff on the bench. Rizzi, Flavius and Lodovico, as usual, said nothing. In the team they formed, it was they who killed, Toublanc who talked. Because only Toublanc had attended the Temple school. He was as efficient at killing as his brothers but he could also read and write. And talk.

'And in order to kill such an ordinary dunce, Master Rience, you're hiring not just any old thug from the port but us, the Michelet brothers? For a hundred Novigrad crowns?'

'That is your usual rate,' drawled the man with the scar, 'correct?'

'Incorrect,' contradicted Toublanc coldly. 'Because we're not for the killing of ordinary fools. But if we do . . . Master Rience, this fool you want to see made a corpse is going to cost you two hundred. Two hundred untrimmed, shining crowns with the stamp of the Novigrad mint on them. Do you know why? Because there's a catch here, honourable sir. You don't have to tell us what it is, we can manage without that. But you will pay for it. Two hundred, I say. You shake on that price and you can consider that no-friend of yours dead. You don't want to agree, find someone else for the job.'

Silence fell in the cellar reeking of mustiness and soured wine. A cockroach, briskly moving its limbs, scudded along the dirt floor. Flavius Michelet, moving his leg in a flash, flattened it with a crunch – hardly changing his position and not changing his expression in the least.

'Agreed,' said Rience. 'You get two hundred. Let's go.'

Toublanc Michelet, professional killer from the age of fourteen, did not betray his surprise with so much as the flicker of an eyelid. He had not counted on being able to bargain for more than a hundred and twenty, a hundred and fifty at the most. Suddenly he was sure that he had named too low a price for the snag hidden in his latest job.

Charlatan Myhrman came to on the floor of his own room. He was lying on his back, trussed up like a sheep. The back of his head was excruciatingly painful and he recalled that, in falling, he had thumped his head on the door-frame. The temple, where he had been struck, also hurt. He could not move because his chest was

being heavily and mercilessly crushed by a high boot fastened with buckles. The old fraud, squinting and wrinkling up his face, looked up. The boot belonged to a tall man with hair as white as milk. Myhrman could not see his face – it was hidden in a darkness not dispersed by the lantern standing on the table.

'Spare my life . . .' he groaned. 'Spare me, I swear by the gods . . . I'll hand you my money . . . Hand you everything . . . I'll show you where it's hidden . . .'

'Where's Rience, Myhrman?'

The charlatan shook at the sound of the voice. He was not a fearful man; there were not many things of which he was afraid. But the voice of the white-haired man contained them all. And a few others in addition.

With a superhuman effort of the will, he overcame the fear crawling in his viscera like some foul insect.

'Huh?' He feigned astonishment. 'What? Who? What did you say?'

The man bent over and Myhrman saw his face. He saw his eyes. And the sight made his stomach slip right down to his rectum.

'Don't beat about the bush, Myhrman, don't twist up your tail.' The familiar voice of Shani, the medical student came from the shadows. 'When I was here three days ago, here, in this high-backed chair, at this table, sat a gentleman in a cloak lined with musk-rat. He was drinking wine, and you never entertain anybody – only the best of friends. He flirted with me, brazenly urged me to go dancing at the Three Little Bells. I even had to slap his hand because he was starting to fondle me, remember ? And you said: "Leave her alone, Master Rience, don't frighten her, I needs must be on good terms with the little academics and do business". And you both chuckled, you and your Master Rience with the burned face. So don't start playing dumb now because you're not dealing with someone dumber than yourself. Talk while you're still being asked politely.'

Oh, you cocksure little student, thought the charlatan. *You treacherous creep, you red-haired hussy, I'm going to find you and pay you back . . . Just let me get myself out of this.*

'What Rience?' he yelped, writhing, trying in vain to free himself from the heel pressing down on his breast-bone. 'And how am I to know who he is and where he is? All sorts come here, what am I—?'

The white-haired man leaned over further, slowly pulling the

dagger from his other boot while pressing down harder on the charlatan's chest with his first.

'Myrhman,' he said quietly, 'believe me or don't – as you like. But if you don't immediately tell me where Rience is . . . If you don't immediately reveal how you contact him . . . Then I will feed you, piece by piece, to the eels in the canal. Starting with your ears.'

There was something in the white-haired man's voice which made the charlatan believe his every word. He stared at the stiletto blade and knew that it was sharper than the knives with which he punctured ulcers and boils. He started to shake so hard that the boot resting on his chest bounced nervously. But he did not say anything. He could not say anything. Not for the time being. Because if Rience were to return and ask why he had betrayed him, Myhrman would have to be able to show him why. *One ear*, he thought, *one ear I have to endure. Then I'll tell him . . .*

'Why waste time and mess about with blood?' A woman's soft alto suddenly resounded from the semi-darkness. 'Why risk him twisting the truth and lying? Allow me to take care of him my way. He'll talk so fast he'll bite his own tongue. Hold him down.'

The charlatan howled and struggled against his fetters but the white-haired man crushed him to the floor with his knee, grabbed him by the hair and twisted his head. Someone knelt down next to them. He smelled perfume and wet bird feathers, felt the touch of fingers on his temple. He wanted to scream but terror choked him – all he managed was a croak.

'You want to scream already?' The soft alto right next to his ear purred like a cat. 'Too soon, Myhrman, too soon. I haven't started yet. But I will in a moment. If evolution has traced any groove at all in your brain then I'm going to plough it somewhat deeper. And then you'll see what a scream can really be.'

'And so,' said Vilgefortz, having heard the report, 'our kings have started to think independently. They have started to plan independently, in an amazingly short time evolving from thinking on a tactical level to a strategic one? Interesting. Not so long ago – at Sodden – all they could do was gallop around with savage cries and swords raised at the van of their company without even looking around to check their company hadn't by chance been left behind, or wasn't galloping in an entirely different direction. And today, there they are – in Hagge Castle – deciding the fate of the world. Interesting. But to be honest, I expected as much.'

‘We know,’ confirmed Artaud Terranova. ‘And we remember, you warned us about it. That’s why we’re telling you about it.’

‘Thank you for remembering,’ smiled the wizard, and Tissaia de Vries was suddenly sure that he had already been aware of each of the facts just presented to him, and had been for a long time. She did not say a word. Sitting upright in her armchair, she evened up her lace cuffs as the left fell a little differently from the right. She felt Terranova’s unfavourable gaze and Vilgefortz’s amused eyes on her. She knew that her legendary pedantism either annoyed or amused everybody. But she did not care in the least.

‘What does the Chapter say to all this?’

‘First of all,’ retorted Terranova, ‘we would like to hear your opinion, Vilgefortz.’

‘First of all,’ smiled the wizard, ‘let us have something to eat and drink. We have enough time – allow me to prove myself a good host. I can see you are frozen through and tired from your journeys. How many changes of portals, if I may ask?’

‘Three.’ Tissaia de Vries shrugged.

‘It was nearer for me,’ added Artaud. ‘Two proved enough. But still complicated, I must admit.’

‘Such foul weather everywhere?’

‘Everywhere.’

‘So let us fortify ourselves with good fare and an old red wine from Cidaris. Lydia, would you be so kind?’

Lydia van Bredevoort, Vilgefortz’s assistant and personal secretary, appeared from behind the curtain like an ethereal phantom and smiled with her eyes at Tissaia de Vries. Tissaia, controlling her face, replied with a pleasant smile and bow of her head. Artaud Terranova stood up and bowed with reverence. He, too, controlled his expression very well. He knew Lydia.

Two servants, bustling around and rustling their skirts, swiftly lay out the tableware, plates and platters. Lydia van Bredevoort, delicately conjuring up a tiny flame between her thumb and index finger, lit the candles in the candelabras. Tissaia saw traces of oil paint on her hand. She filed it in her memory so later, after supper, she could ask the young enchantress to show her her latest work. Lydia was a talented artist.

They supped in silence. Artaud Terranova did not stint himself and reached without embarrassment for the platters and – probably

a little too frequently, and without his host's encouragement – clanged the silver top of the carafe of red wine. Tissaia de Vries ate slowly, devoting more attention to arranging her plates, cutlery and napkins symmetrically – although, in her opinion, they still lay irregularly and hurt her predilection for order and her aesthetic sensibility – than to the fare. She drank sparingly. Vilgefortz ate and drank even more sparingly. Lydia, of course, did not drink or eat at all.

The candle flames undulated in long red and golden whiskers of fire. Drops of rain tinkled against the stained glass of the windows.

'Well, Vilgefortz,' said Terranova finally, rummaging in a platter with his fork in search of an adequately fatty piece of game. 'What is your position regarding our monarchs' behaviour ? Hen Gedymdeith and Francesca sent us here because they want to know your opinion. Tissaia and I are also interested. The Chapter wants to assume a unanimous stand in this matter. And, should it come to action, we also want to act unanimously. So what do you advise?'

'It flatters me greatly' – with a gesture, Vilgefortz thanked Lydia, who was offering to put more broccoli on his plate – 'that my opinion in this matter should be decisive for the Chapter.'

'No one said that.' Artaud poured himself some more wine. 'We're going to make a collective decision anyway, when the Chapter meets. But we wish to let everybody have the opportunity to express themselves beforehand so we can have an idea of all the various views. We're listening, therefore.'

If we've finished supping, let us go through into the workshop, Lydia proposed telepathically, smiling with her eyes. Terranova looked at her smile and quickly downed what he had in his chalice. To the dregs.

'Good idea.' Vilgefortz wiped his fingers on a napkin. 'We'll be more comfortable there. My protection against magical eavesdropping is stronger there, too. Let us go. You can bring the carafe, Artaud.'

'I won't say no. It's my favourite vintage.'

They went through to the workshop. Tissaia could not stop herself from casting an eye over the workbench weighed down with retorts, crucibles, test-tubes, crystals and numerous magical utensils. All were enveloped in a screening spell, but Tissaia de Vries was an Archmage – there was no screen she could not penetrate. And she was a little curious as to what the mage had

been doing of late. She worked out the configuration of the recently used apparatus in a flash. It served for the detection of persons who had disappeared while enabling a psychic vision by means of the ‘crystal, metal, stone’ method. The wizard was either searching for someone or resolving a theoretical, logistical problem. Vilgefortz of Roggeveen was well known for his love of solving such problems.

They sat down in carved ebony armchairs. Lydia glanced at Vilgefortz, caught the sign transmitted by his eye and immediately left. Tissaia sighed imperceptibly.

Everyone knew that Lydia van Bredevoort was in love with Vilgefortz of Roggeveen, that she had loved him for years with a silent, relentless and stubborn love. The wizard, it is to be understood, also knew about this but pretended not to. Lydia made it easier for him by never betraying her feelings to him – she never took the slightest step or made the slightest gesture, transmitted no sign by thought and, even if she could speak, would never have said a word. She was too proud. Vilgefortz, too, did nothing because he did not love Lydia. He could, of course, simply have made her his lover, tied her to him even more strongly and, who knows, maybe even made her happy. There were those who advised him to do so. But Vilgefortz did not. He was too proud and too much a man of principle. The situation, therefore, was hopeless but stable, and this patently satisfied them both.

‘So.’ The young wizard broke the silence. ‘The Chapter are racking their brains about what to do about the initiatives and plans of our kings? Quite unnecessarily. Their plans must simply be ignored.’

‘I beg your pardon?’ Artaud Terranova froze with the chalice in his left hand, the carafe in his right. ‘Did I understand you correctly? We are to do nothing? We’re to let—’

‘We already have,’ interrupted Vilgefortz. ‘Because no one asked us for our permission. And no one will. I repeat, we ought to pretend that we know nothing. That is the only rational thing to do.’

‘The things they have thought up threaten war, and on a grand scale at that.’

‘The things they have thought up have been made known to us thanks to enigmatic and incomplete information, which comes from a mysterious and highly dubious source. So dubious that the word “disinformation” stubbornly comes to mind. And even if it were true, their designs are still at the planning stage and will remain so

for a long while yet. And if they move beyond that stage . . . Well, then we will act accordingly.'

'You mean to say,' Terranova screwed up his face, 'we will dance to the tune they play?'

'Yes, Artaud.' Vilgefortz looked at him and his eyes flashed. 'You will dance to the tune they play. Or you will take leave of the dance-floor. Because the orchestra's podium is too high for you to climb up there and tell the musicians to play some other tune. Realise that at last. If you think another solution is possible, you are making a mistake. You mistake the stars reflected in the surface of the lake at night for the heavens.'

The Chapter will do as he says, disguising his order as advice, thought Tissaia de Vries. *We are all pawns on his chess board. He's moved up, grown, obscured us with his brightness, subordinated us to him. We're pawns in his game. A game the rules of which we do not know.*

Her left cuff had once again arranged itself differently from the right. The enchantress adjusted it with care.

'The kings' plans are already at the stage of practical realisation,' she said slowly. 'In Kaedwen and Aedirn an offensive against the Scoia'tael has begun. The blood of young elves is flowing. It is reaching the point of persecution and pogroms against non-humans. There is talk of an attack on the free elves of Dol Blathanna and the Grey Mountains. This is mass murder. Are we to say to Gedymdeith and Enid Findabair that you advise us to stand idly by, to watch and do nothing? Pretending we can't see anything?'

Vilgefortz turned his head towards her. *Now you're going to change tactics*, thought Tissaia. *You're a player, you can hear which way the dice roll on the table. You're going to change tactics. You're going to strike a different note.*

Vilgefortz did not lower his eyes from hers.

'You are right,' he said curtly. 'You are right, Tissaia. War with Nilfgaard is one thing but we must not look on idly at the massacre of non-humans and do nothing. I suggest we call a convention, a general convention of everyone up to and including Masters of the Third Degree, including those who have been sitting on royal councils since Sodden. At the convention we will make them see reason and order them to keep their monarchs in check.'

'I second this proposition,' said Terranova. 'Let us call a convention and remind them to whom they owe first loyalty. Note

that even some members of our Council now advise kings. The kings are served by Carduin, Philippa Eilhart, Fercart, Radcliffe, Yennefer—'

At the last name Vilgefortz twitched internally. But Tissaia de Vries was an Archmage. Tissaia sensed the thought, the impulse leaping from the workbench and magical apparatus to the two volumes lying on the table. Both books were invisible, enveloped in magic. The magician focused herself and penetrated the screen.

Aen Ithlinnespeath, the prophecy foretold by Ithlinne Aegli aep Aevenien, the elven seeress. The prophecy of the end of civilisation, the prophecy of annihilation, destruction and the return of barbarianism which are to come with the masses of ice pressing down from the borders of the eternal freeze. And the other book . . . Very old . . . Falling apart . . . *Aen Hen Ichaer* . . . The Elder Blood . . . The Blood of Elves?'

'Tissaia? And what do you think?'

'I second it.' The enchantress adjusted her ring which had turned the wrong way round. 'I second Vilgefortz's plan. Let us call a convention. As soon as possible.'

Metal, stone, crystal, she thought. *Are you looking for Yennefer? Why? And what does she have to do with Ithlin's prophecy? Or with the Elder Blood of the Elves? What are you brewing, Vilgefortz?*

I'm sorry, said Lydia van Bredevoort telepathically, coming in without a sound. The wizard stood up.

'Forgive me,' he said, 'but this is urgent. I've been waiting for this letter since yesterday. It will only take a minute.'

Artaud yawned, muffled a belch and reached for the carafe. Tissaia looked at Lydia. Lydia smiled. With her eyes. She could not do so any other way.

The lower half of Lydia van Bredevoort's face was an illusion.

Four years ago, on Vilgefortz's – her master's – recommendation, Lydia had taken part in experiments concerning the properties of an artefact found amongst the excavations of an ancient necropolis. The artefact turned out to be cursed. It activated only once. Of the five wizards taking part in the experiment, three died on the spot. The fourth lost his eyes, both hands and went mad. Lydia escaped with burns, a mangled jaw and a mutation of the larynx and throat which, to this day, effectively resisted all efforts at regeneration. A powerful illusion was therefore drawn so that people did not faint

at the sight of Lydia's face. It was a very strong, very efficiently placed illusion, difficult for even the Chosen Ones to penetrate.

'Hmm . . .' Vilgefortz put the letter aside. 'Thank you, Lydia.'

Lydia smiled. *The messenger is waiting for a reply*, she said.

'There will be no reply.'

I understand. I have given orders to prepare chambers for your guests.

'Thank you. Tissaia, Artaud, I apologise for the short delay. Let us continue. Where were we?'

Nowhere, thought Tissaia de Vries. *But I'm listening carefully to you. Because at some stage you'll finally mention the thing which really interest you.*

'Ah,' began Vilgefortz slowly. 'Now I know what I wanted to say. I'm thinking about those members of the Council who have had the least experience. Fercart and Yennefer. Fercart, as far as I know, is tied to Foltest of Temeria and sits on the king's council with Triss Merigold. But who is Yennefer tied to? You said, Artaud, that she is one of those who are serving kings.'

'Artaud exaggerated,' said Tissaia calmly. 'Yennefer is living in Vengerberg so Demawend sometimes turns to her for help, but they do not work together all the time. It cannot be said for certain that she is serving Demawend.'

'How is her sight? Everything is all right, I hope?'

'Yes. Everything's all right.'

'Good. Very good. I was worried . . . You know, I wanted to contact her but it turned out she had left. No one knew where for.'

Stone, metal, crystal, thought Tissaia de Vries. 'Everything that Yennefer wears is active and cannot be detected using psychic visions. You won't find her that way, my dear. If Yennefer does not wish anyone to know where she is, no one will find out.

'Write to her,' she said calmly, straightening out her cuffs. 'And send the letter in the ordinary way. It will get there without fail. And Yennefer, wherever she is, will reply. She always does.'

'Yennefer,' threw in Artaud, 'frequently disappears, sometimes for entire months. The reasons tend to be quite trivial . . .'

Tissaia looked at him, pursing her lips. The wizard fell silent. Vilgefortz smiled faintly.

'Precisely,' he said. 'That is just what I thought. At one time she

was closely tied to . . . a certain witcher. Geralt, if I'm not mistaken. It seems it wasn't just an ordinary passing affair. It appeared Yennefer was quite strongly involved . . .'

Tissaia de Vries sat up straight and gripped the armrests of her chair.

'Why are you asking about that? They're personal matters. It is none of our business.'

'Of course.' Vilgefortz glanced at the letter lying discarded on the pulpit. 'It is none of our business. But I'm not being guided by unhealthy curiosity but concern about the emotional state of a member of the Council. I am wondering about Yennefer's reaction to the news of . . . of Geralt's death. I presume she would get over it, come to terms with it, without falling into a depression or exaggerated mourning?'

'No doubt, she would,' said Tissaia coldly. 'Especially as such news has been reaching her every now and again – and always proving to be a rumour.'

'That's right,' confirmed Terranova. 'This Geralt, or whatever he's called, knows how to fend for himself. And why be surprised? He is a mutant, a murdering machine, programmed to kill and not let himself be killed. And as for Yennefer, let us not exaggerate her alleged emotions. We know her. She does not give in to emotions. She toyed with the witcher, that's all. She was fascinated with death, which this character constantly courts. And when he finally brings it onto himself, that will be the end of it.'

'For the time being,' remarked Tissaia de Vries dryly, 'the witcher is alive.'

Vilgefortz smiled and once more glanced at the letter lying in front of him.

'Is that so?' he said. 'I don't think so.'

Geralt flinched a little and swallowed hard. The initial shock of drinking the elixir had passed and the second stage was beginning to take effect, as indicated by a faint but unpleasant dizziness which accompanied the adaptation of his sight to darkness.

The adaptation progressed quickly. The deep darkness of the night paled; everything around him started to take on shades of grey, shades which were at first hazy and unclear then increasingly contrasting, distinct and sharp. In the little street leading to the

canal bank which, a moment ago, had been as dark as the inside of a tar barrel, Geralt could now make out the rats roaming through the gutters, and sniffing at puddles and gaps in the walls.

His hearing, too, had been heightened by the witchers' decoction. The deserted tangle of lanes where, only a moment ago, there had been the sound of rain against guttering, began to come to life, to throb with sounds. He heard the cries of cats fighting, dogs barking on the other side of the canal, laughter and shouting from the taprooms and inns of Oxenfurt, yelling and singing from the bargemen's tavern, and the distant, quiet warble of a flute playing a jaunty tune. The dark, sleepy houses came to life as well – Geralt could make out the snoring of slumbering people, the thuds of oxen in enclosures, the snorting of horses in stables. From one of the houses in the depths of the street came the stifled, spasmodic moans of a woman in the throes of lovemaking.

The sounds increased, grew louder. He now made out the obscene lyrics of the carousing songs, learned the name of the moaning woman's lover. From Myhrman's homestead on the canal came the broken, uncoordinated gibberish of the charlatan who had been put, by Philippa Eilhart's treatment, into a state of complete and, no doubt, permanent idiocy.

Dawn was approaching. It had finally stopped raining, a wind started up which blew the clouds away. The sky in the east was clearly paling.

The rats in the lane suddenly grew uneasy, scattered in all directions and hid amongst the crates and rubbish.

The witcher heard footsteps. Four or five men; he could not as yet say exactly how many. He looked up but did not see Philippa.

Immediately he changed tactic. If Rience was amongst those approaching he had little chance of grabbing him. He would first have to fight his escort and he did not want to do so. Firstly, as he was under the influence of the elixir, those men would have to die. Secondly, Rience would then have the opportunity to flee.

The footsteps grew nearer. Geralt emerged from the shadows.

Rience loomed out of the lane. The witcher recognised the sorcerer instantly and instinctively, although he had never seen him before. The burn, a gift from Yennefer, was masked by the shadow of his hood.

He was alone. His escort did not reveal themselves, remaining hidden in the little street. Geralt immediately understood why.

Rience knew who was waiting for him by the charlatan's house. Rience had suspected an ambush, yet he had still come. The witcher realised why. And that was even before he had heard the quiet grating of swords being drawn from their scabbards. *Fine*, he thought. *If that's what you want, fine*.

'It is a pleasure hunting for you,' said Rience quietly. 'You appear where you're wanted of your own accord.'

'The same can be said of you,' calmly retorted the witcher. 'You appeared here. I wanted you here and here you are.'

'You must have pushed Myhrman hard to tell you about the amulet, to show you where it is hidden. And how to activate it to send out a message. But Myhrman didn't know that the amulet informs and warns at the same time, and so he could not have told you even if roasted on red coals. I have distributed a good many of these amulets. I knew that sooner or later you would come across one of them.'

Four men emerged from around a corner of the little street. They moved slowly, deftly and noiselessly. They still kept to the areas of darkness and wielded their drawn swords in such a way as not to be betrayed by a flash of blades. The witcher, obviously, saw them clearly. But he did not reveal the fact. *Fine, murderers*, he thought. *If that's what you want, that's what you'll get.*

'I waited,' continued Rience without moving from the spot, 'and here you are. I intend to finally rid the earth of your burden, you foul changling.'

'You intend? You overrate yourself. You are nothing but a tool. A thug hired by others to deal with their dirty work. Who hired you, stooge?'

'You want to know too much, mutant. You call me a stooge? And do you know what you are? A heap of dung on the road which has to be removed because someone prefers not to soil their boots. No, I am not going to disclose who that person is to you, although I could. But I will tell you something else so you have something to think about on your way to hell. I already know where to find the little bastard you were looking after. And I know where to find that witch of yours, Yennefer. My patrons don't care about her but I bear the whore a personal grudge. As soon as I've finished with you, I'm going after her. I'll see to it that she regrets her tricks with fire. Oh, yes, she is going to regret them. For a very long time.'

'You shouldn't have said that.' The witcher smiled nastily, feeling

the euphoria of battle aroused by the elixir, reacting with adrenalin. ‘Before you said that, you still had a chance to live. Now you don’t.’

A powerful oscillation of his witcher’s medallion warned him of a sudden assault. He jumped aside and, drawing his sword in a flash, deflected and annihilated the violent, paralysing wave of magical energy directed at him with his rune-covered blade. Rience backed away, raised his arm to make a move but at the last moment took fright. Not attempting a second spell, he swiftly retreated down the lane. The witcher could not run after him – the four men who thought they were concealed in the shadows threw themselves at him. Swords flashed.

They were professionals. All four of them. Experienced, skilled professionals working as a team. They came at him in pairs, two on the left, two on the right. In pairs – so that one always covered the other’s back. The witcher chose those on the left. On top of the euphoria produced by the elixir came fury.

The first thug attacked with a feint from dextra only to jump aside and allow the man behind him to execute a deceptive thrust. Geralt spun in a pirouette, evaded and passed by them and with the very tip of his sword slashed the other one from behind across the occiput, shoulders and back. He was angry and hit hard. A fountain of blood spurted on the wall.

The first man backed away with lightning speed, making room for the next pair. These separated for the attack, slashing their swords from two directions in such a way that only one blow could be parried, the other having to meet its aim. Geralt did not parry and, whirling in a pirouette, came between them. In order not to collide, they both had to break their teamed rhythm, their rehearsed steps. One of them managed to turn in a soft, feline feint and leaped away dextrously. The other did not have time. He lost his balance and stumbled backwards. The witcher, turning in a reverse pirouette, used his momentum to slash him across the lower back. He was angry. He felt his sharp witcher’s blade sever the spine. A terrifying howl echoed down the streets. The two remaining men immediately attacked him, showering him with blows which he parried with the greatest of difficulties. He went into a pirouette and tore himself from beneath the flashing blades. But instead of leaning his back against the wall and defending himself, he attacked.

They were not expecting it, did not have time to leap away and apart. One of them countered but the witcher evaded the counterattack, spun, slashed from behind – blindly – counting on

the rush of air. He was angry. He aimed low, at the belly. And hit his mark. He heard a stifled cry but did not have time to look back. The last of the thugs was already at his side, already striking a nasty sinistra with a quarte. Geralt parried at the last moment, statically, without a turn, with a quarte from dextra. The thug, making use of the impetus of the parry, unwound like a spring and slashed from a half-turn, wide and hard. Too hard. Geralt was already spinning. The killer's blade, considerably heavier than the witcher's, cut the air and the thug had to follow the blow. The impetus caused him to turn. Geralt slipped out of the half-turn just beside him, very close. He saw his contorted face, his horrified eyes. He was angry. He struck. Short but powerful. And sure. Right in the eyes.

He heard Shani's terrified scream as she tried to pull herself free of Dandilion on the bridge leading to the charlatan's house.

Rience retreated into the depths of the lane, raising and spreading both arms in front of him, a magical light already beginning to exude from them. Geralt grasped his sword with both hands and without second thoughts ran towards him. The sorcerer's nerves could not take it. Without completing his spell, he began to run away, yelling incomprehensibly. But Geralt understood. He knew that Rience was calling for help. Begging for help.

And help arrived. The little street blazed with a bright light and on the dilapidated, sullied walls of a house, flared the fiery oval of a portal. Rience threw himself towards it. Geralt jumped. He was furious.

Toublanc Michelet groaned and curled up, clutching his riven belly. He felt the blood draining from him, flowing rapidly through his fingers. Not far from him lay Flavius. He had still been twitching a moment ago, but now he lay motionless. Toublanc squeezed his eyelids shut, then opened them. But the owl sitting next to Flavius was clearly not a hallucination – it did not disappear. He groaned again and turned his head away.

Some wench, a young one judging by her voice, was screaming hysterically.

'Let me go! There are wounded there! I've got to . . . I'm a medical student, Dandilion! Let me go, do you hear?'

'You can't help them,' replied Dandilion in a dull voice. 'Not after a witcher's sword . . . Don't even go there. Don't look . . . I beg you, Shani, don't look.'

Toublanc felt someone kneel next to him. He detected the scent of perfume and wet feathers. He heard a quiet, gentle, soothing voice. It was hard to make out the words, the annoying screams and sobs of the young wench interfered. Of that . . . medical student. But if it was the medical student who was yelling then who was kneeling next to him? Toublanc groaned.

'. . . be all right. Everything will be all right.'

'The son . . . of . . . a . . . bitch,' he grunted. 'Rience . . . He told us . . . An ordinary fool . . . But it . . . was a witcher . . . Caa . . . tch . . . Heee . . . elp . . . My . . . guts . . .'

'Quiet, quiet, my son. Keep calm. It's all right. It doesn't hurt any more. Isn't that right, it doesn't hurt? Tell me who called you up here? Who introduced you to Rience? Who recommended him? Who got you into this? Tell me, please, my son. And then everything will be all right. You'll see, it'll be all right. Tell me, please.'

Toublanc tasted blood in his mouth. But he did not have the strength to spit it out. His cheek pressing into the wet earth, he opened his mouth and blood poured out.

He no longer felt anything.

'Tell me,' the gentle voice kept repeating. 'Tell me, my son.'

Toublanc Michelet, professional murderer since the age of fourteen, closed his eyes and smiled a bloodied smile. And whispered what he knew.

And when he opened his eyes, he saw a stiletto with a narrow blade and a tiny golden hilt.

'Don't be frightened,' said the gentle voice as the point of the stiletto touched his temple. 'This won't hurt.'

Indeed, it did not hurt.

He caught up with the sorcerer at the last moment, just in front of the portal. Having already thrown his sword aside, his hands were free and his fingers, extended in a leap, dug into the edge of Rience's cloak. Rience lost his balance; the tug had bent him backwards, forcing him to totter back. He struggled furiously, violently ripped the cloak from clasp to clasp and freed himself. Too late.

Geralt spun him round by hitting him in the shoulder with his

right hand, then immediately struck him in the neck under the ear with his left. Rience reeled but did not fall. The witcher, jumping softly, caught up with him and forcefully dug his fist under his ribs. The sorcerer moaned and drooped over the fist. Geralt grabbed him by the front of his doublet, spun him and threw him to the ground. Pressed down by the witcher's knee, Rience extended his arm and opened his mouth to cast a spell. Geralt clenched his fist and thumped him from above. Straight in the mouth. His lips split like blackcurrants.

'You've already received a present from Yennefer,' he uttered in a hoarse voice. 'Now you're getting one from me.'

He struck once more. The sorcerer's head bounced up; blood spurted onto the witcher's forehead and cheeks. Geralt was slightly surprised – he had not felt any pain but had, no doubt, been injured in the fight. It was his blood. He did not bother nor did he have time to look for the wound and take care of it. He unclenched his fist and walloped Rience once more. He was angry.

'Who sent you? Who hired you?'

Rience spat blood at him. The witcher struck him yet again.

'Who?'

The fiery oval of the portal flared more strongly; the light emanating from it flooded the entire lane. The witcher felt the power throbbing from the oval, had felt it even before his medallion had begun to oscillate violently, in warning.

Rience also felt the energy streaming from the portal, sensed help approaching. He yelled, struggling like an enormous fish. Geralt buried his knees in the sorcerer's chest, raised his arm, forming the Sign of Aard with his fingers, and aimed at the flaming portal. It was a mistake.

No one emerged from the portal. Only power radiated from it and Rience had taken the power.

From the sorcerer's outstretched fingers grew six-inch steel spikes. They dug into Geralt's chest and shoulder with an audible crack. Energy exploded from the spikes. The witcher threw himself backwards in a convulsive leap. The shock was such that he felt and heard his teeth, clenched in pain, crunch and break. At least two of them.

Rience attempted to rise but immediately collapsed to his knees again and began to struggle to the portal on all fours. Geralt,

catching his breath with difficulty, drew a stiletto from his boot. The sorcerer looked back, sprung up and reeled. The witcher was also reeling but he was quicker. Rience looked back again and screamed. Geralt gripped the knife. He was angry. Very angry.

Something grabbed him from behind, overpowered him, immobilised him. The medallion on his neck pulsated acutely; the pain in his wounded shoulder throbbed spasmodically.

Some ten paces behind him stood Philippa Eilhart. From her raised arms emanated a dull light – two streaks, two rays. Both were touching his back, squeezing his arms with luminous pliers. He struggled, in vain. He could not move from the spot. He could only watch as Rience staggered up to the portal, which pulsated with a milky glow.

Rience, in no hurry, slowly stepped into the light of the portal, sank into it like a diver, blurred and disappeared. A second later, the oval went out, for a moment plunging the little street into impenetrable, dense, velvety blackness.

Somewhere in the lanes fighting cats yowled. Geralt looked at the blade of the sword he had picked up on his way towards the magician.

'Why, Philippa? Why did you do it?'

The magician took a step back. She was still holding the knife which a moment earlier had penetrated Toublanc Michelet's skull.

'Why are you asking? You know perfectly well.'

'Yes,' he agreed. 'Now I know.'

'You're wounded, Geralt. You can't feel the pain because you're intoxicated with the witchers' elixir but look how you're bleeding. Have you calmed down sufficiently for me to safely approach and take a look at you? Bloody hell, don't look at me like that! And don't come near me. One more step and I'll be forced to . . . Don't come near me! Please! I don't want to hurt you but if you come near—'

'Philippa!' shouted Dandilion, still holding the weeping Shani. 'Have you gone mad?'

'No,' said the witcher with some effort. 'She's quite sane. And knows perfectly well what she's doing. She knew all along what she was doing. She took advantage of us. Betrayed us. Deceived—'

‘Calm down,’ repeated Philippa Eilhart. ‘You won’t understand and you don’t have to understand. I did what I had to do. And don’t call me a traitor. Because I did this precisely so as not to betray a cause which is greater than you can imagine. A great and important cause, so important that minor matters have to be sacrificed for it without second thoughts, if faced with such a choice. Geralt, damn it, we’re nattering and you’re standing in a pool of blood. Calm down and let Shani and me take care of you.’

‘She’s right!’ shouted Dandilion, ‘you’re wounded, damn it! Your wound has to be dressed and we’ve got to get out of here! You can argue later!’

‘You and your great cause . . .’ The witcher, ignoring the troubadour, staggered forward. ‘Your great cause, Philippa, and your choice, is a wounded man, stabbed in cold blood once he told you what you wanted to know, but what I wasn’t to find out. Your great cause is Rience, whom you allowed to escape so that he wouldn’t by any chance reveal the name of his patron. So that he can go on murdering. Your great cause is those corpses which did not have to be. Sorry, I express myself poorly. They’re not corpses, they’re minor matters!’

‘I knew you wouldn’t understand.’

‘Indeed, I don’t. I never will. But I do know what it’s about. Your great causes, your wars, your struggle to save the world . . . Your end which justifies the means . . . Prick up your ears, Philippa. Can you hear those voices, that yowling? Those are cats fighting for a great cause. For indivisible mastery over a heap of rubbish. It’s no joking matter – blood is being spilled and clumps of fur are flying. It’s war. But I care incredibly little about either of these wars, the cats’ or yours.’

‘That’s only what you imagine,’ hissed the magician. ‘All this is going to start concerning you – and sooner than you think. You’re standing before necessity and choice. You’ve got yourself mixed up in destiny, my dear, far more than you’ve bargained for. You thought you were taking a child, a little girl, into your care. You were wrong. You’ve taken in a flame which could at any moment set the world alight. Our world. Yours, mine, that of the others. And you will have to choose. Like I did. Like Triss Merigold. Choose, as your Yennefer had to. Because Yennefer has already chosen. Your destiny is in her hands, witcher. You placed it in those hands yourself.’

The witcher staggered. Shani yelled and tore herself away from

Dandilion. Geralt held her back with a gesture, stood upright and looked straight into the dark eyes of Philippa Eilhart.

‘My destiny,’ he said with effort. ‘My choice . . . I’ll tell you, Philippa, what I’ve chosen. I won’t allow you to involve Ciri in your dirty machinations. I am warning you. Whoever dares harm Ciri will end up like those four lying there. I won’t swear an oath. I have nothing by which to swear. I simply warn you. You accused me of being a bad guardian, that I don’t know how to protect the child. I will protect her. As best I can. I will kill. I will kill mercilessly . . .’

‘I believe you,’ said the magician with a smile. ‘I believe you will. But not today, Geralt. Not now. Because in a minute you’re going to faint from loss of blood. Shani, are you ready?’

No one is born a wizard. We still know too little about genetics and the mechanisms of heredity. We sacrifice too little time and means on research. Unfortunately, we constantly try to pass on inherited magical abilities in, so to say, a natural way. Results of these pseudo-experiments can be seen all too often in town gutters and within temple walls. We see too many of them, and too frequently come across morons and women in a catatonic state, dribbling seers who soil themselves, seeresses, village oracles and miracle-workers, cretins whose minds are degenerate due to the inherited, uncontrolled Force.

These morons and cretins can also have offspring, can pass on abilities and thus degenerate further. Is anyone in a position to foresee or describe how the last link in such a chain will look?

Most of us wizards lose the ability to procreate due to somatic changes and dysfunction of the pituitary gland. Some wizards – usually women – attune to magic while still maintaining efficiency of the gonads. They can conceive and give birth – and have the audacity to consider this happiness and a blessing. But I repeat: no one is born a wizard. And no one should be born one! Conscious of the gravity of what I write, I answer the question posed at the Congress in Cidaris. I answer most emphatically: each one of us must decide what she wants to be – a wizard or a mother.

I demand all apprentices be sterilised. Without exception.

Tissaia de Vries, *The Poisoned Source*

CHAPTER SEVEN

'I'm going to tell you something,' said Iola the Second suddenly, resting the basket of grain on her hip. 'There's going to be a war. That's what the duke's greeve who came to fetch the cheeses said.'

'A war?' Ciri shoved her hair back from her forehead. 'With who? Nilfgaard?'

'I didn't hear,' the novice admitted. 'But the greeve said our duke had received orders from King Foltest himself. He's sending out a call to arms and all the roads are swarming with soldiers. Oh dear! What's going to happen?'

'If there's going to be a war,' said Eurneid, 'then it'll most certainly be with Nilfgaard. Who else? Again! Oh gods, that's terrible!'

'Aren't you exaggerating a bit with this war, Iola?' Ciri scattered

some grains for the chickens and guinea-hens crowding around them in a busy, noisy whirl. ‘Maybe it’s only another raid on the Scoia’tael?’

‘Mother Nenneke asked the greeve the same thing,’ declared Iola the Second. ‘And the greeve said that no, this time it wasn’t about the Squirrels. Castles and citadels have apparently been ordered to store supplies in case of a siege. But elves attack in forests, they don’t lay siege to castles! The greeve asked whether the Temple could give more cheese and other things. For the castle stores. And he demanded goose feathers. They need a lot of goose feathers, he said. For arrows. To shoot from bows, understand ? Oh, gods! We’re going to have masses of work! You’ll see! We’ll be up to our ears in work!’

‘Not all of us,’ said Eurneid scathingly. ‘Some aren’t going to get their little hands dirty. Some of us only work two days a week. They don’t have any time for work because they are, apparently, studying witchery. But in actual fact they’re probably only idling or skipping around the park thrashing weeds with a stick. You know who I’m talking about, Ciri, don’t you?’

‘Ciri will leave for the war no doubt,’ giggled Iola the Second. ‘After all, she is apparently the daughter of a knight! And herself a great warrior with a terrible sword! At last she’ll be able to cut real heads off instead of nettles!’

‘No, she is a powerful wizard!’ Eurneid wrinkled her little nose. ‘She’s going to change all our enemies into field mice. Ciri! Show us some amazing magic. Make yourself invisible or make the carrots ripen quicker. Or do something so that the chickens can feed themselves. Well, go on, don’t make us ask! Cast a spell!’

‘Magic isn’t for show,’ said Ciri angrily. ‘Magic is not some street market trick.’

‘But of course, of course,’ laughed the novice. ‘Not for show. Eh, Iola? It’s exactly as if I were hearing that hag Yennefer talk!’

‘Ciri is getting more and more like her,’ appraised Iola, sniffing ostentatiously. ‘She even smells like her. Huh, no doubt some magical scent made of mandrake or ambergris. Do you use magical scents, Ciri?’

‘No! I use soap! Something you rarely use!’

‘Oh ho.’ Eurneid twisted her lips. ‘What sarcasm, what spite! And what airs!’

‘She never used to be like this,’ Iola the Second puffed up. ‘She became like this when she started spending time with that witch. She sleeps with her, eats with her, doesn’t leave her side. She’s practically stopped attending lessons at the Temple and no longer has a moment to spare for us!’

‘And we have to do all the work for her! Both in the kitchen and in the garden! Look at her little hands, Iola! Like a princess!’

‘That’s the way it is!’ squeaked Ciri. ‘Some have brains, so they get a book! Others are feather-brained, so they get a broom!’

‘And you only use a broom for flying, don’t you? Pathetic wizard!’

‘You’re stupid!’

‘Stupid yourself!’

‘No, I’m not!’

‘Yes, you are! Come on, Iola, don’t pay any attention to her. Sorceresses are not our sort of company.’

‘Of course they aren’t!’ yelled Ciri and threw the basket of grain on the ground. ‘Chickens are your sort of company!’

The novices turned up their noses and left, passing through the hoard of cackling fowl.

Ciri cursed loudly, repeating a favourite saying of Vesemir’s which she did not entirely understand. Then she added a few words she had heard Yarpen Zigrin use, the meanings of which were a total mystery to her. With a kick, she dispersed the chickens swarming towards the scattered grain, picked up the basket, turned it upside down, then twirled in a witcher’s pirouette and threw the basket like a discus over the reed roof of the henhouse. She turned on her heel and set off through the Temple park at a run.

She ran lightly, skilfully controlling her breath. At every other tree she passed, she made an agile half-turn leap, marking slashes with an imaginary sword and immediately following them with dodges and feints she had learned. She jumped deftly over the fence, landing surely and softly on bent knees.

‘Jarre!’ she shouted, turning her head up towards a window gaping in the stone wall of the tower. ‘Jarre, are you there? Hey! It’s me!’

‘Ciri?’ The boy leaned out. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘Can I come up and see you?’

‘Now? Hmm . . . Well, all right then . . . Please do.’

She flew up the stairs like a hurricane, catching the novice unexpectedly just as, with his back turned, he was quickly adjusting his clothes and hiding some parchments on the table under other parchments. Jarre ran his fingers through his hair, cleared his throat and bowed awkwardly. Ciri slipped her thumbs into her belt and tossed her ashen fringe.

‘What’s this war everybody’s talking about?’ she fired. ‘I want to know!’

‘Please, have a seat.’

She cast her eyes around the chamber. There were four large tables piled with large books and scrolls. There was only one chair. Also piled high.

‘War?’ mumbled Jarre. ‘Yes, I’ve heard those rumours . . . Are you interested in it? You, a g—? No, don’t sit on the table, please, I’ve only just got all the documents in order . . . Sit on the chair. Just a moment, wait, I’ll take those books . . . Does Lady Yennefer know you’re here?’

‘No.’

‘Hmm . . . Or Mother Nenneke?’

Ciri pulled a face. She knew what he meant. The sixteen-year-old Jarre was the high priestess’s ward, being prepared by her to be a cleric and chronicler. He lived in Ellander where he worked as a scribe at the municipal tribunal, but he spent more time in Melitele’s sanctuary than in the town, studying, copying and illuminating volumes in the Temple library for whole days and sometimes even nights. Ciri had never heard it from Nenneke’s lips but it was well known that the high priestess absolutely did not want Jarre to hang around her young novices. And vice-versa. But the novices, however, did sneak keen glances at the boy and chatted freely, discussing the various possibilities presented by the presence on the Temple grounds of something which wore trousers. Ciri was amazed because Jarre was the exact opposite of everything which, in her eyes, should represent an attractive male. In Cintra, as she remembered, an attractive man was one whose head reached the ceiling, whose shoulders were as broad as a doorway, who swore like a dwarf, roared like a buffalo and stank at thirty paces of horses, sweat and beer, regardless of what time of day or night it was. Men who did not correspond to this description were not recognised by Queen Calanthe’s chambermaids as worthy of sighs

and gossip. Ciri had also seen a number of different men – the wise and gentle druids of Angren, the tall and gloomy settlers of Sodden, the witchers of Kaer Morhen. Jarre was different. He was as skinny as a stick-insect, ungainly, wore clothes which were too large and smelled of ink and dust, always had greasy hair and on his chin, instead of stubble, there were seven or eight long hairs, about half of which sprang from a large wart. Truly, Ciri did not understand why she was so drawn to Jarre's tower. She enjoyed talking to him, the boy knew a great deal and she could learn much from him. But recently, when he looked at her, his eyes had a strange, dazed and cloying expression.

'Well.' She grew impatient. 'Are you going to tell me or not?'

'There's nothing to say. There isn't going to be any war. It's all gossip.'

'Aha,' she snorted. 'And so the duke is sending out a call to arms just for fun? The army is marching the highways out of boredom? Don't twist things, Jarre. You visit the town and castle, you must know something!'

'Why don't you ask Lady Yennefer about it?'

'Lady Yennefer has more important things to worry about!' Ciri spat, but then immediately had second thoughts, smiled pleasantly and fluttered her eyelashes. 'Oh, Jarre, tell me, please! You're so clever! You can talk so beautifully and learnedly, I could listen to you for hours! Please, Jarre!'

The boy turned red and his eyes grew unfocused and bleary. Ciri sighed surreptitiously.

'Hmm . . .' Jarre shuffled from foot to foot and moved his arms undecidedly, evidently not knowing what to do with them. 'What can I tell you? It's true, people are gossiping in town, all excited by the events in Dol Angra . . . But there isn't going to be a war. That's for sure. You can believe me.'

'Of course, I can,' she snorted. 'But I'd rather know what you base this certainty on. You don't sit on the duke's council, as far as I know. And if you were made a voivode yesterday, then do tell me about it. I'll congratulate you.'

'I study historical treatises,' Jarre turned crimson, 'and one can learn more from them than sitting on a council. I've read *The History of War* by Marshal Pelligram, Duke de Ruyter's *Strategy*, Bronibor's *The Victorious Deeds of Redania's Gallant Cavalrymen* . . . And I know enough about the present political situation to be able

to draw conclusions through analogy. Do you know what an analogy is?'

'Of course,' lied Ciri, picking a blade of grass from the buckle of her shoe.

'If the history of past wars' – the boy stared at the ceiling – 'were to be laid over present political geography, it is easy to gauge that minor border incidents, such as the one in Dol Angra, are fortuitous and insignificant. You, as a student of magic, must, no doubt, be acquainted with the present political geography?'

Ciri did not reply. Lost in thought, she skimmed through the parchments lying on the table and turned a few pages of the huge leather-bound volume.

'Leave that alone. Don't touch it.' Jarre was worried. 'It's an exceptionally valuable and unique work.'

'I'm not going to eat it.'

'Your hands are dirty.'

'They're cleaner than yours. Listen, do you have any maps here?'

'I do, but they're hidden in the chest,' said the boy quickly, but seeing Ciri pull a face, he sighed, pushed the scrolls of parchment off the chest, lifted the lid and started to rummage through the contents. Ciri, wriggling in the chair and swinging her legs, carried on flicking through the book. From between the pages suddenly slipped a loose page with a picture of a woman, completely naked with her hair curled into ringlets, entangled in an embrace with a completely naked bearded man. Her tongue sticking out, the girl spent a long time turning the etching around, unable to make out which way up it should be. She finally spotted the most important detail in the picture and giggled. Jarre, walking up with an enormous scroll under his arm, blushed violently, took the etching from her without a word and hid it under the papers strewn across the table.

'An exceptionally valuable and unique work,' she gibed. 'Are those the analogies you're studying? Are there any more pictures like that in there? Interesting, the book is called *Healing and Curing*. I'd like to know what diseases are cured that way.'

'You can read the First Runes?' The boy was surprised and cleared his throat with embarrassment. 'I didn't know . . .'

'There's still a lot you don't know.' She turned up her nose. 'And what do you think? I'm not just some novice feeding hens for eggs. I

am . . . a wizard. Well, go on. Show me that map!'

They both knelt on the floor, holding down the stiff sheet, which was stubbornly trying to roll up again, with their hands and knees. Ciri finally weighed down one corner with a chair leg and Jarre pressed another down with a hefty book entitled *The Life and Deeds of Great King Radovid*.

'Hmm . . . This map is so unclear! I can't make head or tail of it . . . Where are we? Where is Ellander?'

'Here.' He pointed. 'Here is Temeria, this space. Here is Wyzima, our King Foltest's capital. Here, in Pontar Valley, lies the duchy of Ellander. And here . . . Yes, here is our Temple.'

'And what's this lake? There aren't any lakes around here.'

'That isn't a lake. It's an ink blot . . .'

'Ah. And here . . . This is Cintra. Is that right?'

'Yes. South of Transriver and Sodden. This way, here, flows the River Yaruga, flowing into the sea right at Cintra. That country, I don't know if you know, is now dominated by the Nilfgaardians—'

'I do know,' she cut him short, clenching her fist. 'I know very well. And where is this Nilfgaard? I can't see a country like that here. Doesn't it fit on this map of yours, or what? Get me a bigger one!'

'Hmm . . .' Jarre scratched the wart on his chin. 'I don't have any maps like that . . . But I do know that Nilfgaard is somewhere further towards the south . . . There, more or less there. I think.'

'So far?' Ciri was surprised, her eyes fixed on the place on the floor which he indicated. 'They've come all the way from there? And on the way conquered those other countries?'

'Yes, that's true. They conquered Metinna, Maecht, Nazair, Ebbing, all the kingdoms south of the Amell Mountains. Those kingdoms, like Cintra and Upper Sodden, the Nilfgaardians now call the Provinces. But they didn't manage to dominate Lower Sodden, Verden and Brugge. Here, on the Yaruga, the armies of the Four Kingdoms held them back, defeating them in battle—'

'I know, I studied history.' Ciri slapped the map with her open palm. 'Well, Jarre, tell me about the war. We're kneeling on political geography. Draw conclusions through analogy and through anything you like. I'm all ears.'

The boy blushed, then started to explain, pointing to the

appropriate regions on the map with the tip of a quill.

‘At present, the border between us and the South – dominated by Nilfgaard – is demarcated, as you can see, by the Yaruga River. It constitutes an obstacle which is practically insurmountable. It hardly ever freezes over, and during the rainy season it can carry so much water that its bed is almost a mile wide. For a long stretch, here, it flows between precipitous, inaccessible banks, between the rocks of Mahakam . . .’

‘The land of dwarves and gnomes?’

‘Yes. And so the Yaruga can only be crossed here, in its lower reaches, in Sodden, and here, in its middle reaches, in the valley of Dol Angra . . .’

‘And it was exactly in Dol Angra, that inci—Incident?’

‘Wait. I’m just explaining to you that, at the moment, no army could cross the Yaruga River. Both accessible valleys, those along which armies have marched for centuries, are very heavily manned and defended, both by us and by Nilfgaard. Look at the map. Look how many strongholds there are. See, here is Verden, here is Brugge, here the Isles of Skellige . . .’

‘And this, what is this? This huge white mark?’

Jarre moved closer; she felt the warmth of his knee.

‘Brokilon Forest,’ he said, ‘is forbidden territory. The kingdom of forest dryads. Brokilon also defends our flank. The dryads won’t let anyone pass. The Nilfgaardians either . . .’

‘Hmm . . .’ Ciri leaned over the map. ‘Here is Aedirn . . . And the town of Vengerberg . . . Jarre! Stop that immediately!’

The boy abruptly pulled his lips away from her hair and went as red as a beetroot.

‘I do not wish you to do that to me!’

‘Ciri, I—’

‘I came to you with a serious matter, as a wizard to a scholar,’ she said icily and with dignity, in a tone of voice which exactly copied that of Yennefer. ‘So behave!’

The ‘scholar’ blushed an even deeper shade and had such a stupid expression on his face that the ‘wizard’ could barely keep herself from laughing. He leaned over the map once more.

‘All this geography of yours,’ she continued, ‘hasn’t led to

anything yet. You're telling me about the Yaruga River but the Nilfgaardians have, after all, already crossed to the other side once. What's stopping them now?'

'That time,' hawked Jarre, wiping the sweat which had all of a sudden appeared on his brow, 'they only had Brugge, Sodden and Temeria against them. Now, we're united in an alliance. Like at the battle of Sodden. The Four Kingdoms. Temeria, Redania, Aedirn and Kaedwen . . .'

'Kaedwen,' said Ciri proudly. 'Yes, I know what that alliance is based on. King Henselt of Kaedwen offers special, secret aid to King Demawend of Aedirn. That aid is transported in barrels. And when King Demawend suspects someone of being a traitor, he puts stones in the barrels. Sets a trap—'

She broke off, recalling that Geralt had forbidden her to mention the events in Kaedwen. Jarre stared at her suspiciously.

'Is that so? And how can you know all that?'

'I read about it in a book written by Marshal Pelican,' she snorted. 'And in other analogies. Tell me what happened in Dol Angra or whatever it's called. But first, show me where it is.'

'Here. Dol Angra is a wide valley, a route leading from the south to the kingdoms of Lyria and Rivia, to Aedirn, and further to Dol Blathanna and Kaedwen . . . And through Pontar Valley to us, to Temeria.'

'And what happened there?'

'There was fighting. Apparently. I don't know much about it, but that's what they're saying at the castle.'

'If there was fighting,' frowned Ciri, 'there's a war already! So what are you talking about?'

'It's not the first time there's been fighting,' clarified Jarre, but the girl saw that he was less and less sure of himself. 'Incidents at the border are very frequent. But they're insignificant.'

'And how come?'

'The forces are balanced. Neither we nor the Nilfgaardians can do anything. And neither of the sides can give their opponent a *casus belli—'*

'Give what?'

'A reason for war. Understand? That's why the armed incidents in Dol Angra are most certainly fortuitous matters, probably attacks by

brigands or skirmishes with smugglers . . . In no way can they be the work of regular armies, neither ours nor those of Nilfgaard . . . Because that would be precisely a *casus belli* . . .'

'Aha. Jarre, tell me—'

She broke off. She raised her head abruptly, quickly touched her temples with her fingers and frowned.

'I've got to go,' she said. 'Lady Yennefer is calling me.'

'You can hear her?' The boy was intrigued. 'At a distance? How . . .'

'I've got to go,' she repeated, getting to her feet and brushing the dust off her knees. 'Listen, Jarre. I'm leaving with Lady Yennefer, on some very important matters. I don't know when we'll be back. I warn you they are secret matters which concern only wizards, so don't ask any questions.'

Jarre also stood up. He adjusted his clothing but still did not know what to do with his hands. His eyes glazed over sickeningly.

'Ciri . . .'

'What?'

'I . . . I . . .'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' she said impatiently, glaring at him with her huge, emerald eyes. 'Nor do you, obviously. I'm off. Take care, Jarre.'

'Goodbye . . . Ciri. Have a safe journey. I'll . . . I'll be thinking of you . . .'.

Ciri sighed.

'I'm here, Lady Yennefer!'

She flew into the chamber like a shot from a catapult and the door thumped open, slamming against the wall. She could have broken her legs on the stool standing in her way but Ciri jumped over it deftly, gracefully executed a half-pirouette feigning the slash of a sword, and joyfully laughed at her successful trick. Despite running briskly, she did not pant but breathed evenly and calmly. She had mastered breath control to perfection.

'I'm here!' she repeated.

'At last. Get undressed, and into the tub. Quick.'

The enchantress did not look round, did not turn away from the table, looked at Ciri in the mirror. Slowly. She combed her damp, black curls which straightened under the pressure of the comb only to spring back a moment later into shiny waves.

The girl unbuckled her boots in a flash, kicked them off, freed herself of her clothes and with a splash landed in the tub. Grabbing the soap, she started to energetically scrub her forearms.

Yennefer sat motionless, staring at the window and toying with her comb. Ciri snorted, spluttered and spat because soap had got into her mouth. She tossed her head wondering whether a spell existed which could make washing possible without water, soap and wasting time.

The magician put the comb aside but, lost in thought, kept gazing through the window at the swarms of ravens and crows croaking horrifically as they flew east. On the table, next to the mirror and an impressive array of bottled cosmetics, lay several letters. Ciri knew that Yennefer had been waiting for them a long time and that the day on which they were to leave the Temple depended on her receiving these letters. In spite of what she had told Jarre, the girl had no idea where and why they were leaving. But in those letters . . .

Splashing with her left hand so as to mislead, she arranged the fingers of her right in a gesture, concentrated on a formula, fixed her eyes on the letters and sent out an impulse.

‘Don’t you even dare,’ said Yennefer, without turning around.

‘I thought . . .’ She cleared her throat. ‘I thought one of them might be from Geralt . . .’

‘If it was, I’d have given it to you.’ The magician turned in her chair and sat facing her. ‘Are you going to be long washing?’

‘I’ve finished.’

‘Get up, please.’

Ciri obeyed. Yennefer smiled faintly.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘you’ve finished with childhood. You’ve rounded out where necessary. Lower your hands. I’m not interested in your elbows. Well, well, don’t blush, no false shyness. It’s your body, the most natural thing in the world. And the fact that you’re developing is just as natural. If your fate had turned out differently . . . If it weren’t for the war, you’d have long been the wife of some duke or prince. You realise that, don’t you? We’ve discussed matters

concerning your gender often enough and in enough detail for you to know that you're already a woman. Physiologically, that is to say. Surely you've not forgotten what we talked about?'

'No. I haven't.'

'When you visit Jarre I hope there aren't any problems with your memory either?'

Ciri lowered her eyes, but only momentarily. Yennefer did not smile.

'Dry yourself and come here,' she said coolly. 'No splashing, please.'

Wrapped in a towel, Ciri sat down on the small chair at the magician's knees. Yennefer brushed the girl's hair, every now and again snipping off a disobedient wisp with a pair of scissors.

'Are you angry with me?' asked the girl reluctantly. 'For, for . . . going to the tower?'

'No. But Nenneke doesn't like it. You know that.'

'But I haven't . . . I don't care about Jarre in the least.' Ciri blushed a little. 'I only . . .'

'Exactly,' muttered the enchantress. 'You only. Don't play the child because you're not one any more, let me remind you. That boy slobbers and stammers at the sight of you. Can't you see that?'

'That's not my fault! What am I supposed to do?'

Yennefer stopped combing Ciri's hair and measured her with a deep, violet gaze.

'Don't toy with him. It's base.'

'But I'm not toying with him! I'm only talking to him!'

'I'd like to believe,' the enchantress said as she snipped her scissors, cutting yet another wisp of hair which would not allow itself to be styled for anything in the world, 'that during these conversations, you remember what I asked you.'

'I remember, I remember!'

'He's an intelligent and bright boy. One or two inadvertent words could lead him on the right track, to matters he should know nothing about. No one, absolutely no one must find out who you are.'

'I remember,' repeated Ciri. 'I haven't squealed a word to anyone, you can be sure of that. Tell me, is that why we have to leave so

suddenly? Are you afraid that someone's going to find out I'm here? Is that why?'

'No. There are other reasons.'

'Is it because . . . there might be a war? Everybody's talking about another war! Everybody's talking about it, Lady Yennefer.'

'Indeed,' the magician confirmed coolly, snipping her scissors just above Ciri's ear. 'It's a subject which belongs to the so-called interminable category. There's been talk about wars in the past, there is talk now and there always will be. And not without reason – there have been wars and there will be wars. Lower your head.'

'Jarre said . . . that there's not going to be a war with Nilfgaard. He spoke of some sort of analogies . . . Showed me a map. I don't know what to think myself any more. I don't know what these analogies are, probably something terribly clever . . . Jarre reads various learned books and knows it all, but I think . . .'

'It interests me, what you think, Ciri.'

'In Cintra . . . That time . . . Lady Yennefer, my grandmother was much cleverer than Jarre. King Eist was clever, too. He sailed the seas, saw everything, even a narwhal and sea serpent, and I bet he also saw many an analogy. And so what? Suddenly they appeared, the Nilfgaardians . . .'

Ciri raised her head and her voice stuck in her throat. Yennefer put her arms around her and hugged her tightly.

'Unfortunately,' she said quietly, 'unfortunately, you're right, my ugly one. If the ability to make use of experience and draw conclusions decided, we would have forgotten what war is a long time ago. But those whose goal is war have never been held back, nor will be, by experience or analogy.'

'So . . . It's true, after all. There is going to be a war. Is that why we have to leave?'

'Let's not talk about it. Let's not worry too soon.'

Ciri sniffed.

'I've already seen a war,' she whispered. 'I don't want to see another. Never. I don't want to be alone again. I don't want to be frightened. I don't want to lose everything again, like that time. I don't want to lose Geralt . . . or you, Lady Yennefer. I don't want to lose you. I want to stay with you. And him. Always.'

'You will.' The magician's voice trembled a little. 'And I'm going

to be with you, Ciri. Always. I promise you.'

Ciri sniffed again. Yennefer coughed quietly, put down the scissors and comb, got to her feet and crossed over to the window. The ravens were still croaking in their flight towards the mountains.

'When I arrived here,' the lady magician suddenly said in her usual, melodious, slightly mocking voice. 'When we first met . . . You didn't like me.'

Ciri did not say anything. *Our first meeting*, she thought. *I remember. I was in the Grotto with the other girls. Hrosvitha was showing us plants and herbs. Then Iola the First came in and whispered something in Hrosvitha's ear. The priestess grimaced with animosity. And Iola the First came up to me with a strange expression of her face*. 'Get yourself together, Ciri,' *she said,* 'and go the refectory, quick. Mother Nenneke is summoning you. Someone has arrived.'

Strange, meaningful glances, excitement in their eyes. And whispers. Yennefer. 'Magician Yennefer. Quick, Ciri, hurry up. Mother Nenneke is waiting. And she is waiting.'

I knew immediately, thought Ciri, *that it was her. Because I'd seen her. I'd seen her the night before. In my dream.*

Her.

I didn't know her name then. She didn't say anything in my dream. She only looked at me and behind her, in the darkness, I saw a closed door . . .

Ciri sighed. Yennefer turned and the obsidian star on her neck glittered with a thousand reflections.

'You're right,' admitted the girl seriously, looking straight into the magician's violet eyes. 'I didn't like you.'

'Ciri,' said Nenneke, 'come closer. This is Lady Yennefer from Vengerberg, Mistress of Wizardry. Don't be frightened. Lady Yennefer knows who you are. You can trust her.'

The girl bowed, interlocking her palms in a gesture of full respect. The enchantress, rustling her long, black dress, approached, took Ciri by the chin and quite off-handedly lifted her head, turning it right and left. The girl felt anger and rebellion rising within her – she was not used to being treated this way. And at the same time, she experienced a burning envy. Yennefer was very beautiful. Compared to the delicate, pale and rather common comeliness of the priestesses and novices who Ciri saw every day, the magician

glowed with a conscious, even demonstrative loveliness, emphasised and accentuated in every detail. Her raven-black locks cascading down her shoulders shone, reflected the light like the feathers of a peacock, curling and undulating with every move. Ciri suddenly felt ashamed, ashamed of her grazed elbows, chapped hands, broken nails, her ashen, stringy hair. All of a sudden, she had an overwhelming desire to possess what Yennefer had – a beautiful, exposed neck and on it a lovely black velvet ribbon with a lovely glittering star. Regular eyebrows, accentuated with charcoal, and long eyelashes. Proud lips. And those two mounds which rose with every breath, hugged by black cloth and white lace . . .

'So this is the famous Surprise.' The magician twisted her lips a little. 'Look me in the eyes, girl.'

Ciri shuddered and hunched her shoulders. No, she did not envy Yennefer that one thing – did not desire to have it or even look at it. Those eyes, violet, deep as a fathomless lake, strangely bright, dispassionate and malefic. Terrifying.

The magician turned towards the stout high priestess. The star on her neck flamed with reflections of the sun beaming through the window into the refectory.

'Yes, Nenneke,' she said. 'There can be no doubt. One just has to look into those green eyes to know that there is something in her. High forehead, regular arch of the brows, eyes set attractively apart. Narrow nose. Long fingers. Rare hair pigment. Obvious elven blood, although there is not much of it in her. An elven great-grandfather or great-grandmother. Have I guessed correctly?'

'I don't know her family tree,' the high priestess replied calmly. 'It didn't interest me.'

'Tall for her age,' continued the magician, still appraising Ciri with her eyes. The girl was boiling over with fury and annoyance, struggling with an overpowering desire to scream defiantly, scream her lungs out, stamp her feet and run off to the park, on the way knocking over the vase on the table and slamming the door so as to make the plaster crumble from the ceiling.

'Not badly developed.' Yennefer did not take her eyes off her. 'Has she suffered any infectious diseases in childhood ? Ha, no doubt you didn't ask her about that either. Has she been ill since she's been here?'

'No.'

‘Any migraines? Fainting? Inclination to catch cold? Painful periods?’

‘No. Only those dreams.’

‘I know.’ Yennefer gathered the hair from her cheek. ‘He wrote about that. It appears from his letter that in Kaer Morhen they didn’t try out any of their . . . experiments on her. I would like to believe that’s true.’

‘It is. They gave her only natural stimulants.’

‘Stimulants are never natural!’ The magician raised her voice. ‘Never! It is precisely the stimulants which may have aggravated her symptoms in . . . Damn it, I never suspected him of such irresponsibility!’

‘Calm down.’ Nenneke looked at her coldly and, all of a sudden, somehow oddly without respect. ‘I said they were natural and absolutely safe. Forgive me, dear, but in this respect I am a greater authority than you. I know it is exceedingly difficult for you to accept someone else’s authority but in this case I am forced to inflict it on you. And let there be no more talk about it.’

‘As you wish.’ Yennefer pursed her lips. ‘Well, come on, girl. We don’t have much time. It would be a sin to waste it.’

Ciri could barely keep her hands from shaking; she swallowed hard and looked inquiringly at Nenneke. The high priestess was serious, as if sad, and the smile with which she answered the unspoken question was unpleasantly false.

‘You’re going with Lady Yennefer now,’ she said. ‘Lady Yennefer is going to be looking after you for a while.’

Ciri bowed her head and clenched her teeth.

‘You are no doubt baffled,’ continued Nenneke, ‘that a Mistress of Wizardry is suddenly taking you into her care. But you are a reasonable girl, Ciri. You can guess why. You have inherited certain . . . attributes from your ancestors. You know what I am talking about. You used to come to me, after those dreams, after the nocturnal disturbances in the dormitory. I couldn’t help you. But Lady Yennefer—’

‘Lady Yennefer,’ interrupted the magician, ‘will do what is necessary. Let us go, girl.’

‘Go,’ nodded Nenneke, trying, in vain, to make her smile at least appear natural. ‘Go, child. Remember it is a great privilege to have someone like Lady Yennefer look after you. Don’t bring shame on

the Temple and us, your mentors. And be obedient.'

I'll escape tonight, Ciri made up her mind. *Back to Kaer Morhen. I'll steal a horse from the stables and that's the last they'll see of me. I'll run away!*

'Indeed you will,' said the magician under her breath.

'I beg your pardon?' the priestess raised her head. 'What did you say?'

'Nothing, nothing,' smiled Yennefer. 'You just thought I did. Or maybe I thought I did? Just look at this ward of yours, Nenneke. Furious as a cat. Sparks in her eyes; just wait and she'll hiss. And if she could flatten her ears, she would. A witcher-girl! I'll have to take her firmly in hand, file her claws.'

'Be more understanding.' The high priestess's features visibly hardened. 'Please, be kind-hearted and understanding. She really is not who you take her to be.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'She's not your rival, Yennefer.'

For a moment they measured each other with their eyes, the enchantress and the priestess, and Ciri felt the air quiver, a strange, terrible force between them growing in strength. This lasted no more than a fraction of a second after which the force disappeared and Yennefer burst out laughing, lightheartedly and sweetly.

'I forgot,' she said. 'Always on his side, aren't you, Nenneke? Always worrying about him. Like the mother he never had.'

'And you're always against him,' smiled the priestess. 'Bestowing him with strong feelings, as usual. And defending yourself as hard as you can not to call the feelings by their rightful name.'

Once again, Ciri felt fury rise up somewhere in the pit of her stomach, and her temples throbbed with spite and rebellion. She remembered how many times and under what circumstances she had heard that name. Yennefer. A name which caused unease, a name which was the symbol of some sinister secret. She guessed what that secret was.

They're talking quite openly in front of me, without any restraint, she thought, feeling her hands start to shake with anger once more. *They're not bothered about me at all. Ignoring me completely. As if I were a child. They're talking about Geralt in front of me, in my presence, but they can't because I . . . I am . . .*

Who?

'You, on the other hand, Nenneke,' retorted the magician, 'are amusing yourself, as usual, analysing other people's emotions, and on top of that interpreting them to suit yourself!'

'And putting my nose into other people's business?'

'I didn't want to say that.' Yennefer tossed her black locks, which gleamed and writhed like snakes. 'Thank you for doing so for me. And now let us change the subject, please, because the one we were discussing is exceptionally silly – disgraceful in front of our young pupil. And as for being understanding, as you ask . . . I will be. But kind-hearted – with that, there might be a problem because, after all, it is widely thought I don't possess any such organ. But we'll manage somehow. Isn't that right, Surprise?'

She smiled at Ciri and, despite herself, despite her anger and annoyance, Ciri had to respond with a smile. Because the enchantress's smile was unexpectedly pleasant, friendly and sincere. And very, very beautiful.

She listened to Yennefer's speech with her back ostentatiously turned, pretending to bestow her full attention on the bumble bee buzzing in the flower of one of the hollyhocks growing by the temple wall.

'No one asked me about it,' she mumbled.

'What didn't anybody ask you about?'

Ciri turned in a half-pirouette and furiously whacked the hollyhock with her fist. The bumble bee flew away, buzzing angrily and ominously.

'No one asked me whether I wanted you to teach me!'

Yennefer rested her fists on her hips; her eyes flashed.

'What a coincidence,' she hissed. 'Imagine that – no one asked me whether I wanted to teach you either. Besides, wanting has got nothing to do with it. I don't apprentice just anybody and you, despite appearances, might still turn out to be a nobody. I was asked to check how things stand with you. To examine what is inside you and how that could endanger you. And I, though not unreluctantly, agreed.'

'But I haven't agreed yet!'

The magician raised her arm and moved her hand. Ciri

experienced a throbbing in her temples and a buzzing in her ears, as if she were swallowing but much louder. She felt drowsy, and an overpowering weakness, tiredness stiffened her neck and softened her knees.

Yennefer lowered her hand and the sensation instantly passed.

'Listen to me carefully, Surprise,' she said. 'I can easily cast a spell on you, hypnotise you, or put you in a trance. I can paralyse you, force you to drink an elixir, strip you naked, lay you out on the table and examine you for hours, taking breaks for meals while you lie there, looking at the ceiling, unable to move even your eyeballs. That is what I would do with just any snotty kid. I do not want to do that to you because one can see, at first glance, that you are an intelligent and proud girl, that you have character. I don't want to put you or myself to shame. Not in front of Geralt. Because he is the one who asked me to take care of your abilities. To help you deal with them.'

'He asked you? Why? He never said anything to me! He never asked me—'

'You keep going back to that,' cut in the magician. 'No one asked for your opinion, no one took the trouble to check what you want or don't want. Could you have given cause for someone to consider you a contrary, stubborn, snotty kid, whom it is not worth asking questions like that? But I'm going to take the risk and am going to ask something no one has ever asked you. Will you allow yourself to be examined?'

'And what will it involve? What are these tests? And why . . .'

'I have already explained. If you haven't understood, that's too bad. I have no intention of polishing your perception or working on your intelligence. I can examine a sensible girl just as well as a stupid one.'

'I'm not stupid! And I understood everything!'

'All the better.'

'But I'm not cut out to be a magician! I haven't got any abilities! I'm never going to be a magician nor want to be one! I'm destined for Geralt . . . I'm destined to be a witcher! I've only come here for a short period! I'm going back to Kaer Morhen soon . . .'

'You are persistently staring at my neckline,' said Yennefer icily, narrowing her violet eyes a little. 'Do you see anything unusual there or is it just plain jealousy?'

‘That star . . .’ muttered Ciri. ‘What’s it made of? Those stones move and shine so strangely . . .’

‘They pulsate,’ smiled the magician. ‘They are active diamonds, sunken in obsidian. Do you want to see them close up? Touch them?’

‘Yes . . . No!’ Ciri backed away and angrily tossed her head, trying to dispel the faint scent of lilac and gooseberries emanating from Yennefer. ‘I don’t. Why should I? I’m not interested! Not a bit! I’m a witcher! I haven’t got any magical abilities! I’m not cut out to be a magician, surely that’s clear because I’m . . . And anyway . . .’

The magician sat on the stone bench under the wall and concentrated on examining her fingernails.

‘. . . and anyway,’ concluded Ciri, ‘I’ve got to think about it.’

‘Come here. Sit next to me.’

She obeyed.

‘I’ve got to have time to think about it,’ she said hesitantly.

‘Quite right.’ Yennefer nodded, still gazing at her nails. ‘It is a serious matter. It needs to be thought over.’

Both said nothing for a while. The novices strolling through the park glanced at them with curiosity, whispered, giggled.

‘Well?’

‘Well what?’

‘Have you thought about it?’

Ciri leaped to her feet, snorted and stamped.

‘I . . . I . . .’ she panted, unable to catch her breath from anger. ‘Are you making fun of me? I need time! I need to think about it! For longer! For a whole day . . . And night!’

Yennefer looked her in the eyes and Ciri shrivelled under the gaze.

‘The saying goes,’ said the magician slowly, ‘that the night brings solutions. But in your case, Surprise, the only thing night can bring is yet another nightmare. You will wake up again, screaming and in pain, drenched in sweat. You will be frightened again, frightened of what you saw, frightened of what you won’t be able to remember. And there will be no more sleep that night. There will be fear. Until dawn.’

The girl shuddered, lowered her head.

‘Surprise.’ Yennefer’s voice changed imperceptibly. ‘Trust me.’

The enchantress’s shoulder was warm. The black velvet of her dress asked to be touched. The scent of lilac and gooseberries intoxicated delightfully. Her embrace calmed and soothed, relaxed, tempered excitement, stilled anger and rebellion.

‘You’ll submit to the tests, Surprise.’

‘I will,’ she answered, understanding that she did not really have to reply. Because it was not a question.

‘I don’t understand anything any more,’ said Ciri. ‘First you say I’ve got abilities because I’ve got those dreams. But you want to do tests and check . . . So how is it? Do I have abilities or don’t I?’

‘That question will be answered by the tests.’

‘Tests, tests.’ She pulled a face. ‘I haven’t got any abilities, I tell you. I’d know if I had them, wouldn’t I? Well, but . . . If, by some sheer chance, I had abilities, what then?’

‘There are two possibilities,’ the magician informed her with indifference as she opened the window. ‘Your abilities will either have to be extinguished or you will have to learn how to control them. If you are gifted and want to, I can try to instil in you some elementary knowledge of magic.’

‘What does “elementary” mean?’

‘Basic.’

They were alone in the large chamber next to the library in an unoccupied side wing of the building, which Nenneke had allocated to the lady magician. Ciri knew that this chamber was used by guests. She knew that Geralt, whenever he visited the Temple, stayed right here.

‘Are you going to want to teach me?’ She sat on the bed and skimmed her hand over the damask eiderdown. ‘Are you going to want to take me away from here? I’m never going to leave with you!’

‘So I’ll leave alone,’ said Yennefer coldly, untying the straps of her saddle-bags. ‘And I assure you, I’m not going to miss you. I did tell you that I’ll educate you only if you decide you want to. And I can do so here, on the spot.’

‘How long are you going to edu—Teach me for?’

‘As long as you want.’ The magician leaned over, opened the chest of drawers, pulled out an old leather bag, a belt, two boots trimmed with fur and a clay demi-john in a wicker basket. Ciri heard her curse under her breath while smiling, and saw her hide the finds back in the drawers. She guessed whose they were. Who had left them there.

‘What does that mean, as long as I want?’ she asked. ‘If I get bored or don’t like the work—’

‘We’ll put an end to it. It’s enough that you tell me. Or show me.’

‘Show you? How?’

‘Should we decide on educating you, I will demand absolute obedience. I repeat: absolute. If, on the other hand, you get tired of it, it will suffice for you to disobey. Then the lessons will instantly cease. Is that clear?’

Ciri nodded and cast a fleeting glance of her green eyes at the magician.

‘Secondly,’ continued Yennefer, unpacking her saddle-bags, ‘I will demand absolute sincerity. You will not be allowed to hide anything from me. Anything. So if you feel you have had enough, it will suffice for you to lie, pretend, feign or close in on yourself. If I ask you something and you do not answer sincerely, that will also indicate an instant end to our lessons. Have you understood?’

‘Yes,’ muttered Ciri. ‘And that . . . sincerity . . . Does that work both ways? Will I be able to . . . ask you questions?’

Yennefer looked at her and her lips twisted strangely.

‘Of course,’ she answered after a while. ‘That goes without saying. That will be the basis of the learning and protection I aim to give you. Sincerity works both ways. You are to ask me questions. At any time. And I will answer. Sincerely.’

‘Any question?’

‘Any question.’

‘As of now?’

‘Yes. As of now.’

‘What is there between you and Geralt, Lady Yennefer?’

Ciri almost fainted, horrified at her own impertinence, chilled by the silence which followed the question.

The enchantress slowly approached her, placed her hands on her

shoulders, looked her in the eyes from up close – and deeply.

'Longing,' she answered gravely. 'Regret. Hope. And fear. Yes, I don't think I have omitted anything. Well, now we can get on with the tests, you little green-eyed viper. We will see if you're cut out for this. Although after your question I would be very surprised if it turned out you aren't. Let's go, my ugly one.'

Ciri bridled.

'Why do you call me that?'

Yennefer smiled with the corners of her lips.

'I promised to be sincere.'

Ciri, annoyed, pulled herself up straight and wriggled in her hard chair which, after many hours of sitting, hurt her backside.

'Nothing's going to come of it!' she snarled, wiping her charcoal-smeared fingers on the table. 'After all this, nothing . . . Nothing works out for me! I'm not cut out to be a magician! I knew that right from the start but you didn't want to listen to me! You didn't pay any attention!'

Yennefer raised her eyebrows.

'I didn't want to listen to you, you say? That's interesting. I usually devote my attention to every sentence uttered in my presence and note it in my memory. The one condition being that there be at least a little sense in the sentence.'

'You're always mocking me.' Ciri grated her teeth. 'And I just wanted to tell you . . . Well, about these abilities. You see in Kaer Morhen, in the mountains . . . I couldn't form a single witcher Sign. Not one!'

'I know.'

'You know?'

'I know. But that doesn't mean anything.'

'How's that? Well . . . But that's not all!'

'I'm listening in suspense.'

'I'm not cut out for it. Can't you understand that? I'm . . . I'm too young.'

'I was younger than you when I started.'

'But I'm sure you weren't . . .'

‘What do you mean, girl? Stop stuttering! At least one full sentence, please.’

‘Because . . .’ Ciri lowered her head and blushed. ‘Because Iola, Myrrha, Eurneid and Katye – when we were having dinner – laughed at me and said that witchcraft doesn’t have access to me and that I’m not going to perform any magic because . . . Because I’m . . . a virgin, that means—’

‘I know what it means, believe it or not,’ interrupted the magician. ‘No doubt you’ll see this as another spiteful piece of mockery but I hate to tell you that you are talking a lot of rubbish. Let us get back to the test.’

‘I’m a virgin!’ repeated Ciri aggressively. ‘Why the tests? Virgins can’t do magic!’

‘I can’t see a solution,’ Yennefer leaned back in her chair. ‘So go out and lose your virginity if it gets in your way so much. But be quick about it if you please.’

‘Are you making fun of me?’

‘You’ve noticed?’ The magician smiled faintly. ‘Congratulations. You’ve passed the preliminary test in perspicacity. And now for the real test. Concentrate, please. Look: there are four pine trees in this picture. Each one has a different number of branches. Draw a fifth to fit in with the other four and to fit in this space here.’

‘Pine trees are silly,’ decreed Ciri, sticking out her tongue and drawing a slightly crooked tree with her charcoal. ‘And boring! I can’t understand what pine trees have to do with magic? What? Lady Yennefer! You promised to answer my questions!’

‘Unfortunately,’ sighed the magician, picking up the sheet of paper and critically appraising the drawing, ‘I think I’m going to regret that promise. What do pine trees have in common with magic? Nothing. But you’ve drawn it correctly, and on time. In truth, excellent for a virgin.’

‘Are you laughing at me?’

‘No. I rarely laugh. I really need to have a good reason to laugh. Concentrate on the next page, Surprise. There are rows of stars, circles, crosses and triangles drawn on it, a different number of each shape in each row. Think and answer: how many stars should there be in the last row?’

‘Stars are silly!’

‘How many?’

‘Three!’

Yennefer did not say anything for a long time. She stared at a detail on the carved wardrobe door known only to her. The mischievous smile on Ciri’s lips started slowly to disappear until finally it disappeared altogether, without a trace.

‘No doubt you were curious to learn,’ said the magician very slowly, not ceasing to admire the wardrobe, ‘what would happen if you gave me a senseless and stupid reply. You thought perhaps that I might not notice because I am not in the least interested in your answers? You thought wrongly. You believed, perhaps, that I would simply accept that you are stupid? You were wrong. But if you are bored of being tested and wanted, for a change, to test me . . . Well, that has clearly worked, hasn’t it? Either way, this test is concluded. Return the paper.’

‘I’m sorry, Lady Yennefer.’ The girl lowered her head. ‘There should, of course, be . . . one star there. I’m very sorry. Please don’t be angry with me.’

‘Look at me, Ciri.’

The girl raised her eyes, astonished. Because for the first time the magician had called her by her name.

‘Ciri,’ said Yennefer. ‘Know that, despite appearances, I get angry just as rarely as I laugh. You haven’t made me angry. But in apologising you have proved I wasn’t wrong about you. And now take the next sheet of paper. As you can see there are five houses on it. Draw the sixth . . .’

‘Again? I really can’t understand why—’

‘. . . the sixth house.’ The lady magician’s voice changed dangerously and her eyes flashed with a violet glow. ‘Here, in this space. Don’t make me repeat myself, please.’

After apples, pine trees, stars, fishes and houses, came the turn of labyrinths through which she had to quickly find a path, wavy lines, blots which looked like squashed cockroaches, and mosaics which made her go cross-eyed and set her head spinning. Then there was a shining ball on a piece of string at which she had to stare for a long time. Staring at it was as dull as dish-water and Ciri kept falling asleep. Yennefer, surprisingly, did not care even though a few days earlier she had scolded her grimly for napping over one of the cockroach blots.

Pouring over the tests had made her neck and back ache and day by day they grew more painful. She missed movement and fresh air and, obliged to be sincere, she immediately told Yennefer. The magician took it easily, as if she had been expecting this for a long time.

For the next two days they both ran through the park, jumped over ditches and fences under the amused or pitying eyes of the priestesses and novices. They exercised and practised their balance walking along the top of the wall which encircled the orchard and farm buildings. Unlike the training in Kaer Morhen, though, the exercises with Yennefer were always accompanied by theory. The magician taught Ciri how to breathe, guiding the movement of her chest and diaphragm with strong pressure from her hand. She explained the rules of movement, how muscles and bones work, and demonstrated how to rest, release tension and relax.

During one such session of relaxation, stretched out on the grass and gazing at the sky, Ciri asked a question which was bothering her. ‘Lady Yennefer? When are we finally going to finish the tests?’

‘Do they bore you so much?’

‘No . . . But I’d like to know whether I’m cut out to be a magician.’

‘You are.’

‘You know that already?’

‘I knew from the start. Few people can detect the activity of my star. Very few. You noticed it straight away.’

‘And the tests?’

‘Concluded. I already know what I wanted to about you.’

‘But some of the tasks . . . They didn’t work out very well. You said yourself that . . . Are you really sure? You’re not mistaken? You’re sure I have the ability?’

‘I’m sure.’

‘But—’

‘Ciri.’ The enchantress looked both amused and impatient. ‘From the moment we lay down in the meadow, I have been talking to you without using my voice. It’s called telepathy, remember that. And as you no doubt noticed, it has not made our talking together any more difficult.’

‘Magic’ – Yennefer, her eyes fixed on the sky above the hills, rested her hands on the pommel of her saddle – ‘is, in some people’s opinion, the embodiment of Chaos. It is a key capable of opening the forbidden door. The door behind which lurk nightmares, fear and unimaginable horrors, behind which enemies hide and wait, destructive powers, the forces of pure Evil capable of annihilating not only the one who opens the door but with them the entire world. And since there is no lack of those who try to open the door, someone, at some point, is going to make a mistake and then the destruction of the world will be forejudged and inevitable. Magic is, therefore, the revenge and the weapon of Chaos. The fact that, following the Conjunction of the Spheres, people have learned to use magic, is the curse and undoing of the world. The undoing of mankind. And that’s how it is, Ciri. Those who believe that magic is Chaos are not mistaken.’

Spurred on by its mistress’s heels, the magician’s black stallion neighed lengthily and slowly made his way into the heather. Ciri hastened her horse, followed in Yennefer’s tracks and caught up with her. The heather reached to their stirrups.

‘Magic,’ Yennefer continued after a while, ‘is, in some people’s opinion, art. Great, elitist art, capable of creating beautiful and extraordinary things. Magic is a talent granted to only a chosen few. Others, deprived of talent, can only look at the results of the artists’ works with admiration and envy, can admire the finished work while feeling that without these creations and without this talent the world would be a poorer place. The fact that, following the Conjunction of the Spheres, some chosen few discovered talent and magic within themselves, the fact that they found Art within themselves, is the blessing of beauty. And that’s how it is. Those who believe that magic is art are also right.’

On the long bare hill which protruded from the heath like the back of some lurking predator lay an enormous boulder supported by a few smaller stones. The magician guided her horse in its direction without pausing her lecture.

‘There are also those according to whom magic is a science. In order to master it, talent and innate ability alone are not enough. Years of keen study and arduous work are essential; endurance and self-discipline are necessary. Magic acquired like this is knowledge, learning, the limits of which are constantly stretched by enlightened and vigorous minds, by experience, experiments and practice. Magic acquired in such a way is progress. It is the plough, the loom, the watermill, the smelting furnace, the winch and the pulley. It is

progress, evolution, change. It is constant movement. Upwards. Towards improvement. Towards the stars. The fact that following the Conjunction of the Spheres we discovered magic will, one day, allow us to reach the stars. Dismount, Ciri.'

Yennefer approached the monolith, placed her palm on the coarse surface of the stone and carefully brushed away the dust and dry leaves.

'Those who consider magic to be a science,' she continued, 'are also right. Remember that, Ciri. And now come here, to me.'

The girl swallowed and came closer. The enchantress put her arm around her.

'Remember,' she repeated, 'magic is Chaos, Art and Science. It is a curse, a blessing and progress. It all depends on who uses magic, how they use it, and to what purpose. And magic is everywhere. All around us. Easily accessible. It is enough to stretch out one's hand. See? I'm stretching out my hand.'

The cromlech trembled perceptibly. Ciri heard a dull, distant noise and a rumble coming from within the earth. The heather undulated, flattened by the gale which suddenly gusted across the hill. The sky abruptly turned dark, covered with clouds scudding across it at incredible speed. The girl felt drops of rain on her face. She narrowed her eyes against the flash of lightning which suddenly flared across the horizon. She automatically huddled up to the enchantress, against her black hair smelling of lilac and gooseberries.

'The earth which we tread. The fire which does not go out within it. The water from which all life is born and without which life is not possible. The air we breathe. It is enough to stretch out one's hand to master them, to subjugate them. Magic is everywhere. It is in air, in water, in earth and in fire. And it is behind the door which the Conjunction of the Spheres has closed on us. From there, from behind the closed door, magic sometimes extends its hand to us. For us. You know that, don't you? You have already felt the touch of that magic, the touch of the hand from behind that door. That touch filled you with fear. Such a touch fills everyone with fear. Because there is Chaos and Order, Good and Evil in all of us. But it is possible and necessary to control it. This has to be learnt. And you will learn it, Ciri. That is why I brought you here, to this stone which, from time immemorial, has stood at the crossing of veins of power pulsating with force. Touch it.'

The boulder shook, vibrated, and with it the entire hill vibrated

and shook.

‘Magic is extending its hand towards you, Ciri. To you, strange girl, Surprise, Child of the Elder Blood, the Blood of Elves. Strange girl, woven into Movement and Change, into Annihilation and Rebirth. Destined and destiny. Magic extends its hand towards you from behind the closed door, towards you, a tiny grain of sand in the workings of the Clock of Fate. Chaos extends its talons towards you, still uncertain if you will be its tool or an obstacle in its design. That which Chaos shows you in your dreams is this very uncertainty. Chaos is afraid of you, Child of Destiny. But it wants you to be the one who feels fear.’

There was a flash of lightning and a long rumble of thunder. Ciri trembled with cold and dread.

‘Chaos cannot show you what it really is. So it is showing you the future, showing you what is going to happen. It wants you to be afraid of the coming days, so that fear of what is going to happen to you and those closest to you will start to guide you, take you over completely. That is why Chaos is sending you those dreams. Now, you are going to show me what you see in your dreams. And you are going to be frightened. And then you will forget and master your fear. Look at my star, Ciri. Don’t take your eyes from it!’

A flash. A rumble of thunder.

‘Speak! I command you!’

Blood. Yennefer’s lips, cut and crushed, move silently, flow with blood. White rocks flitter past, seen from a gallop. A horse neighs. A leap. Valley, abyss. Screaming. Flight, an endless flight. Abyss . . .

In the depth of the abyss, smoke. Stairs leading down.

Va’esse deireádh aep eigean . . . Something is coming to an end . . . What?

Elaine blath, Feainnewedd . . . Child of the Elder Blood? Yennefer’s voice seems to come from somewhere afar, is dull, awakens echoes amidst the stone walls dripping with damp. Elaine blath—

‘Speak!’

The violet eyes shine, burn in the emaciated, shrivelled face, blackened with suffering, veiled with a tempest of dishevelled, dirty black hair. Darkness. Damp. Stench. The excruciating cold of stone walls. The cold of iron on wrists, on ankles . . .

Abyss. Smoke. Stairs leading down. Stairs down which she must

go. Must because . . . Because something is coming to an end. Because Tedd Deireádh, the Time of End, the Time of the Wolf's Blizzard is approaching. The Time of the White Chill and White Light . . .

The Lion Cub must die! For reasons of state!

'Let's go,' says Geralt. 'Down the stairs. We must. It must be so. There is no other way. Only the stairs. Down!'

His lips are not moving. They are blue. Blood, blood everywhere . . . The whole stairs in blood . . . Mustn't slip . . . Because the witcher trips just once . . . The flash of a blade. Screams. Death. Down. Down the stairs.

Smoke. Fire. Frantic galloping, hooves thundering. Flames all around. 'Hold on! Hold on, Lion Cub of Cintra!'

The black horse neighs, rears. 'Hold on!'

The black horse dances. In the slit of the helmet adorned with the wings of a bird of prey shine and burn merciless eyes.

A broad sword, reflecting the glow of the fire, falls with a hiss. Dodge, Ciri! Feign! Pirouette, parry! Dodge! Dodge! Too slooooowwww!

The blow blinds her with its flash, shakes her whole body, the pain paralyses her for a moment, dulls, deadens, and then suddenly explodes with a terrible strength, sinks its cruel, sharp fangs into her cheek, yanks, penetrates right through, radiates into the neck, the shoulders, chest, lungs . . .

'Ciri!'

She felt the coarse, unpleasant, still coolness of stone on her back and head. She did not remember sitting down. Yennefer was kneeling next to her. Gently, but decisively, she straightened her fingers, pulled her hand away from her cheek. The cheek throbbed, pulsated with pain.

'Mama . . .' groaned Ciri. 'Mama . . . How it hurts! Mama . . .'

The magician touched her face. Her hand was as cold as ice. The pain stopped instantly.

'I saw . . .' the girl whispered, closing her eyes, 'the things I saw in the dreams . . . A black knight . . . Geralt . . . And also . . . You . . . I saw you, Lady Yennefer!'

'I know.'

‘I saw you . . . I saw how—’

‘Never more. You will never see that again. You won’t dream about it any more. I will give you the force to push those nightmares away. That is why I have brought you here, Ciri – to show you that force. Tomorrow, I am going to start giving it to you.’

Long, arduous days followed, days of intensive study and exhausting work. Yennefer was firm, frequently stern, sometimes masterfully formidable. But she was never boring. Previously, Ciri could barely keep her eyes open in the Temple school and would sometimes even doze off during a lesson, lulled by the monotonous, gentle voice of Nenneke, Iola the First, Hrosvitha or some other teacher. With Yennefer, it was impossible. And not only because of the timbre of the lady magician’s voice and the short, sharply accentuated sentences she used. The most important element was the subject of her studies. The study of magic. Fascinating, exciting and absorbing study.

Ciri spent most of the day with Yennefer. She returned to the dormitory late at night, collapsed into bed like a log and fell asleep immediately. The novices complained that she snored very loudly and tried to wake her. In vain.

Ciri slept deeply.

With no dreams.

‘Oh, gods.’ Yennefer sighed in resignation and, ruffling her black hair with both hands, lowered her head. ‘But it’s so simple! If you can’t master this move, what will happen with the harder ones?’

Ciri turned away, mumbled something in a raspy voice and massaged her stiff hand. The magician sighed once more.

‘Take another look at the etching. See how your fingers should be spread. Pay attention to the explanatory arrows and runes describing how the move should be performed.’

‘I’ve already looked at the drawing a thousand times! I understand the runes! Vort, cáelme. Ys, veloë. Away from oneself, slowly. Down, quickly. The hand . . . like this?’

‘And the little finger?’

‘It’s impossible to position it like that without bending the ring

finger at the same time!'

'Give me your hand.'

'Ouuuch!'

'Not so loud, Ciri, otherwise Nenneke will come running again, thinking that I'm skinning you alive or frying you in oil. Don't change the position of your fingers. And now perform the gesture. Turn, turn the wrist! Good. Now shake the hand, relax the fingers. And repeat. No, no! Do you know what you did? If you were to cast a real spell like that, you'd be wearing your hand in splints for a month! Are your hands made of wood?'

'My hand's trained to hold a sword! That's why!'

'Nonsense. Geralt has been brandishing his sword for his whole life and his fingers are agile and . . . mmmm . . . very gentle. Continue, my ugly one, try again. See? It's enough to want to. It's enough to try. Once more. Good. Shake your hand. And once again. Good. Are you tired?'

'A little . . .'

'Let me massage your hand and arm. Ciri, why aren't you using the ointment I gave you? Your hands are as rough as crocodile skin . . . But what's this? A mark left by a ring, am I right? Was I imagining it or did I forbid you to wear any jewellery?'

'But I won the ring from Myrrha playing spinning tops! And I only wore it for half a day—'

'That's half a day too long. Don't wear it any more, please.'

'I don't understand, why aren't I allowed—'

'You don't have to understand,' the magician said cutting her short, but there was no anger in her voice. 'I'm asking you not to wear any ornaments like that. Pin a flower in your hair if you want to. Weave a wreath for your hair. But no metal, no crystals, no stones. It's important, Ciri. When the time comes, I will explain why. For the time being, trust me and do as I ask.'

'You wear your star, earrings and rings! And I'm not allowed? Is that because I'm . . . a virgin?'

'Ugly one,' Yennefer smiled and stroked her on the head, 'are you still obsessed with that? I have already explained to you that it doesn't matter whether you are or not. Not in the least. Wash your hair tomorrow; it needs it, I see.'

'Lady Yennefer?'

‘Yes.’

‘May I . . . As part of the sincerity you promised . . . May I ask you something?’

‘You may. But, by all the gods, not about virginity, please.’

Ciri bit her lip and did not say anything for a long time.

‘Too bad,’ sighed Yennefer. ‘Let it be. Ask away.’

‘Because, you see . . .’ Ciri blushed and licked her lips, ‘the girls in the dormitory are always gossiping and telling all sorts of stories . . . About Belleteyn’s feast and others like that . . . And they say I’m a snotty kid, a child because it’s time . . . Lady Yennefer, how does it really work? How can one know that the time has come . . .’

‘. . . to go to bed with a man?’

Ciri blushed a deep shade of crimson. She said nothing for a while then raised her eyes and nodded.

‘It’s easy to tell,’ said Yennefer, naturally. ‘If you are beginning to think about it then it’s a sign the time has come.’

‘But I don’t want to!’

‘It’s not compulsory. You don’t want to, then you don’t.’

‘Ah.’ Ciri bit her lip again. ‘And that . . . Well . . . Man . . . How can you tell it’s the right one to . . .’

‘. . . go to bed with?’

‘Mmmh.’

‘If you have any choice at all,’ the enchantress twisted her lips in a smile, ‘but don’t have much experience, you first appraise the bed.’

Ciri’s emerald eyes turned the shape and size of saucers.

‘How’s that . . . The bed?’

‘Precisely that. Those who don’t have a bed at all, you eliminate on the spot. From those who remain, you eliminate the owners of any dirty or slovenly beds. And when only those who have clean and tidy beds remain, you choose the one you find most attractive. Unfortunately, the method is not a hundred per cent foolproof. You can make a terrible mistake.’

‘You’re joking?’

‘No. I’m not joking, Ciri. As of tomorrow, you are going to sleep here with me. Bring your things. From what I hear, too much time

is wasted in the novices' dormitory on gabbling, time which would be better spent resting and sleeping.'

After mastering the basic positions of the hands, the moves and gestures, Ciri began to learn spells and their formulae. The formulae were easier. Written in Elder Speech, which the girl already knew to perfection, they sank easily into her memory. Nor did she have any problems enunciating the frequently complicated intonations. Yennefer was clearly pleased and, from day to day, was becoming more pleasant and sympathetic. More and more frequently, taking breaks in the studies, both gossiped and joked about any old thing; both even began to amuse themselves by delicately poking fun at Nenneke who often 'visited' their lectures and exercises – bristling and puffed up like a brooding hen – ready to take Ciri under her protective wing, to protect and save her from the magician's imagined severity and the 'inhuman tortures' of her education.

Obeying instructions, Ciri moved to Yennefer's chamber. Now they were together not only by day but also by night. Sometimes, their studies would take place during the night – certain moves, formulae and spells could not be performed in daylight.

The magician, pleased with the girl's progress, slowed the speed of her education. They had more free time. They spent their evenings reading books, together or separately. Ciri waded through Stammelford's *Dialogues on the Nature of Magic*, Giambattista's *Forces of the Elements* and Richert and Monck's *Natural Magic*. She also flicked through – because she did not manage to read them in their entirety – such works as Jan Bekker's *The Invisible World* and Agnes of Glanville's *The Secret of Secrets*. She dipped into the ancient, yellowed *Codex of Mirthe*, *Ard Aercane*, and even the famous, terrible *Dhu Dwimmermorc*, full of menacing etchings.

She also reached for other books which had nothing to do with magic. She read *The History of the World* and *A Treatise on Life*. Nor did she leave out lighter works from the Temple library. Blushing, she devoured Marquis La Creahme's *Gambols* and Anna Tiller's *The King's Ladies*. She read *The Adversities of Loving* and *Time of the Moon*, collections of poems by the famous troubadour Dandilion. She shed tears over the ballads of Essi Daven, subtle, infused with mystery, and collected in a small, beautifully bound volume entitled *The Blue Pearl*.

She made frequent use of her privilege to ask questions. And she received answers. More and more frequently, however, she was the

one being questioned. In the beginning it had seemed that Yennefer was not at all interested in her lot, in her childhood in Cintra or the later events of war. But in time her questions became more and more concrete. Ciri had to reply and did so very unwillingly because every question the magician asked opened a door in her memory which she had promised herself never to open, which she wanted to keep forever locked. Ever since she had met Geralt in Sodden, she had believed she had begun 'another life', that the other life – the one in Cintra – had been irrevocably wiped out. The witchers in Kaer Morhen never asked her about anything and, before coming to the temple, Geralt had even prevailed upon her not to say a word to anyone about who she was. Nenneke, who, of course knew about everything, saw to it that to the other priestesses and the novices Ciri was exceptionally ordinary, an illegitimate daughter of a knight and a peasant woman, a child for whom there had been no place either in her father's castle or her mother's cottage. Half of the novices in Melitele's Temple were just such children.

And Yennefer too knew the secret. She was the one who 'could be trusted'. Yennefer asked. About it. About Cintra.

'How did you get out of the town, Ciri? How did you slip past the Nilfgaardians?'

Ciri did not remember. Everything broke off, was lost in obscurity and smoke. She remembered the siege, saying goodbye to Queen Calanthe, her grandmother; she remembered the barons and knights forcibly dragging her away from the bed where the wounded, dying Lioness of Cintra lay. She remembered the frantic escape through flaming streets, bloody battle and the horse falling. She remembered the black rider in a helmet adorned with the wings of a bird of prey.

And nothing more.

'I don't remember. I really don't remember, Lady Yennefer.'

Yennefer did not insist. She asked different questions. She did so gently and tactfully and Ciri grew more and more at ease. Finally, she started to speak herself. Without waiting to be asked, she recounted her years as a child in Cintra and on the Isles of Skellige. About how she learned about the Law of Surprise and that fate had decreed her to be the destiny of Geralt of Rivia, the white-haired witcher. She recalled the war, her exile in the forests of Transriver, her time among the druids of Angren and the time spent in the country. How Geralt had found her there and taken her to Kaer

Morhen, the Witchers' Keep, thus opening a new chapter in her short life.

One evening, of her own initiative, unasked, casually, joyfully and embellishing a great deal, she told the enchantress about her first meeting with the witcher in Brokilon Forest, amongst the dryads who had abducted her and wanted to force her to stay and become one of them.

'Oh!' said Yennefer on listening to the story, 'I'd give a lot to see that – Geralt, I mean. I'm trying to imagine the expression on his face in Brokilon, when he saw what sort of Surprise destiny had concocted for him! Because he must have had a wonderful expression when he found out who you were?'

Ciri giggled and her emerald eyes lit up devilishly.

'Oh, yes!' she snorted. 'What an expression! Do you want to see? I'll show you. Look at me!'

Yennefer burst out laughing.

That laughter, thought Ciri watching swarms of black birds flying eastwards, *that laughter, shared and sincere, really brought us together, her and me. We understood – both she and I – that we can laugh and talk together about him. About Geralt. Suddenly we became close, although I knew perfectly well that Geralt both brought us together and separated us, and that that's how it would always be.*

Our laughter together brought us closer to each other.

As did the events two days later. In the forest, on the hills. She was showing me how to find . . .

'I don't understand why I have to look for these . . . I've forgotten what they're called again . . .'

'Intersections,' prompted Yennefer, picking off the burrs which had attached themselves to her sleeve as they crossed the scrubs. 'I am showing you how to find them because they're places from which you can draw the force.'

'But I know how to draw the force already! And you taught me yourself that the force is everywhere. So why are we roaming around in the bushes? After all, there's a great deal of force in the Temple!'

'Yes, indeed, there is a fair amount there. That's exactly why the

Temple was built there and not somewhere else. And that's why, on Temple grounds, drawing it seems so easy to you.'

'My legs hurt! Can we sit down for a while?'

'All right, my ugly one.'

'Lady Yennefer?'

'Yes?'

'Why do we always draw the force from water veins? Magical energy, after all, is everywhere. It's in the earth, isn't it? In air, in fire?'

'True.'

'And earth . . . Here, there's plenty of earth around here. Under our feet. And air is everywhere! And should we want fire, it's enough to light a bonfire and . . .'

'You are still too weak to draw energy from the earth. You still don't know enough to succeed in drawing anything from air. And as for fire, I absolutely forbid you to play with it. I've already told you, under no circumstances are you allowed to touch the energy of fire!'

'Don't shout. I remember.'

They sat in silence on a fallen dry tree trunk, listening to the wind rustling in the tree tops, listening to a woodpecker hammering away somewhere close-by. Ciri was hungry and her saliva was thick from thirst, but she knew that complaining would not get her anywhere. In the past, a month ago, Yennefer had reacted to such complaints with a dry lecture on how to control such primitive instincts; later, she had ignored them in contemptuous silence. Protesting was just as useless and produced as few results as sulking over being called 'ugly one'.

The magician plucked the last burr from her sleeve. *She's going to ask me something in a moment*, thought Ciri, *I can hear her thinking about it. She's going to ask about something I don't remember again. Or something I don't want to remember. No, it's senseless. I'm not going to answer. All of that is in the past, and there's no returning to the past. She once said so herself.*

'Tell me about your parents, Ciri.'

'I can't remember them, Lady Yennefer.'

'Please try to.'

‘I really don’t remember my papa . . .’ she said in a quiet voice, succumbing to the command. ‘Except . . . Practically nothing. My mama . . . My mama, I do. She had long hair, like this . . . And she was always sad . . . I remember . . . No, I don’t remember anything . . .’

‘Try to remember, please.’

‘I can’t!’

‘Look at my star.’

Seagulls screamed, diving down between the fishing boats where they caught scourings and tiny fish emptied from the crates. The wind gently fluttered the lowered sails of the drakkars, and smoke, quelled by drizzle, floated above the landing-stage. Triremes from Cintra were sailing into the port, golden lions glistening on blue flags. Uncle Crach, who was standing next to her with his hand – as large as the paw of a grizzly bear – on her shoulder, suddenly fell to one knee. Warriors, standing in rows, rhythmically struck their shields with their swords.

Along the gang-plank towards them came Queen Calanthe. Her grandmother. She who was officially called Ard Rhena, the Highest Queen, on the Isles of Skellige. But Uncle Crach an Craite, the Earl of Skellige, still kneeling with bowed head, greeted the Lioness of Cintra with a title which was less official but considered by the islanders to be more venerable.

‘Hail, Modron.’

‘Princess,’ said Calanthe in a cold and authoritative voice, without so much as a glance at the earl, ‘come here. Come here to me, Ciri.’

Her grandmother’s hand was as strong and hard as a man’s, her rings cold as ice.

‘Where is Eist?’

‘The King . . .’ stammered Crach. ‘Is at sea, Modron. He is looking for the remains . . . And the bodies. Since yesterday . . .’

‘Why did he let them?’ shouted the queen. ‘How could he allow it? How could you allow it, Crach? You’re the Earl of Skellige! No drakkar is allowed to go out to sea without your permission! Why did you allow it, Crach?’

Uncle Crach bowed his head even lower.

‘Horses!’ said Calanthe. ‘We’re going to the fort. And tomorrow,

at dawn, I am setting sail. I am taking the princess to Cintra. I will never allow her to return here. And you . . . You have a huge debt to repay me, Crach. One day I will demand repayment.'

'I know, Modron.'

'If I do not claim it, she will do so.' Calanthe looked at Ciri. 'You will repay the debt to her, Earl. You know how.'

Crach an Craite got to his feet, straightened himself and the features of his weatherbeaten face hardened. With a swift move, he drew from its sheath a simple, steel sword devoid of ornaments and pulled up the sleeve his left arm, marked with thickened white scars.

'Without the dramatic gestures,' snorted the queen. 'Save your blood. I said: one day. Remember!'

'Aen me Gláeddyv, zvaere a'Bloedgeas, Ard Rhena, Lionors aep Xintra!' Crach an Craite, the Earl of the Isles of Skellige, raised his arms and shook his sword. The warriors roared hoarsely and beat their weapons against their shields.

'I accept your oath. Lead the way to the fort, Earl.'

Ciri remembered King Eist's return, his stony, pale face. And the queen's silence. She remembered the gloomy, horrible feast at which the wild, bearded sea wolves of Skellige slowly got drunk in terrifying silence. She remembered the whispers. 'Geas Muire . . . Geas Muire!'

She remembered the trickles of dark beer poured onto the floor, the horns smashed against the stone walls of the hall in bursts of desperate, helpless, senseless anger. 'Geas Muire! Pavetta!'

Pavetta, the Princess of Cintra, and her husband, Prince Duny. Ciri's parents. Perished. Killed. Geas Muire, the Curse of the Sea, had killed them. They had been swallowed up by a tempest which no one had foreseen. A tempest which should not have broken out . . .

Ciri turned her head away so that Yennefer would not see the tears swelling in her eyes. *Why all this*, she thought. *Why these questions, these recollections? There's no returning to the past. There's no one there for me any more. Not my papa, nor my mama, nor my grandmother, the one who was Ard Rhena, the Lioness of Cintra. Uncle Crach an Craite, no doubt, is also dead. I haven't got anybody any more and am someone else. There's no returning . . .*

The magician remained silent, lost in thought.

‘Is that when your dreams began?’ she asked suddenly.

‘No,’ Ciri reflected. ‘No, not then. Not until later.’

‘When?’

The girl wrinkled her nose.

‘In the summer . . . The one before . . . Because the following summer there was the war already . . .’

‘Aha. That means the dreams started after you met Geralt in Brokilon?’

She nodded. *I’m not going to answer the next question*, she decided. But Yennefer did not ask anything. She quickly got to her feet and looked at the sun.

‘Well, that’s enough of this sitting around, my ugly one. It’s getting late. Let’s carry on looking. Keep your hand held loosely in front of you, and don’t tense your fingers. Forward.’

‘Where am I to go? Which direction?’

‘It’s all the same.’

‘The veins are everywhere?’

‘Almost. You’re going to learn how to discover them, to find them in the open and recognise such spots. They are marked by trees which have dried up, gnarled plants, places avoided by all animals. Except cats.’

‘Cats?’

‘Cats like sleeping and resting on intersections. There are many stories about magical animals but really, apart from the dragon, the cat is the only creature which can absorb the force. No one knows why a cat absorbs it and what it does with it . . . What’s the matter?’

‘Oooo . . . There, in that direction! I think there’s something there! Behind that tree!’

‘Ciri, don’t fantasise. Intersections can only be sensed by standing over them . . . Hmmm . . . Interesting. Extraordinary, I’d say. Do you really feel the pull?’

‘Really!’

‘Let’s go then. Interesting, interesting . . . Well, locate it. Show me where.’

‘Here! On this spot!’

‘Well done. Excellent. So you feel delicate cramps in your ring finger? See how it bends downwards? Remember, that’s the sign.’

‘May I draw on it?’

‘Wait, I’ll check.’

‘Lady Yennefer ? How does it work with this drawing of the force? If I gather force into myself then there might not be enough left down below. Is it right to do that? Mother Nenneke taught us that we mustn’t take anything just like that, for the fun of it. Even the cherry has to be left on its tree for the birds, so that it can simply fall.’

Yennefer put her arm around Ciri, kissed her gently on the hair at her temple.

‘I wish,’ she muttered, ‘others could hear what you said. Vilgefortz, Francesca, Terranova . . . Those who believe they have exclusive right to the force and can use it unreservedly. I wish they could listen to the little wise ugly one from Melitele’s Temple. Don’t worry, Ciri. It’s a good thing you’re thinking about it but believe me, there is enough force. It won’t run out. It’s as if you picked one single little cherry from a huge orchard.

‘Can I draw on it now?’

‘Wait. Oh, it’s a devilishly strong pocket. It’s pulsating violently. Be careful, ugly one. Draw on it carefully and very, very slowly.

‘I’m not frightened! Pah-pah! I’m a witcher. Ha! I feel it! I feel . . . Ooouuuch! Lady . . . Ye . . . nnnne . . . feeeeer . . .’

‘Damn it! I warned you! I told you! Head up! Up, I say! Take this and put it to your nose or you’ll be covered in blood! Calmly, calmly, little one, just don’t faint. I’m beside you. I’m beside you

. . . daughter. Hold the handkerchief. I’ll just conjure up some ice . . .’

There was a great fuss about that small amount of blood. Yennefer and Nenneke did not talk to each other for a week.

For a week, Ciri lazed around, read books and got bored because the magician had put her studies on hold. The girl did not see her for entire days – Yennefer disappeared somewhere at dawn, returned in the evening, looked at her strangely and was oddly taciturn.

After a week, Ciri had had enough. In the evening, when the

enchantress returned, she went up to her without a word and hugged her hard.

Yennefer was silent. For a very long time. She did not have to speak. Her fingers, clasping the girl's shoulders tightly, spoke for her.

The following day, the high priestess and the lady magician made up, having talked for several hours.

And then, to Ciri's great joy, everything returned to normal.

'Look into my eyes, Ciri. A tiny light. The formula, please!'

'Aine verseos!'

'Good. Look at my hand. The same move and disperse the light in the air.'

'Aine aen aenye!'

'Excellent. And what gesture comes next? Yes, that's the one. Very good. Strengthen the gesture and draw. More, more, don't stop!'

'Oooouuuch . . .'

'Keep your back straight! Arms by your side! Hands loose, no unnecessary moves with your fingers. Every move can multiply the effect. Do you want a fire to burst out here? Strengthen it, what are you waiting for?'

'Oouuch, no . . . I can't—'

'Relax and stop shaking! Draw! What are you doing? There, that's better . . . Don't weaken your will! That's too fast, you're hyperventilating! Unnecessarily getting hot! Slower, ugly one, calmer. I know it's unpleasant. You'll get used to it.'

'It hurts . . . My belly . . . Down here—'

'You're a woman, it's a typical reaction. Over time you'll harden yourself against it. But in order to harden yourself you have to practise without any painkillers blocking you. It really is necessary, Ciri. Don't be afraid of anything, I'm alert and screening you. Nothing can happen to you. But you have to endure the pain. Breathe calmly. Concentrate. The gesture, please. Perfect. And take the force, draw it, pull it in . . . Good, good . . . Just a bit more . . .'

'O . . . O . . . Oooouuuch!'

'There, you see? You can do it, if you want to. Now watch my

hand. Carefully. Perform the same movement. Fingers! Fingers, Ciri! Look at my hand, not the ceiling! Now, that's good, yes, very good. Tie it up. And now turn it around, reverse the move and now issue the force in the form of a stronger light.'

'Eeeee . . . Eeeeek . . . Aiiiieee . . .'

'Stop moaning! Control yourself! It's just cramp! It'll stop in a moment! Fingers wider, extinguish it, give it back, give it back from yourself ! Slower, damn it, or your blood vessels will burst again!'

'Eeeeeek!'

'Too abrupt, ugly one, still too abrupt. I know the force is bursting out but you have to learn to control it. You mustn't allow outbursts like the one a moment ago. If I hadn't insulated you, you would have caused havoc here. Now, once more. We're starting right from the beginning. Move and formula.'

'No! Not again! I can't!'

'Breathe slowly and stop shaking. It's plain hysteria this time, you don't fool me. Control yourself, concentrate and begin.'

'No, please, Lady Yennefer . . . It hurts . . . I feel sick . . .'

'Just no tears, Ciri. There's no sight more nauseating than a magician crying. Nothing arouses greater pity. Remember that. Never forget that. One more time, from the beginning. Spell and gesture. No, no, this time without copying me. You're going to do it by yourself. So, use your memory!'

'Aine verseos . . . Aine aen aenye . . . Oooouuuuch!'

'No! Too fast!'

Magic, like a spiked iron arrow, lodged in her. Wounded her deeply. Hurt. Hurt with the strange sort of pain oddly associated with bliss.

To relax, they once again ran around the park. Yennefer persuaded Nenneke to take Ciri's sword out of storage and so enabled the girl to practise her steps, dodges and attacks – in secret, of course, to prevent the other priestesses and novices seeing her. But magic was omnipresent. Ciri learned how – using simple spells and focusing her will – to relax her muscles, combat cramps, control adrenalin, how to master her aural labyrinth and its nerve, how to slow or speed her pulse and how to cope without oxygen for short periods.

The lady magician knew a surprising amount about a witcher's sword and 'dance'. She knew a great deal about the secrets of Kaer Morhen; there was no doubt she had visited the Keep. She knew Vesemir and Eskel. Although not Lambert and Coën.

Yennefer used to visit Kaer Morhen. Ciri guessed why – when they spoke of the Keep – the eyes of the enchantress grew warm, lost their angry gleam and their cold, indifferent, wise depth. If the words had befitted Yennefer's person, Ciri would have called her dreamy, lost in memories.

Ciri could guess the reason.

There was a subject which the girl instinctively and carefully avoided. But one day, she got carried away and spoke out. About Triss Merigold. Yennefer, as if casually, as if indifferently, asking as if banal, sparing questions, dragged the rest from her. Her eyes were hard and impenetrable.

Ciri could guess the reason. And, amazingly, she no longer felt annoyed.

Magic was calming.

*

* 'The so-called Sign of Aard, Ciri, is a very simple spell belonging to the family of psychokinetic magic which is based on thrusting energy in the required direction. The force of the thrust depends on how the will of the person throwing it is focused and on the expelled force. It can be considerable. The witchers adapted the spell, making use of the fact that it does not require knowledge of a magical formula – concentration and the gesture are enough. That's why they called it a Sign. Where they got the name from, I don't know, maybe from the Elder Speech – the word "ard", as you know, means "mountain", "upper" or "the highest". If that is truly the case then the name is very misleading because it's hard to find an easier psychokinetic spell. We, obviously, aren't going to waste time and energy on something as primitive as the witchers' Sign. We are going to practise real psychokinesis. We'll practise on . . . Ah, on that basket lying under the apple tree. Concentrate.'

'Ready.'

'You focus yourself quickly. Let me remind you: control the flow of the force. You can only emit as much as you draw. If you release even a tiny bit more, you do so at the cost of your constitution. An effort like that could render you unconscious and, in extreme circumstances, could even kill you. If, on the other hand, you

release everything you draw, you forfeit all possibility of repeating it, and you will have to draw it again and, as you know, it's not easy to do and it is painful.'

'Ooooh, I know!'

'You mustn't slacken your concentration and allow the energy to tear itself away from you of its own accord. My Mistress used to say that emitting the force must be like blowing a raspberry in a ballroom; do it gently, sparingly, and with control. And in such a way that you don't let those around you to know it was you. Understood?'

'Understood!'

'Straighten yourself up. Stop giggling. Let me remind you that spells are a serious matter. They are cast with grace and pride. The motions are executed fluently but with restraint. With dignity. You do not pull faces, grimace or stick your tongue out. You are handling a force of nature, show Nature some respect.'

'All right, Lady Yennefer.'

'Careful, this time I'm not screening you. You are an independent spell-caster. This is your debut, ugly one. You saw that demi-john of wine in the chest of drawers? If your debut is successful, your mistress will drink it tonight.'

'By herself?'

'Novices are only allowed to drink wine once they are qualified apprentices. You have to wait. You're smart, so that just means another ten years or so, not more. Right, let's start. Arrange your fingers. And the left hand? Don't wave it around! Let it hang loose or rest it on your hip. Fingers! Good. Right, release.'

'Aaaah . . .'

'I didn't ask you to make funny noises. Emit the energy. In silence.'

'Haa, ha! It jumped! The basket jumped! Did you see?'

'It barely twitched. Ciri, sparingly does not mean weakly. Psychokinesis is used with a specific goal in mind. Even witchers use the Sign of Aard to throw their opponent off his feet. The energy you emitted would not knock their hat off their head! Once more, a little stronger. Go for it!'

'Ha! It certainly flew! It was all right that time, wasn't it, Lady Yennefer?'

‘Hmmm . . . You’ll run to the kitchen afterwards and pinch a bit of cheese to go with our wine . . . That was almost right. Almost. Stronger still, ugly one, don’t be frightened. Lift the basket from the ground and throw it hard against the wall of that shack, make feathers fly. Don’t slouch! Head up! Gracefully, but with pride! Be bold, be bold! Oh, bloody hell!’

‘Oh, dear . . . I’m sorry, Lady Yennefer . . . I probably . . . probably used a bit too much . . .’

‘A little bit. Don’t worry. Come here. Come on, little one.’

‘And . . . and the shack?’

‘These things happen. There’s no need to take it to heart. Your debut, on the whole, should be viewed as a success. And the shack? It wasn’t too pretty. I don’t think anyone will miss its presence in the landscape. Hold on, ladies! Calm down, calm down, why this uproar and commotion, nothing has happened ! Easy, Nenneke! Really, nothing has happened. The planks just need to be cleared away. They’ll make good firewood!’

During the warm, still afternoons the air grew thick with the scent of flowers and grass; pulsating with peace and silence, broken by the buzz of bees and enormous beetles. On afternoons like this Yennefer carried Nenneke’s wicker chair out into the garden and sat in it, stretching her legs out in front of her. Sometimes she studied books, sometimes read letters which she received by means of strange couriers, usually birds. At times she simply sat gazing into the distance. With one hand, and lost in thought, she ruffled her black, shiny locks, with the other she stroked Ciri’s head as she sat on the grass, snuggled up to the magician’s warm, firm thigh.

‘Lady Yennefer?’

‘I’m here, ugly one.’

‘Tell me, can one do anything with magic?’

‘No.’

‘But you can do a great deal, am I right?’

‘You are.’ The enchantress closed her eyes for a moment and touched her eyelids with her fingers. ‘A great deal.’

‘Something really great . . . Something terrible! Very terrible?’

‘Sometimes even more so than one would have liked.’

‘Hmm . . . And could I . . . When will I be able to do something like that?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe never. Would that you don’t have to.’

Silence. No words. Heat. The scent of flowers and herbs.

‘Lady Yennefer?’

‘What now, ugly one?’

‘How old were you when you became a wizard?’

‘When I passed the preliminary exams? Thirteen.’

‘Ha! Just like I am now! And how . . . How old were you when . . . No, I won’t ask about that—’

‘Sixteen.’

‘Aha . . .’ Ciri blushed faintly and pretended to be suddenly interested in a strangely formed cloud hovering over the temple towers. ‘And how old were you . . . when you met Geralt?’

‘Older, ugly one. A bit older.’

‘You still keep on calling me ugly one! You know how I don’t like it. Why do you do it?’

‘Because I’m malicious. Wizards are always malicious.’

‘But I don’t want to . . . don’t want to be ugly. I want to be pretty. Really pretty, like you, Lady Yennefer. Can I, through magic, be as pretty as you one day?’

‘You . . . Fortunately you don’t have to . . . You don’t need magic for it. You don’t know how lucky you are.’

‘But I want to be really pretty!’

‘You are really pretty. A really pretty ugly one. My pretty little ugly one . . .’

‘Oh, Lady Yennefer!’

‘Ciri, you’re going to bruise my thigh.’

‘Lady Yennefer?’

‘Yes.’

‘What are you looking at like that?’

‘At that tree. That linden tree.’

‘And what’s so interesting about it?’

‘Nothing. I’m simply feasting my eyes on it. I’m happy that . . . I

can see it.'

'I don't understand.'

'Good.'

Silence. No words. Humid.

'Lady Yennefer!'

'What now?'

'There's a spider crawling towards your leg! Look how hideous it is!'

'A spider's a spider.'

'Kill it!'

'I can't be bothered to bend over.'

'Then kill it with magic!'

'On the grounds of Melitele's Temple? So that Nenneke can throw us out head first? No, thank you. And now be quiet. I want to think.'

'And what are you thinking about so seriously? Hmm. All right, I'm not going to say anything now.'

'I'm beside myself with joy. I was worried you were going to ask me another one of your unequal grand questions.'

'Why not? I like your unequal grand answers!'

'You're getting impudent, ugly one.'

'I'm a wizard. Wizards are malicious and impudent.'

No words. Silence. Stillness in the air. Close humidity as if before a storm. And silence, this time broken by the distant croaking of ravens and crows.

'There are more and more of them.' Ciri looked upwards. 'They're flying and flying . . . Like in autumn . . . Hideous birds . . . The priestesses say that it's a bad sign . . . An omen, or something. What is an omen, Lady Yennefer?'

'Look it up in *Dhu Dwimmermorc*. There's a whole chapter on the subject.'

Silence.

'Lady Yennefer . . .'

'Oh, hell. What is it now?'

‘It’s been so long, why isn’t Geralt . . . Why isn’t he coming?’

‘He’s forgotten about you, no doubt, ugly one. He’s found himself a prettier girl.’

‘Oh, no! I know he hasn’t forgotten! He couldn’t have! I know that, I know that for certain, Lady Yennefer!’

‘It’s good you know. You’re a lucky ugly one.’

‘I didn’t like you,’ she repeated.

Yennefer did not look at her as she stood at the window with her back turned, staring at the hills looming black in the east. Above the hills, the sky was dark with flocks of ravens and crows.

In a minute she’s going to ask why I didn’t like her, thought Ciri. *No, she’s too clever to ask such a question. She’ll dryly draw my attention to my grammar and ask when I started using the past tense. And I’ll tell her. I’ll be just as dry as she is, I’ll parody her tone of voice, let her know that I, too, can pretend to be cold, unfeeling and indifferent, ashamed of my feelings and emotions. I’ll tell her everything. I want to, I have to tell her everything. I want her to know everything before we leave Melitele’s Temple. Before we part to finally meet the one I miss. The one she misses. The one who no doubt misses us both. I want to tell her that . . .*

I’ll tell her. It’s enough for her to ask.

The magician turned from the window and smiled. She did not ask anything.

They left the following day, early in the morning. Both wore men’s travelling clothes, cloaks, hats and hoods which hid their hair. Both were armed.

Only Nenneke saw them off. She spoke quietly and at length with Yennefer, then they both – the magician and the priestess – shook each other’s hand, hard, like men. Ciri, holding the reins of her dapple-grey mare, wanted to say goodbye in the same way, but Nenneke did not allow it. She embraced her, hugged her and gave her a kiss. There were tears in her eyes. In Ciri’s, too.

‘Well,’ said the priestess finally, wiping her eye with the sleeve of her robe, ‘now go. May the Great Melitele protect you on your way, my dears. But the goddess has a great many things on her mind, so look after yourselves too. Take care of her, Yennefer. Keep her safe,

like the apple of your eye.'

'I hope' – the magician smiled faintly – 'that I'll manage to keep her safer.'

Across the sky, towards Pontar Valley, flew flocks of crows, croaking loudly. Nenneke did not look at them.

'Take care,' she repeated. 'Bad times are approaching. It might turn out to be true, what Ithlinne aep Aevenien knew, what she predicted. The Time of the Sword and Axe is approaching. The Time of Contempt and the Wolf 's Blizzard. Take care of her, Yennefer. Don't let anyone harm her.'

'I'll be back, Mother,' said Ciri, leaping into her saddle. 'I'll be back for sure! Soon!'

She did not know how very wrong she was.

Time of Contempt

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CHAPTER ONE

Blood on your hands, Falka,

Blood on your dress.

Burn, burn, Falka, and die,

Die in agony for your crimes!

Vedymins, *called witchers among the Nordlings (q.v.), a mysterious and elite caste of warriorpriests, probably an offshoot of the druids (q.v.). In the folk consciousness, they are endowed with magical powers and superhuman abilities;* ***v.*** *were said to fight evil spirits, monsters and all manner of dark forces. In reality, since they were unparalleled in their ability to wield weapons,* ***v.*** *were used by the rulers of the north in the tribal fighting they waged with each other. In combat* ***v.*** *fell into a trance, brought on, it is believed, by autohypnosis or intoxicating substances, and fought with pure energy, being utterly invulnerable to pain or even grave wounds, which reinforced the superstitions about their superhuman powers. The theory, according to which* ***v.*** *were said to have been the products of mutation or genetic engineering, has not found confirmation.* ***V.*** *are the heroes of numerous Nordling tales (cf. F. Delannoy,* Myths and Legends of the Nordlings).

Effenberg and Talbot

Encyclopaedia Maxima Mundi, Vol. XV

When talking to youngsters entering the service, Aplegatt usually told them that in order to make their living as mounted messengers two things would be necessary: a head of gold and an arse of iron.

A head of gold is essential, Aplegatt instructed the young messengers, since in the flat leather pouch strapped to his chest beneath his clothing the messenger only carries news of less vital importance, which could without fear be entrusted to treacherous paper or manuscript. The really important, secret tidings – those on which a great deal depended – must be committed to memory by the messenger and only repeated to the intended recipient. Word for word; and at times those words are far from simple. Difficult to pronounce, let alone remember. In order to memorise them and not make a mistake when they are recounted, one has to have a truly golden head.

And the benefits of an arse of iron, oh, every messenger will swiftly learn those for himself. When the moment comes for him to spend three days and nights in the saddle, riding a hundred or even two hundred miles along roads or sometimes, when necessary, trackless terrain, then it is needed. No, of course you don't sit in the saddle without respite; sometimes you dismount and rest. For a man can bear a great deal, but a horse less. However, when it's time to get back in the saddle after resting, it's as though your arse were shouting, 'Help! Murder!'

'But who needs mounted messengers now, Master Aplegatt?' young people would occasionally ask in astonishment. 'Take Vengerberg to Vizima; no one could knock that off in less than four – or even five – days, even on the swiftest steed. But how long does a sorcerer from Vengerberg need to send news to a sorcerer from Vizima? Half an hour, or not even that. A messenger's horse may go lame, but a sorcerer's message always arrives. It never loses its way. It never arrives late or gets lost. What's the point of messengers, if there are sorcerers everywhere, at every kingly court? Messengers are no longer necessary, Master Aplegatt.'

For some time Aplegatt had also been thinking he was no longer of any use to anyone. He was thirty-six and small but strong and wiry, wasn't afraid of hard work and had – naturally – a head of gold. He could have found other work to support himself and his wife, to put a bit of money by for the dowries of his two as yet unmarried daughters and to continue helping the married one whose husband, the sad loser, was always unlucky in his business ventures. But Aplegatt couldn't and didn't want to imagine any other job. He was a royal mounted messenger and that was that.

And then suddenly, after a long period of being forgotten and humiliatingly idle, Aplegatt was once again needed. And the highways and forest tracks once again echoed to the sound of hooves. Just like the old days, messengers began to travel the land bearing news from town to town.

Aplegatt knew why. He saw a lot and heard even more. It was expected that he would immediately erase each message from his memory once it had been given, that he would forget it so as to be unable to recall it even under torture. But Aplegatt remembered. He knew why kings had suddenly stopped communicating with the help of magic and sorcerers. The news that the messengers were carrying was meant to remain a secret from them. Kings had suddenly stopped trusting sorcerers; stopped confiding their secrets in them.

Aplegatt didn't know what had caused this sudden cooling off in the friendship between kings and sorcerers and wasn't overly concerned about it. He regarded both kings and magic-users as incomprehensible creatures, unpredictable in their deeds – particularly when times were becoming hard. And the fact that times were now hard could not be ignored, not if one travelled across the land from castle to castle, from town to town, from kingdom to kingdom.

There were plenty of troops on the roads. With every step one came across an infantry or cavalry column, and every commander you met was edgy, nervous, curt and as self-important as if the fate of the entire world rested on him alone. The cities and castles were also full of armed men, and a feverish bustle went on there, day and night. The usually invisible burgraves and castellans now ceaselessly rushed along walls and through courtyards, angry as wasps before a storm, yelling, swearing and issuing orders and kicks. Day and night, lumbering columns of laden wagons rolled towards strongholds and garrisons, passing carts on their way back, moving quickly, unburdened and empty. Herds of frisky three-year-old mounts taken straight out of stables kicked dust up on the roads. Ponies not accustomed to bits nor armed riders cheerfully enjoyed their last days of freedom, giving stable boys plenty of extra work and other road users no small trouble.

To put it briefly, war hung in the hot, still air.

Aplegatt stood up in his stirrups and looked around. Down at the foot of the hill a river sparkled, meandering sharply among meadows and clusters of trees. Forests stretched out beyond it, to the south. The messenger urged his horse on. Time was running out.

He'd been on the road for two days. The royal order and mail had caught up with him in Hagge, where he was resting after returning from Tretogor. He had left the stronghold by night, galloping along the highway following the left bank of the Pontar, crossed the border with Temeria before dawn, and now, at noon of the following day, was already at the bank of the Ismena. Had King Foltest been in Vizima, Aplegatt would have delivered him the message that night. Unfortunately, the king was not in the capital; he was residing in the south of the country, in Maribor, almost two hundred miles from Vizima. Aplegatt knew this, so in the region of the White Bridge he left the westward-leading road and rode through woodland towards Ellander. He was taking a risk. The Scoia'tael[1] continued to roam the forests, and woe betide anyone who fell into their hands or came within arrowshot. But a royal messenger had to take risks. Such was his duty.

He crossed the river without difficulty – it hadn't rained since June and the Ismena's waters had fallen considerably. Keeping to the edge of the forest, he reached the track leading southeast from Vizima, towards the dwarven foundries, forges and settlements in the Mahakam Mountains. There were plenty of carts along the track, often being overtaken by small mounted units. Aplegatt sighed in relief. Where there were lots of humans, there weren't any Scoia'tael. The campaign against the guerrilla elves had endured in Temeria for a year and, being harried in the forests, the Scoia'tael commandos had divided up into smaller groups. These smaller groups kept well away from well-used roads and didn't set ambushes on them.

Before nightfall he was already on the western border of the duchy of Ellander, at a crossroads near the village of Zavada. From here he had a straight and safe road to Maribor: forty-two miles of hard, well-frequented forest track, and there was an inn at the crossroads. He decided to rest his horse and himself there. Were he to set off at daybreak he knew that, even without pushing his mount too hard, he would see the silver and black pennants on the red roofs of Maribor Castle's towers before sundown.

He unsaddled his mare and groomed her himself, sending the stable boy away. He was a royal messenger, and a royal messenger never permits anyone to touch his horse. He ate a goodly portion of scrambled eggs with sausage and a quarter of a loaf of rye bread, washed down with a quart of ale. He listened to the gossip. Of various kinds. Travellers from every corner of the world were dining at the inn.

Aplegatt learned there'd been more trouble in Dol Angra; a troop of Lyrian cavalry had once again clashed with a mounted Nilfgaardian unit. Meve, the queen of Lyria, had loudly accused Nilfgaard of provocation – again – and called for help from King Demavend of Aedirn. Tretogor had seen the public execution of a Redanian baron who had secretly allied himself with emissaries of the Nilfgaardian emperor, Emhyr. In Kaedwen, Scoia'tael commandos, amassed into a large unit, had orchestrated a massacre in Fort Leyda. To avenge the massacre, the people of Ard Carraigh had organised a pogrom, murdering almost four hundred non-humans residing in the capital.

Meanwhile the merchants travelling from the south described the grief and mourning among the Cintran emigrants gathered in Temeria, under the standard of Marshal Vissegerd. The dreadful news of the death of Princess Cirilla, the Lion Cub, the last of the bloodline of Queen Calanthe, had been confirmed.

Some even darker, more foreboding gossip was told. That in several villages in the region of Aldersberg cows had suddenly begun to squirt blood from their udders while being milked, and at dawn the Virgin Bane, harbinger of terrible destruction, had been seen in the fog. The Wild Hunt, a spectral army galloping across the firmament, had appeared in Brugge, in the region of Brokilon Forest, the forbidden kingdom of the forest dryads; and the Wild Hunt, as is generally known, always heralds war. And a spectral ship had been spotted off Cape Bremervoord with a ghoul on board: a black knight in a helmet adorned with the wings of a bird of prey . . .

The messenger stopped listening; he was too tired. He went to the common sleeping chamber, dropped onto his pallet and fell fast asleep.

He arose at daybreak and was a little surprised as he entered the courtyard – he was not the first person preparing to leave, which was unusual. A black gelding stood saddled by the well, while nearby a woman in male clothing was washing her hands in the trough. Hearing Aplegatt's footsteps she turned, gathered her luxuriant black hair in her wet hands, and tossed it back. The messenger bowed. The woman gave a faint nod.

As he entered the stable he almost ran into another early riser, a girl in a velvet beret who was just leading a dapple grey mare out into the courtyard. The girl rubbed her face and yawned, leaning against her horse's withers.

‘Oh my,’ she murmured, passing the messenger, ‘I’ll probably fall asleep on my horse . . . I’ll just flake out . . . Auuh . . .’

‘The cold’ll wake you up when you give your mare free rein,’ said Aplegatt courteously, pulling his saddle off the rack. ‘Godspeed, miss.’

The girl turned and looked at him, as though she had only then noticed him. Her eyes were large and as green as emeralds. Aplegatt threw the saddlecloth over his horse.

‘I wished you a safe journey,’ he said. He wasn’t usually talkative or effusive but now he felt the need to talk to someone, even if this someone was just a sleepy teenager. Perhaps it was those long days of solitude on the road, or possibly that the girl reminded him a little of his middle daughter.

‘May the gods protect you,’ he added, ‘from accidents and foul weather. There are but two of you, and womenfolk at that . . . And times are ill at present. Danger lurks everywhere on the highways.’

The girl opened her green eyes wider. The messenger felt his spine go cold, and a shudder passed through him.

‘Danger . . .’ the girl said suddenly, in a strange, altered voice. ‘Danger comes silently. You will not hear it when it swoops down on grey feathers. I had a dream. The sand . . . The sand was hot from the sun.’

‘What?’ Aplegatt froze with the saddle pressed against his belly. ‘What say you, miss? What sand?’

The girl shuddered violently and rubbed her face. The dapple grey mare shook its head.

‘Ciri!’ shouted the black-haired woman sharply from the courtyard, adjusting the girth on her black stallion. ‘Hurry up!’

The girl yawned, looked at Aplegatt and blinked, appearing surprised by his presence in the stable. The messenger said nothing.

‘Ciri,’ repeated the woman, ‘have you fallen asleep in there?’

‘I’m coming, Madam Yennefer.’

By the time Aplegatt had finally saddled his horse and led it out into the courtyard there was no sign of either woman or girl. A cock crowed long and hoarsely, a dog barked, and a cuckoo called from among the trees. The messenger leapt into the saddle. He suddenly recalled the sleepy girl’s green eyes and her strange words. *Danger comes silently? Grey feathers? Hot sand? The maid was probably not*

right in the head, he thought. *You come across a lot like that these days; deranged girls spoiled by vagabonds or other ne'er-do-wells in these times of war . . . Yes, definitely deranged. Or possibly only sleepy, torn from her slumbers, not yet fully awake. It's amazing the poppycock people come out with when they're roaming around at dawn, still caught between sleep and wakefulness . . .*

A second shudder passed through him, and he felt a pain between his shoulder blades. He massaged his back with a fist.

Weak at the knees, he spurred his horse on as soon as he was back on the Maribor road, and rode away at a gallop. Time was running out.

The messenger did not rest for long in Maribor – not a day had passed before the wind was whistling in his ears again. His new horse, a roan gelding from the Maribor stable, ran hard, head forward and its tail flowing behind. Roadside willows flashed past. The satchel with the diplomatic mail pressed against Aplegatt's chest. His arse ached.

'Oi! I hope you break your neck, you blasted gadabout!' yelled a carter in his wake, pulling in the halter of his team, startled by the galloping roan flashing by. 'See how he runs, like devils were licking his heels! Ride on, giddy-head, ride; you won't outrun Death himself!'

Aplegatt wiped an eye, which was watering from the speed.

The day before he had given King Foltest a letter, and then recited King Demavend's secret message.

'Demavend to Foltest. All is prepared in Dol Angra. The disguised forces await the order. Estimated date: the second night after the July new moon. The boats are to beach on the far shore two days later.'

Flocks of crows flew over the highway, cawing loudly. They flew east, towards Mahakam and Dol Angra, towards Vengerberg. As he rode, the messenger silently repeated the confidential message the king of Temeria had entrusted to him for the king of Aedirn.

'Foltest to Demavend. Firstly: let us call off the campaign. The windbags have called a council. They are going to meet and debate on the Isle of Thanedd. This council may change much. Secondly: the search for the Lion Cub can be called off. It is confirmed. The Lion Cub is dead.'

Aplegatt spurred on his horse. Time was running out.

The narrow forest track was blocked with wagons. Aplegatt slowed down and trotted unhurriedly up to the last wagon in the long column. He saw he could not force his way through the obstruction, but nor could he think about heading back; too much time would be lost. Venturing into the boggy thicket and riding around the obstruction was not an attractive alternative either, particularly since darkness was falling.

'What's going on?' he asked the drivers of the last wagon in the column. They were two old men, one of whom seemed to be dozing and the other showing no signs of life. 'An attack? Scoia'tael? Speak up! I'm in a hurry . . .'

Before either of the two old men had a chance to answer, screams could be heard from the head of the column, hidden amongst the trees. Drivers leapt onto their wagons, lashing their horses and oxen to the accompaniment of choice oaths. The column moved off ponderously. The dozing old man awoke, moved his chin, clucked at his mules and flicked the reins across their rumps. The moribund old man came to life too, drew his straw hat back from his eyes and looked at Aplegatt.

'Mark him,' he said. 'A hasty one. Well, laddie, your luck's in. You've joined the company right on time.'

'Aye,' said the other old man, motioning with his chin and urging the mules forward. 'You are timely. Had you come at noon, you'd have come to a stop like us and waited for a clear passage. We're all in a hurry, but we had to wait. How can you ride on, when the way is closed?'

'The way closed? Why so?'

'There's a cruel man-eater in these parts, laddie. He fell on a knight riding along the road with nowt but a boy for company. They say the monster rent the knight's head right off – helmet and all – and spilt his horse's gizzards. The boy made good his escape and said it was a fell beast, that the road was crimson with gore—'

'What kind of monster is it?' asked Aplegatt, reining in his horse in order to continue talking to the wagoners as they drove on. 'A dragon?' 'Nay, it's no dragon,' said the one in the straw hat. '"Tis said to be a manticore, or some such. The boy said 'tis a flying beast, awful huge. And vicious! We reckoned he would devour the knight and fly away, but no! They say he settled on the road, the whoreson, and was sat there, hissing and baring its fangs . . . Yea, and the road all stopped up like a corked-up flagon, for whoever drove up first and saw the fiend left his wagon and hastened away.

Now the wagons are backed up for a third of a league, and all around, as you see, laddie, thicket and bog. There's no riding around or turning back. So here we stood . . .'

'Such a host!' snorted the horseman. 'And they were standing by like dolts when they ought to've seized axe and spear to drive the beast from the road, or slaughter it.'

'Aye, a few tried,' said the old wagoner, driving on his mules, for the column was now moving more quickly. 'Three dwarves from the merchants' guard and, with them, four recruits who were heading to the stronghold in Carreras to join the army. The monster carved up the dwarves horribly, and the recruits –'

'– bolted,' finished the other old man, after which he spat rapturously. The gob flew a long way ahead of him, expertly falling into the space between the mules' rumps. 'Bolted, after barely setting their eyes on the manticore. One of them shat his britches, I hear. Oh, look, look, laddie. That's him! Yonder!'

'What are you blathering on about?' asked Aplegatt, somewhat annoyed. 'You're pointing out that shitty arse ? I'm not interested—'

'Nay! The monster! The monster's corpse! They're lifting it onto a wagon! D'you see?'

Aplegatt stood in his stirrups. In spite of the gathering darkness and the crowd of onlookers he saw the great tawny body being lifted up by soldiers. The monster's bat-like wings and scorpion tail dragged inertly along the ground. Cheering, the soldiers lifted the corpse higher and heaved it onto a wagon. The horses harnessed to it, clearly disturbed by the stench of the carcass and the blood, neighed and tugged at the shaft.

'Move along!' the sergeant shouted at the old men. 'Keep moving! Don't block the road!'

The greybeard drove his mules on, the wagon bouncing over the rutted road. Aplegatt, urging on his horse with his heel, drew alongside.

'Looks like the soldiers have put paid to the beast.'

'Not a bit of it,' rejoined the old man. 'When the soldiers arrived, all they did was yell and order people around. "Stand still! Move on!" and all the rest of it. They were in no haste to deal with the monster. They sent for a witcher.'

'A witcher?'

'Aye,' confirmed the second old man. 'Someone recalled he'd seen

a witcher in the village, and they sent for him. A while later he rode past us. His hair was white, his countenance fearful to behold, and he bore a cruel blade. Not an hour had passed than someone called from the front that the road would soon be clear, for the witcher had dispatched the beast. So at last we set off; which was just about when you turned up, laddie.'

'Ah,' said Aplegatt absentmindedly. 'All these years I've been scouring these roads and never met a witcher. Did anyone see him defeat the monster?'

'I saw it!' called a boy with a shock of tousled hair, trotting up on the other side of the wagon. He was riding bareback, steering a skinny, dapple grey nag using a halter. 'I saw it all! I was with the soldiers, right at the front!'

'Look at him, snot-nosed kid,' said the old man driving the wagon. 'Milk not dried on his face, and see how he mouths off. Looking for a slap?'

'Leave him, father,' interrupted Aplegatt. 'We'll reach the crossroads soon and I'm riding to Carreras, so first I'd like to know how the witcher got on. Talk, boy.'

'It was like this,' he began quickly, still trotting alongside the wagon. 'That witcher comes up to the officer. He says his name's Geralt. The officer says it's all the same to him, and it'd be better if he made a start. Shows him where the monster is. The witcher moves closer and looks on. The monster's about five furlongs or more away, but he just glances at it and says at once it's an uncommon great manticore and he'll kill it if they give him two hundred crowns.'

'Two hundred crowns?' choked the other old man. 'Had he gone cuckoo?'

'The officer says the same, only his words were riper. So the witcher says that's how much it will cost and it's all the same to him; the monster can stay on the road till Judgement Day. The officer says he won't pay that much and he'll wait till the beast flies off by itself. The witcher says it won't because it's hungry and pissed off. And if it flies off, it'll be back soon because that's its hunting terri–terri– territor—'

'You whippersnapper, don't talk nonsense!' said the old man driving the cart, losing his temper, unsuccessfully trying to clear his nose into the fingers he was holding the reins with. 'Just tell us what happened!'

‘I *am* telling you! The witcher goes, “The monster won’t fly away, he’ll spend the entire night eating the dead knight, nice and slow, because the knight’s in armour and it’s hard to pick out the meat.” So some merchants step up and try making a deal with the witcher, by hook or by crook, that they’ll organise a whip-round and give him five score crowns. The witcher says that beast’s a manticore and is very dangerous, and they can shove their hundred crowns up their arses, he won’t risk his neck for it. So the officer gets pissed off and says tough luck, it’s a witcher’s fate to risk his neck, and that a witcher is perfectly suited to it, like an arse is perfectly suited to shitting. But I can see the merchants get afeared the witcher would get angry and head off, because they say they’ll pay seven score and ten. So then the witcher gets his sword out and heads off down the road towards where the beast’s sitting. And the officer makes a mark behind him to drive away magic, spits on the ground and says he doesn’t know why the earth bears such hellish abominations. One of the merchants says that if the army drove away monsters from roads instead of chasing elves through forests, witchers wouldn’t be needed and that—’

‘Don’t drivel,’ interrupted the old man. ‘Just say what you saw.’

‘I saw,’ boasted the boy, ‘the witcher’s horse, a chestnut mare with a white blaze.’

‘Blow the mare! Did you see the witcher kill the monster?’

‘Err . . .’ stammered the boy. ‘No I didn’t . . . I got pushed to the back. Everybody was shouting and the horses were startled, when —’

‘Just what I said,’ declared the old man contemptuously. ‘He didn’t see shite, snotty-nosed kid.’

‘But I saw the witcher coming back!’ said the boy, indignantly. ‘And the officer, who saw it all, he was as pale as a ghost and said quietly to his men it was magic spells or elven tricks and that a normal man couldn’t wield a sword that quickly . . . While the witcher ups and takes the money from the merchants, mounts his mare and rides off.’

‘Hmm,’ murmured Aplegatt. ‘Which way was he headed? Along the road to Carreras? If so, I might catch him up, just to have a look at him . . .’

‘No,’ said the boy. ‘He took the road to Dorian from the crossroads. He was in a hurry.’

The Witcher seldom dreamed at all, and he never remembered

those rare dreams on waking. Not even when they were nightmares – and they were usually nightmares.

This time it was also a nightmare, but at least the Witcher remembered some of it. A distinct, clear image had suddenly emerged from a swirling vortex of unclear but disturbing shapes, of strange but foreboding scenes and incomprehensible but sinister words and sounds. It was Ciri, but not as he remembered her from Kaer Morhen. Her flaxen hair, flowing behind her as she galloped, was longer – as it had been when they first met, in Brokilon. When she rode by he wanted to shout but no words came. He wanted to run after her, but it was as if he were stuck in setting pitch to halfway up his thighs. And Ciri seemed not to see him and galloped on, into the night, between misshapen alders and willows waving their boughs as if they were alive. He saw she was being pursued. That a black horse was galloping in her tracks, and on it a rider in black armour, wearing a helmet decorated with the wings of a bird of prey.

He couldn't move, he couldn't shout. He could only watch as the winged knight chased Ciri, caught her hair, pulled her from the saddle and galloped on, dragging her behind him. He could only watch Ciri's face contort with pain, watch her mouth twist into a soundless cry. *Awake!* he ordered himself, unable to bear the nightmare. *Awake! Awake at once!*

He awoke.

He lay motionless for a long while, recalling the dream. Then he rose. He drew a pouch from beneath his pillow and quickly counted out some ten-crown coins. One hundred and fifty for yesterday's manticore. Fifty for the fogler he had been commissioned to kill by the headman of a village near Carreras. And fifty for the werewolf some settlers from Burdorff had driven out of hiding for him.

Fifty for a werewolf. That was plenty, for the work had been easy. The werewolf hadn't even fought back. Driven into a cave from which there was no escape, it had knelt down and waited for the sword to fall. The Witcher had felt sorry for it.

But he needed the money.

Before an hour had passed he was ambling down the streets of the town of Dorian, looking for a familiar lane and sign.

The wording on the sign read: 'Codringher and Fenn, legal consultation and services'. But Geralt knew only too well that Codringher and Fenn's trade had little in common with the law,

while the partners themselves had a host of reasons to avoid any kind of contact either with the law or its enforcers. He also seriously doubted if any of the clients who showed up in their chambers knew what the word ‘consultation’ meant.

There was no entrance on the ground floor of the small building; there was only a securely bolted door, probably leading to a coach house or a stable. In order to reach the door one had to venture around the back of the building, enter a muddy courtyard full of ducks and chickens and, from there, walk up some steps before proceeding down a narrow gallery and along a cramped, dark corridor. Only then did one find oneself before a solid, studded mahogany door, equipped with a large brass knocker in the form of a lion’s head.

Geralt knocked, and then quickly withdrew. He knew the mechanism mounted in the door could shoot twenty-inch iron spikes through holes hidden among the studs. In theory the spikes were only released if someone tried to tamper with the lock, or if Codringher or Fenn pressed the trigger mechanism, but Geralt had discovered, many times, that all mechanisms are unreliable. They only worked when they ought not to work, and vice versa.

There was sure to be a device in the door – probably magic – for identifying guests. Having knocked, as today, no voice from within ever plied him with questions or demanded that he speak. The door opened and Codringher was standing there. Always Codringher, never Fenn.

‘Welcome, Geralt,’ said Codringher. ‘Enter. You don’t need to flatten yourself against the doorframe, I’ve dismantled the security device. Some part of it broke a few days ago. It went off quite out of the blue and drilled a few holes in a hawker. Come right in. Do you have a case for me?’

‘No,’ said the Witcher, entering the large, gloomy anteroom which, as usual, smelled faintly of cat. ‘Not for you. For Fenn.’

Codringher cackled loudly, confirming the Witcher’s suspicions that Fenn was an utterly mythical figure who served to pull the wool over the eyes of provosts, bailiffs, tax collectors and any other individuals Codringher detested.

They entered the office, where it was lighter because it was the topmost room and the solidly barred windows enjoyed the sun for most of the day. Geralt sat in the chair reserved for clients. Opposite, in an upholstered armchair behind an oaken desk, lounged Codringher; a man who introduced himself as a ‘lawyer’, a

man for whom nothing was impossible. If anyone had difficulties, troubles, problems, they went to Codringher. And would quickly be handed proof of his business partner's dishonesty and malpractice. Or he would receive credit without securities or guarantees. Or find himself the only one, from a long list of creditors, to exact payment from a business which had declared itself bankrupt. He would receive his inheritance even though his rich uncle had threatened he wouldn't leave them a farthing. He would win an inheritance case when even the most determined relatives unexpectedly withdrew their claims. His son would leave the dungeon, cleared even of charges based on irrefutable evidence, or would be released due to the sudden absence of any such proof. For, when Codringher and Fenn were involved, if there had been proof it would mysteriously disappear, or the witnesses would vie to retract their earlier testimonies. A dowry hunter courting their daughter would suddenly direct his affections towards another. A wife's lover or daughter's seducer would suffer a complicated fracture of three members – including at least one upper one – in an unfortunate accident. Or a fervent enemy or other extremely inconvenient individual would stop doing him harm; as a rule they were never seen or heard of again. Yes, if someone had a problem they could always ride to Dorian, run swiftly to Codringher and Fenn and knock at the mahogany door. Codringher, the 'lawyer', would be standing in the doorway, short, spare and grizzled, with the unhealthy pallor of a person who seldom spent time in the fresh air. Codringher would lead them into his office, sit down in his armchair, lift his large black and white tomcat onto his lap and stroke it. The two of them – Codringher and the tomcat – would measure up the client with identical, unpleasant, unsettling expressions in their yellowish-green eyes.

'I received your letter,' said Codringher, while he and the tomcat weighed the Witcher up with their yellowish-green gaze. 'Dandelion also visited. He passed through Dorian a few weeks ago and told me a little about your concerns. But he said very little. Really too little.'

'Indeed? You astonish me. That's the first time I've heard that Dandelion didn't say too much.'

'Dandelion,' said Codringher unsmilingly, 'said very little because he knew very little. He said even less than he knew because you'd forbidden him to speak about certain issues. Where does your lack of trust come from? Especially towards a professional colleague?'

This visibly annoyed Geralt. Codringher would probably have pretended not to notice, but he couldn't because of the cat. It

opened its eyes wide, bared its white fangs and hissed almost silently.

‘Don’t annoy my cat,’ said the lawyer, stroking the animal to calm it. ‘Did it bother you to be called a colleague? But it’s true. I’m also a witcher. I also save people from monsters and from monstrous difficulties. And I also do it for money.’

‘There are certain differences,’ muttered Geralt, still under the tomcat’s unpleasant gaze.

‘There are,’ agreed Codringher. ‘You are an anachronistic witcher, and I’m a modern witcher, moving with the spirit of the times. Which is why you’ll soon be out of work and I’ll be doing well. Soon there won’t be any strigas, wyverns, endriagas or werewolves left in the world. But there’ll always be whoresons.’

‘But it’s mainly the whoresons you get out of difficulties, Codringher. Paupers with difficulties can’t afford your services.’

‘Paupers can’t afford your services either. Paupers can never afford anything, which is precisely why they’re called paupers.’

‘Astonishingly logical of you. And so original it takes the breath away.’

‘The truth always has that effect. And it’s the truth that being a bastard is the basis and mainstay of our professions. Except your business is almost a relic and mine is genuine and growing in strength.’

‘All right, all right. Let’s get down to our business.’

‘About time,’ said Codringher, nodding his head and stroking his cat, which had arched its back and was now purring loudly, sinking its claws into his knee. ‘And we’ll sort these things out in order of importance. The first issue: the fee, my friend, is two hundred and fifty Novigrad crowns. Do you have that kind of money? Or perhaps you number yourself among the paupers with difficulties?’

‘First let’s establish whether you’ve done enough to deserve a sum like that.’

‘Decide for yourself,’ said the lawyer coldly, ‘and be quick about it. Once you feel convinced, lay the money on the table. Then we’ll move on to other, less important matters.’

Geralt unfastened a purse from his belt and threw it, with poor grace and a clink of coins, onto the desk. The tomcat jumped off Codringher’s lap with a bound and ran away. The lawyer dropped the purse in a drawer without checking the contents.

‘You alarmed my cat,’ he said with undisguised reproach.

‘I do beg your pardon. I thought the clink of money was the last thing that could scare it. Tell me what you uncovered.’

‘That Rience,’ began Codringher, ‘who interests you so much, is quite a mysterious character. I’ve been able to ascertain that he was a student at the school for sorcerers in Ban Ard for two years. They threw him out after catching him thieving. Recruiting officers from the Kaedwen secret service were waiting outside the school, as usual, and Rience allowed himself to be recruited. I was unable to determine what he did for the Kaedwen secret service, but sorcerers’ rejects are usually trained as killers. Does that fit?’

‘Like a glove. Go on.’

‘My next information comes from Cintra. Rience served time in the dungeons there, during Queen Calanthe’s reign.’

‘What for?’

‘For debts, would you believe? He didn’t stay long though, because someone bought him out after paying off the debts along with the interest. The transaction took place through a bank, with the anonymity of the benefactor preserved. I tried to uncover the identity of this benefactor but admitted defeat after checking four banks in turn. Whoever bought Rience out was a pro. And cared a great deal about preserving their anonymity.’

Codringher fell silent and then coughed loudly, pressing a handkerchief to his mouth.

‘And suddenly, as soon as the war was over, Mr Rience showed up in Sodden, Angren and Brugge,’ he continued after a moment, wiping his lips and looking down at the handkerchief. ‘Changed beyond recognition, at least as regards his behaviour and the quantities of cash he had to throw around. Because, as far as his identity went, the brazen son of a bitch didn’t bother with secrecy: he continued to use the name “Rience”. And as Rience he began to search intensively for a certain party; to be precise a young, female party. He visited the druids from the Angren Circle, the ones who looked after war orphans. One druid’s body was found some time later in a nearby forest, mutilated, bearing the marks of torture. Rience showed up afterwards in Riverdell—’

‘I know,’ interrupted Geralt. ‘I know what he did to the Riverdell peasant family. And I was expecting more for my two hundred and fifty crowns. Up to now, your only fresh information has been about the sorcerers’ school and the Kaedwen secret service. I know the

rest. I know Rience is a ruthless killer. I know he's an arrogant rogue who doesn't even bother to use aliases. I know he's working for somebody. But for whom, Codringher?'

'For some sorcerer or other. It was a sorcerer who bought him out of that dungeon. You told me yourself – and Dandelion confirmed it – that Rience uses magic. Real magic, not the tricks that some expellee from the academy might know. So someone's backing him, they're equipping him with amulets and probably secretly training him. Some officially practising sorcerers have secret pupils and factotums like him for doing illegal or dirty business. In sorcerers' slang it's described as "having someone on a leash".'

'Were he on a magician's leash Rience would be using camouflaging magic. But he doesn't change his name or face. He hasn't even got rid of the scar from the burn Yennefer gave him.'

'That confirms precisely that he's on a leash,' said Codringher, coughing and wiping his lips again with his handkerchief, 'because magical camouflage isn't camouflage at all; only dilettantes use stuff like that. Were Rience hiding under a magical shield or illusory mask, it would immediately set off every magical alarm, and there are currently alarms like that at practically every city gate. Sorcerers never fail to detect illusory masks. Even in the biggest gathering of people, in the biggest throng, Rience would attract all of their attention, as if flames were shooting out of his ears and clouds of smoke out of his arse. So I repeat: Rience is in the service of a sorcerer and is operating so as not to draw the attention of other sorcerers to himself.'

'Some say he's a Nilfgaardian spy.'

'I know. For example, Dijkstra, the head of the Redania secret service, thinks that. Dijkstra is seldom wrong, so one can only assume he's right this time, too. But having one role doesn't rule out the other. A sorcerer's factotum may be a Nilfgaardian spy at the same time.'

'You're saying that a sanctioned sorcerer is spying for Nilfgaard through Rience?'

'Nonsense,' coughed Codringher, looking intently into his handkerchief. 'A sorcerer spying for Nilfgaard? Why? For money? Risible. Counting on serious power under the rule of the victorious Emperor Emhyr? Even more ludicrous. It's no secret that Emhyr var Emreis keeps his sorcerers on a short leash. Sorcerers in Nilfgaard are treated about the same as, let's say, stablemen. And they have no more power than stablemen either. Would any of our headstrong

mages choose to fight for an emperor who would treat them as a stable boy? Filippa Eilhart, who dictates addresses and edicts to Vizimir of Redania? Sabrina Glevissig, who interrupts the speeches of Henselt of Kaedwen, banging her fist on the table and ordering the king to be silent and listen? Vilgefortz of Roggeveen, who recently told Demavend of Aedirn that, for the moment, he has no time for him?'

'Get to the point, Codringher. What does any of that have to do with Rience?'

'It's simple. The Nilfgaardian secret service is trying to get to a sorcerer by getting their factotum to work for them. From what I know, Rience wouldn't spurn the Nilfgaardian florin and would probably betray his master without a second thought.'

'Now *you're* talking nonsense. Even our headstrong mages know when they're being betrayed and Rience, were he exposed, would dangle from a gibbet. If he was lucky.'

'You're acting like a child, Geralt. You don't hang exposed spies – you make use of them. You stuff them with disinformation and try to make double agents out of them—'

'Don't bore this child, Codringher. Neither the arcana of intelligence work nor politics interest me. Rience is breathing down my neck, and I want to know why and on whose orders. On the orders of some sorcerer, it would appear. So who is it?'

'I don't know yet. But I soon will.'

'Soon,' muttered the Witcher, 'is too late for me.'

'I in no way rule that out,' said Codringher gravely. 'You've landed in a dreadful pickle, Geralt. It's good you came to me; I know how to get people out of them. I already have, essentially.'

'Indeed?'

'Indeed,' said the lawyer, putting his handkerchief to his lips and coughing. 'For you see, my friend, in addition to the sorcerer, and possibly also Nilfgaard, there is a third party in the game. I was visited, and mark this well, by agents from King Foltest's secret service. They had a problem: the king had ordered them to search for a certain missing princess. When finding her turned out not to be quite so simple, those agents decided to enlist a specialist in such thorny problems. While elucidating the case to the specialist, they hinted that a certain witcher might know a good deal about the missing princess. That he might even know where she was.'

‘And what did the specialist do?’

‘At first he expressed astonishment. It particularly astonished him that the aforementioned witcher had not been deposited in a dungeon in order to find out – in the traditional manner – everything he knew, and even plenty of what he didn’t know but might invent in order to satisfy his questioners. The agents replied that they had been forbidden to do that. Witchers, they explained, have such a sensitive nervous system that they immediately die under torture when, as they described quite vividly, a vein bursts in their brains. Because of that, they had been ordered to hunt the witcher. This task had also turned out to be taxing. The specialist praised the agents’ good sense and instructed them to report back in two weeks.’

‘And did they?’

‘I’ll say they did. This specialist, who already regarded you as a client, presented the agents with hard evidence that Geralt the Witcher has never had and could never have anything in common with the missing princess. For the specialist had found witnesses to the death of Princess Cirilla; granddaughter of Calanthe, daughter of Queen Pavetta. Cirilla died three years ago in a refugee camp in Angren. Of diphtheria. The child suffered terribly before her death. You won’t believe it, but the Temerian agents had tears in their eyes as they listened to my witnesses’ accounts.’

‘I have tears in my eyes too. I presume these Temerian agents could not – or would not – offer you more than two hundred and fifty crowns?’

‘Your sarcasm pains my heart, Witcher. I’ve got you out of a pickle, and you, rather than thank me, wound my heart.’

‘I thank you and I beg your pardon. Why did King Foltest order his agents to search for Ciri, Codringher? What were they ordered to do, should they have found her?’

‘Oh, but you are slow-witted. Kill her, of course. She is considered a pretender to the throne of Cintra, for which there are other plans.’

‘It doesn’t add up, Codringher. The Cintran throne was burnt to the ground along with the royal palace, the city and the rest of the country. Nilfgaard rules there now. Foltest is well aware of that; and other kings too. How, exactly, can Ciri pretend to a throne that doesn’t exist?’

‘Come,’ said Codringher, getting up, ‘let us try to find an answer to that question together. In the meanwhile, I shall give you proof

of my trust . . . What is it about that portrait that interests you so much?'

'That it's riddled with holes, as though a woodpecker had been pecking at it for a few seasons,' said Geralt, looking at a painting in a gilt frame hanging on the wall opposite the lawyer's desk, 'and that it portrays a rare idiot.'

'It's my late father,' said Codringher, grimacing a little. 'A rare idiot indeed. I hung his portrait there so as to always have him before my eyes. As a warning. Come, Witcher.'

They went out into the corridor. The tomcat, which had been lying in the middle of the carpet, enthusiastically licking a rear paw extended at a strange angle, vanished into the darkness of the corridor at the sight of the witcher.

'Why don't cats like you, Geralt? Does it have something to do with the—'

'Yes,' he interrupted, 'it does.'

One of the mahogany panels slid open noiselessly, revealing a secret passage. Codringher went first. The panel, no doubt set in motion by magic, closed behind them but did not plunge them into darkness. Light reached them from the far end of the secret passage.

It was cold and dry in the room at the end of the corridor, and the oppressive, stifling smell of dust and candles hung in the air.

'You can meet my partner, Geralt.'

'Fenn?' smiled the Witcher. 'You jest.'

'Oh, but I don't. Admit it, you suspected Fenn didn't exist!'

'Not at all.'

A creaking could be heard from between the rows of bookcases and bookshelves that reached up to the low vaulted ceiling, and a moment later a curious vehicle emerged. It was a high-backed chair on wheels. On the chair sat a midget with a huge head, set directly on disproportionately narrow shoulders. The midget had no legs.

'I'd like to introduce Jacob Fenn,' said Codringher, 'a learned legist, my partner and valued co-worker. And this is our guest and client –'

'– the Witcher, Geralt of Rivia,' finished the cripple with a smile. 'I guessed without too much difficulty. I've been working on the case for several months. Follow me, gentlemen.'

They set off behind the creaking chair into the labyrinth of bookcases, which groaned beneath a weight of printed works that even the university library of Oxenfurt would have been proud to have in its collection. The incunabula, judged Geralt, must have been collected by several generations of Codringhers and Fenns. He was pleased by the obvious show of trust, and happy to finally have the chance to meet Fenn. He did not doubt, however, that the figure of Fenn, though utterly genuine, was also partially fictitious. The fictitious Fenn, Codringher's infallible alter ego, was supposedly often seen abroad, while the chair-bound, learned legist probably never left the building.

The centre of the room was particularly well lit, and there stood a low pulpit, accessible from the chair on wheels and piled high with books, rolls of parchment and vellum, great sheets of paper, bottles of ink, bunches of quills and innumerable mysterious utensils. Not all of them were mystifying. Geralt recognised moulds for forging seals and a diamond grater for removing the text from official documents. In the centre of the pulpit lay a small ball-firing repeating arbalest, and next to it huge magnifying glasses made of polished rock crystal peeped out from under a velvet cloth. Magnifying glasses of that kind were rare and cost a fortune.

'Found anything new, Fenn?'

'Not really,' said the cripple, smiling. His smile was pleasant and very endearing. 'I've reduced the list of Rience's potential paymasters to twenty-eight sorcerers . . .'

'Let's leave that for the moment,' Codringher interrupted quickly. 'Right now something else is of interest to us. Enlighten Geralt as to the reasons why the missing princess of Cintra is the object of extensive search operations by the agents of the Four Kingdoms.'

'The girl has the blood of Queen Calanthe flowing in her veins,' said Fenn, seeming astonished to be asked to explain such obvious matters. 'She is the last of the royal line. Cintra has considerable strategic and political importance. A vanished pretendress to the crown remaining beyond the sphere of influence is inconvenient, and may be dangerous were she to fall under the wrong influence. For example, that of Nilfgaard.'

'As far as I recall,' said Geralt, 'Cintran law bars women from succession.'

'That is true,' agreed Fenn and smiled once more. 'But a woman may always become someone's wife and the mother of a male heir. The Four Kingdoms' intelligence services learned of Rience's

feverish search for the princess and were convinced that's what it's all about. It was thus decided to prevent the princess from becoming a wife or a mother. Using simple but effective means.'

'But the princess is dead,' said Codringher, seeing the change the smiling midget's words had evoked on Geralt's face. 'The agents learned of it and have called off their hunt.'

'Only for now,' said the Witcher, working hard to remain calm and sound unemotional. 'The thing about falsehoods is that they usually come to light. What's more, the royal agents are only one of the parties participating in this game. The agents – you said yourselves – were tracking Ciri in order to confound the other hunters' plans. Those others may be less susceptible to disinformation. I hired you to find a way of guaranteeing the child's safety. So what do you propose?'

'We have a certain notion,' said Fenn, glancing at his partner but seeing no instructions to remain silent in his expression. 'We want to circulate the news – discretely but widely – that neither Princess Cirilla nor any of her male heirs will have any right to the throne of Cintra.'

'In Cintra, the distaff side does not inherit,' explained Codringher, fighting another coughing fit. 'Only the spear side does.'

'Precisely,' confirmed the learned legist. 'Geralt said so himself a moment ago. It's an ancient law, which even that she-devil Calanthe was unable to revoke – though not for want of trying.'

'She tried to nullify the law using intrigue,' said Codringher with conviction, wiping his lips with a handkerchief. 'Illegal intrigue. Explain, Fenn.'

'Calanthe was the only daughter of King Dagorad and Queen Adalia. After her parents' death she opposed the aristocracy, who only saw her as the wife of the new king.

'She wanted to reign supreme. At most, for the sake of formality and to uphold the dynasty, she agreed to the institution of a prince consort who would reign with her, but have as much importance as a straw doll. The old houses defied this. Calanthe had three choices: a civil war; abdication in favour of another line; or marriage to Roegner, Prince of Ebbing. She chose the third option and she ruled the country . . . but at Roegner's side. Naturally, she didn't allow herself to be subjugated or bundled off to join the womenfolk. She was the Lioness of Cintra. But it was Roegner who was the formal ruler – though none ever called him "the Lion".'

‘So Calanthe,’ Codringher took up, ‘tried very hard to fall pregnant and produce a son. Nothing came of it. She bore a daughter, Pavetta, and miscarried twice after which it became clear she would have no more children. All her plans had fallen through. There you have a woman’s fate. A ravaged womb scuppers her lofty ambitions.’

Geralt scowled.

‘You are execrably crude, Codringher.’

‘I know. The truth was also crude. For Roegner began looking around for a young princess with suitably wide hips, preferably from a family of fertility proven back to her great-great-grandmother. And Calanthe found herself on shaky ground. Every meal, every glass of wine could contain death, every hunt might end with an unfortunate accident. There is much to suggest that at the moment the Lioness of Cintra took the initiative, Roegner died. The pox was raging across the country, and the king’s death surprised no one.’

‘I begin to understand,’ said the Witcher, seemingly dispassionately, ‘what news you plan to circulate discreetly but widely. Ciri will be named the granddaughter of a poisoner and husband-killer?’

‘Don’t get ahead of yourself, Geralt. Go on, Fenn.’

‘Calanthe had saved her own life,’ said the cripple, smiling, ‘but the crown was further away than ever. When, after Roegner’s death, the Lioness tried to seize absolute power, the aristocracy once again strongly opposed this violation of the law and tradition. A king was meant to sit on Cintra’s throne, not a queen. The solution was eventually made clear: as soon as young Pavetta began to resemble a woman in any way, she should be married off to someone suitable to become the new king. A second marriage for the barren queen wasn’t an option. The most the Lioness of Cintra could hope for was the role of queen mother. To cap it all, Pavetta’s husband could turn out to be someone who might totally remove his mother-in-law from power.’

‘I’m going to be crude again,’ warned Codringher. ‘Calanthe delayed marrying off Pavetta. She wrecked the first marital project when the girl was ten and the second when she was thirteen. The aristocracy demanded that Pavetta’s fifteenth birthday would be her last as a maiden. Calanthe had to agree; but first she achieved what she had been counting on. Pavetta had remained a maiden too long. She’d finally got the itch, and so badly that she was knocked up by

the first stray to come along; and he was an enchanted monster to boot. There were some kind of supernatural circumstances too, some prophecies, sorcery, promises . . . Some kind of Law of Surprise? Am I right, Geralt? What happened next you probably recall. Calanthe brought a witcher to Cintra, and the witcher stirred up trouble. Not knowing he was being manipulated, he removed the curse from the monstrous Urcheon, enabling his marriage to Pavetta. In so doing, the witcher also made it possible for Calanthe to retain the throne. Pavetta's marriage to a monster – even a now unenchanted one – was such a great shock to the noblemen that they could suddenly accept the marriage of the Lioness to Eist Tuirseach. For the jarl of the Isles of Skellige seemed better than the stray Urcheon. Thus, Calanthe continued to rule the country. Eist, like all islanders, gave the Lioness of Cintra too much respect to oppose her in anything, and kingly duties simply bored him. He handed over his rule wholesale to her. And Calanthe, stuffing herself with medicaments and elixirs, dragged her husband into bed day and night. She wanted to reign until the end of her days. And, if not as queen mother, then as the mother of her own son. As I've already said, great ambitions, but—'

'You've already said it. Don't repeat yourself.'

'It was too late. Queen Pavetta, wife of the weird Urcheon, was wearing a suspiciously loose-fitting dress even during the marriage ceremony. Calanthe, resigned, changed her plans; if it she couldn't rule through her son, let it be Pavetta's son. But she gave birth to a daughter. A curse, or what? Queen Pavetta could still have had a child though. I mean would have been able to. For a mysterious accident occurred. Pavetta and the weird Urcheon perished in an unexplained maritime disaster.'

'Aren't you implying too much, Codringher?'

'I'm trying to explain the situation, nothing more. Calanthe was devastated after Pavetta's death, but not for long. Her granddaughter was her final hope. Pavetta's daughter, Cirilla. Ciri; a little devil incarnate, roaring around the royal palace. She was the apple of some people's eyes, particularly the older folk because she was so like Calanthe had been as a child. To others . . . she was a changeling, the daughter of the monstrous Urcheon, the girl to whom some witcher or other was also claiming rights. And now we're getting to the nub of the matter: Calanthe's little darling, clearly being groomed as her successor, treated almost as a second incarnation, the Lion Cub of the Lioness's blood, was already viewed by some as bereft of any right to the throne. Cirilla was ill-

born. Pavetta's marriage had been a misalliance. She had mixed royal blood with the inferior blood of a stray of unknown origin.'

'Crafty, Codringher. But it wasn't like that. Ciri's father wasn't inferior in any way. He was a prince.'

'What are you saying? I didn't know that. From which kingdom?'

'One of the southern ones . . . From Maecht . . . ? Yes, indeed, from Maecht.'

'Interesting,' mumbled Codringher. 'Maecht has been a Nilfgaardian march for a long time. It's part of the Province of Metinna.'

'But it's a kingdom,' interrupted Fenn. 'A king reigns there.'

'Emhyr var Emreis rules there,' Codringher cut him off. 'Whoever sits on that throne does so by the grace and will of Emhyr. But while we're on the subject, find out who Emhyr made king. I can't recall.'

'Right away,' said the cripple, pushing the wheels of his chair and creaking off in the direction of a bookcase. He took down a thick roll of scrolls and began looking at them, discarding them on the floor after checking them. 'Hmm . . . Here it is. The Kingdom of Maecht. Its coat of arms presents quarterly, azure and gules, one and four two fishes argent, two and three a crown of the same—'

'To hell with heraldry, Fenn. The king, who is the king?'

'Hoët the Just. Chosen by means of election . . .'

'By Emhyr of Nilfgaard,' postulated Codringher coldly.

'. . . nine years ago.'

'Not that one,' said the lawyer, counting quickly. 'He doesn't concern us. Who was before him?'

'Just a moment. Here it is. Akerspaark. Died—'

'Died of acute pneumonia, his lungs having been pierced by the dagger of Emhyr's hit men or Hoët the Just,' said Codringher, once again displaying his perspicacity. 'Geralt, does Akerspaark ring any bells for you? Could he be Urcheon's father?'

'Yes,' said the Witcher after a moment's thought. 'Akerspaark. I recall that's what Duny called his father.'

'Duny?'

'That was his name. He was a prince, the son of that Akerspaark —'

‘No,’ interrupted Fenn, staring at the scrolls. ‘They are all mentioned here. Legitimate sons: Orm, Gorm, Torm, Horm and Gonzalez. Legitimate daughters: Alia, Valia, Nina, Paulina, Malvina and Argentina . . .’

‘I take back the slander spread about Nilfgaard and Hoët the Just,’ announced Codringher gravely. ‘Akerspaark wasn’t murdered, he bonked himself to death. I presume he had bastards too, Fenn?’

‘Indeed. Aplenty. But I see no Duny here.’

‘I didn’t expect you to see him. Geralt, your Urcheon was no prince. Even if that boor Akerspaark really did sire him on the side, he was separated from the rights to such a title by – aside from Nilfgaard – a bloody long queue of legitimate Orms, Gorms and other Gonzalezes and their own, probably abundant, offspring. From a technical point of view Pavetta committed a misalliance.’

‘And Ciri, being the child of a misalliance, has no rights to the throne?’

‘Bullseye.’

Fenn creaked up to the pulpit, pushing the wheels of his chair.

‘That is an argument,’ he said, raising his huge head. ‘Purely an argument. Don’t forget, Geralt, we are neither fighting to gain the crown for Princess Cirilla, nor to deprive her of it. The rumour we’re spreading is meant to show that the girl can’t be used to seize Cintra. That if anyone makes an attempt of that kind, it will be easy to challenge, to question. The girl will cease to be a major piece in this political game; she’ll be an insignificant pawn. And then . . .’

‘They’ll let her live,’ completed Codringher unemotionally.

‘How strong is your argument,’ asked Geralt, ‘from the formal point of view?’

Fenn looked at Codringher and then at the Witcher.

‘Not that strong,’ he admitted. ‘Cirilla is still Calanthe, albeit somewhat diluted. In normal countries she might have been removed from the throne, but these circumstances aren’t normal. The Lioness’s blood has political significance . . .’

‘Blood . . .’ said Geralt, wiping his forehead. ‘What does “Child of the Elder Blood” mean, Codringher?’

‘I don’t understand. Has anyone used such a term with reference to Cirilla?’

‘Yes.’

‘Who?’

‘Never mind who. What does it mean?’

‘Luned aep Hen Ichaer,’ said Fenn suddenly, pushing off from the pulpit. ‘It would literally be not *Child*, but *Daughter* of the Elder Blood. Hmm . . . Elder Blood . . . I’ve come across that expression. I don’t remember exactly . . . I think it concerns some sort of elven prophecy. In some versions of Itlina’s prophecy, the older ones, it seems to me there are mentions of the Elder Blood of the Elves, or Aen Hen Ichaer. But we don’t have the complete text of that prophecy. We would have to ask the elves—’

‘Enough,’ interrupted Codringher coldly. ‘Not too many of these matters at one time, Fenn, not too many irons in the fire, not too many prophecies or mysteries. That’s all for now, thank you. Farewell, and fruitful work. Geralt, if you would, let’s go back to the office.’

‘Too little, right?’ the Witcher asked to be sure, when they had returned and sat down in their chairs, the lawyer behind his desk, and he facing him. ‘Too low a fee, right?’

Codringher lifted a metal star-shaped object from the desk and turned it over in his fingers several times.

‘That’s right, Geralt. Rootling around in elven prophecies is an infernal encumbrance for me; a waste of time and resources. The need to search out contacts amongst the elves, since no one aside from them is capable of understanding their writings. Elven manuscripts, in most cases, mean tortuous symbolism, acrostics, occasionally even codes. The Elder Speech is always, to put it mildly, ambiguous and, when written down, may have as many as ten meanings. The elves were never inclined to help humans who wanted to fathom their prophecies. And in today’s times, when a bloody war against the Squirrels is raging in the forests, when pogroms are taking place, it’s dangerous to approach them. Doubly dangerous. Elves may take you for a provocateur, while humans may accuse you of treachery . . .’

‘How much, Codringher?’

The lawyer was silent for a moment, still playing with the metal star.

‘Ten per cent,’ he said finally.

‘Ten per cent of what?’

‘Don’t mock me, Witcher. The matter is becoming serious. It’s

becoming ever less clear what this is all about, and when no one knows what something's about it's sure to be all about money. In which case a percentage is more agreeable to me than an ordinary fee. Give me ten per cent of what you'll make on this, minus the sum already paid. Shall we draw up a contract?'

'No. I don't want you to lose out. Ten per cent of nothing gives nothing, Codringher. My dear friend, I won't be making anything out of this.'

'I repeat, don't mock me. I don't believe you aren't acting for profit. I don't believe that, behind this, there isn't some . . .'

'I'm not particularly bothered what you believe. There won't be any contract. Or any percentages. Name your fee for gathering the information.'

'Anyone else I would throw out of here,' said Codringher, coughing, 'certain they were trying to pull the wool over my eyes. But noble and naive disinterestedness, my anachronistic Witcher, strangely suits you. It's your style, it's so wonderfully and pathetically outmoded to let yourself be killed for nothing . . .'

'Let's not waste time. How much, Codringher?'

'The same again. Five hundred in total.'

'I'm sorry,' said Geralt, shaking his head, 'I can't afford a sum like that. Not right now at least.'

'I repeat the proposition I laid before you at the beginning of our acquaintance,' said the lawyer slowly, still playing with the star. 'Come and work for me and you will. You will be able to afford information and other luxuries besides.'

'No, Codringher.'

'Why not?'

'You wouldn't understand.'

'This time you're wounding not my heart, but my professional pride. For I flatter myself, believing that I generally understand everything. Being a downright bastard is the basis of our professions, but you insist on favouring the anachronistic version over the modern one.'

The Witcher smiled.

'Bullseye.'

Codringher coughed violently once again, wiped his lips, looked

down at his handkerchief, and then raised his yellow-green eyes.

‘You took a good look at the list of sorcerers and sorceresses lying on the pulpit? At the list of Rience’s potential paymasters?’

‘Indeed.’

‘I won’t give you that list until I’ve checked it thoroughly. Don’t be influenced by what you saw there. Dandelion told me Filippa Eilhart probably knows who’s running Rience, but she didn’t let you in on it. Filippa wouldn’t protect any old sucker. It’s an important character running that bastard.’

The Witcher said nothing.

‘Beware, Geralt. You’re in grave danger. Someone’s playing a game with you. Someone is accurately predicting your movements, if not actually controlling them. Don’t give in to arrogance and self-righteousness. Whoever’s playing with you is no striga or werewolf. It’s not the brothers Michelet. It’s not even Rience. The Child of the Elder Blood, damn it. As if the throne of Cintra, sorcerers, kings and Nilfgaard weren’t enough, now there are elves. Stop playing this game, Witcher. Get yourself out of it. Confound their plans by doing what no one expects. Break off that crazy bond; don’t allow yourself to be linked to Cirilla. Leave her to Yennefer; go back to Kaer Morhen and keep your head down. Hole yourself up in the mountains, and I’ll root around in elven manuscripts, calmly, unhurriedly and thoroughly. And when I have some information about the Child of the Elder Blood, when I have the name of the sorcerer who’s involved in it, you’ll get the money together and we’ll do a swap.’

‘I can’t wait. The girl’s in danger.’

‘That’s true. But I know you’re considered an obstacle on the way to her. An obstacle to be ruthlessly removed. Thus, you are in danger too. They’ll set about getting the girl once they’ve finished you off.’

‘Or when I leave the game, withdraw and hole up in Kaer Morhen. I’ve paid you too much, Codringher, for you to be giving me advice like that.’

The lawyer turned the steel star over in his fingers.

‘I’ve been busily working for some time, for the sum you paid me today, Witcher,’ he said, suppressing a cough. ‘The advice I’m giving you has been thoroughly considered. Hide in Kaer Morhen; disappear. And then the people who are looking for Cirilla will get

her.'

Geralt squinted and smiled. Codringher didn't blench. 'I know what I'm talking about,' he said, impervious to the look and the smile. 'Your Ciri's tormentors will find her and do with her what they will. And meanwhile, both she and you will be safe.'

'Explain, please. And make it quick.'

'I've found a certain girl. She's from the Cintra nobility, a war orphan. She's been through refugee camps, and is currently measuring cloth in ells and cutting it out, having been taken in by a Brugge draper. There is nothing remarkable about her, aside from one thing. She is quite similar in likeness to a certain miniature of the Lion Cub of Cintra . . . Fancy a look?'

'No, Codringher. No, I don't. And I can't permit a solution like that.'

'Geralt,' said the lawyer, closing his eyes. 'What drives you? If you want to save Ciri . . . I wouldn't have thought you could afford the luxury of contempt. No, that was badly expressed. You can't afford the luxury of spurning contempt. A time of contempt is approaching, Witcher, my friend, a time of great and utter contempt. You have to adapt. What I'm proposing is a simple solution. Someone will die, so someone else can live. Someone you love will survive. A girl you don't know, and whom you've never seen, will die—'

'And who am I free to despise?' interrupted the Witcher. 'Am I to pay for what I love with contempt for myself? No, Codringher. Leave the girl in peace; may she continue to measure cloth. Destroy her portrait. Burn it. And give me something else for the two hundred and fifty hard-earned crowns which you threw into a drawer. I need information. Yennefer and Ciri have left Ellander. I'm certain you know that. I'm certain you know where they are headed. And I'm certain you know who's chasing them.'

Codringher drummed his fingers on the table and coughed.

'The wolf, heedless of warnings, wants to carry on hunting,' he said. 'He doesn't see he's being hunted, and he's heading straight for some tasty kippers hung up as bait by a real hunter.'

'Don't be trite. Get to the point.'

'If you wish. It's not difficult to guess that Yennefer is riding to the Conclave of Mages, called at the beginning of July in Garstang on the Isle of Thanedd. She is cleverly staying on the move and not

using magic, so it's hard to locate her. A week ago she was still in Ellander, and I calculate that in three or four days she will reach the city of Gors Velen; from there Thanedd is a stone's throw. On the way to Gors Velen she has to ride through the hamlet of Anchor. Were you to set off immediately you would have a chance of catching those who are pursuing her. Because someone is pursuing her.'

'They wouldn't, by any chance,' said Geralt, smiling hideously, 'be royal agents?'

'No,' said the lawyer, looking at the metal star he was playing with. 'They aren't agents. Neither is it Rience, who's cleverer than you, because after the ruckus with the Michelets he's crawled into a hole somewhere and he's keeping his head down. Three hired thugs are after Yennefer.'

'I presume you know them?'

'I know them all. Which is why I suggest something to you: leave them alone. Don't ride to Anchor. And I'll use all the contacts and connections I possess. I'll try to bribe the thugs and reword the contract. In other words, I'll set them on Rience. If I succeed . . .'

He broke off suddenly and swung an arm powerfully. The steel star whirred through the air and slammed with a thud into the portrait, right into the forehead of Codringher senior, cutting a hole in the canvas and embedding itself almost halfway into the wall.

'Not bad, eh?' grinned the lawyer. 'It's called an orion. A foreign invention. I've been practising for a month; I never miss now. It might come in useful. This little star is unerring and lethal at thirty feet, and it can be hidden in a sleeve or stuck behind a hatband. Orions have been part of the Nilfgaardian secret service equipment for a year now. Ha, ha, if Rience is spying for Nilfgaard, it would be amusing if they found him with an orion in his temple . . . What do you say to that?'

'Nothing. That's your business. Two hundred and fifty crowns are lying in your drawer.'

'Sure,' said Codringher, nodding. 'I treat your words to mean you're giving me a free hand. Let's be silent for a moment, Geralt. Let's honour Rience's imminent death with a minute's silence. Why the hell are you frowning? Have you no respect for the majesty of death?'

'I do. Too great a respect to listen to idiots mocking it. Have you ever thought about your own death, Codringher?'

The lawyer coughed heavily and looked for a long time at the handkerchief in front of his mouth. Then he raised his eyes.

‘Of course,’ he said quietly. ‘I have. Intensively, at that. But my thoughts are nothing to do with you, Witcher. Will you ride to Anchor?’

‘I will.’

‘Ralf Blunden, a.k.a. the Professor. Heimo Kantor. Little Yaxa. Do those names mean anything to you?’

‘No.’

‘All three are pretty handy with a sword. Better than the Michelets. So I would suggest a more reliable, long-range weapon. These Nilfgaardian throwing stars, for example. I’ll sell you a few if you like. I’ve plenty of them.’

‘No thanks. They’re impractical. Noisy in flight.’

‘The whistling has a psychological element. They’re capable of paralysing their victim with fear.’

‘Perhaps. But they can also warn them. I’d have time to dodge it.’

‘If you saw it being thrown at you, you could. I know you can dodge an arrow or a quarrel . . . But from behind—’

‘From behind as well.’

‘Bullshit.’

‘Let’s try a wager,’ said Geralt coldly. ‘I’ll turn my face to the portrait of your dullard of a father, and you throw an orion at me. Should you hit me, you win. Should you not, you lose. Should you lose, you’ll decipher those elven manuscripts. You’ll get hold of information about the Child of the Elder Blood. Urgently. And on credit.’

‘And if I win?’

‘You’ll still get that information but you’ll pass it on to Yennefer. She’ll pay. You won’t be left out of pocket.’

Codringher opened the drawer and took out another orion.

‘You don’t expect me to accept the wager.’ It was a statement, not a question.

‘No,’ smiled the Witcher. ‘I’m sure you’ll accept it.’

‘A daredevil, I see. Have you forgotten? I don’t have any scruples.’

‘I haven’t forgotten. After all, the time of contempt is approaching, and you keep up with progress and the zeitgeist. But I took your accusations of anachronistic naivety to heart, and this time I’ll take a risk, though not without hope of profit. What’s it to be then? Is the bet on?’

‘Yes.’ Codringher took hold of the steel star by one of its arms and stood up. ‘Curiosity always won out over good sense in me, not to mention unfounded mercy. Turn around.’

The Witcher turned around. He glanced at the face on the portrait riddled with holes and with the orion sticking into it. And then he closed his eyes.

The star whistled and thudded into the wall four inches from the frame of the portrait.

‘Damn and blast!’ roared Codringher. ‘You didn’t even flinch, you whoreson!’

Geralt turned back and smiled. Quite hideously.

‘Why should I have flinched? I could hear you aiming to miss.’

The inn was empty. A young woman with dark rings under her eyes sat on a bench in the corner. Bashfully turned away to one side, she was breastfeeding a child. A broad-shouldered fellow, perhaps her husband, dozed alongside, his back resting against the wall. Someone else, whose features Aplegatt couldn’t make out in the gloom of the inn, sat in the shadows behind the stove.

The innkeeper looked up, saw Aplegatt, noticed his attire and the badge with the arms of Aedirn on his chest, and his face immediately darkened. Aplegatt was accustomed to welcomes like that. As a royal messenger he was absolute entitled to a mount. The royal decrees were explicit – a messenger had the right to demand a fresh horse in every town, village, inn or farmyard – and woe betide anyone who refused. Naturally, the messenger left his own horse, and signed a receipt for the new one; the owner could appeal to the magistrate and receive compensation. But you never knew. Thus a messenger was always looked upon with dislike and anxiety; would he demand a horse or not? Would he take our Golda, never to be seen again? Or our Beauty, reared from a foal? Our pampered Ebony? Aplegatt had seen sobbing children clinging to their beloved playmate as it was being led out of the stable, saddled, and more than once had looked into the faces of adults, pale with the sense of injustice and helplessness.

‘I don’t need a fresh horse,’ he said brusquely. It seemed to him

the innkeeper sighed with relief.

‘I’ll only have a bite to eat; the road’s given me an appetite,’ added the messenger. ‘Anything in the pot?’

‘There’s some gruel left over. I’ll serve you d’reckly. Sit you down. Needing a bed? Night’s falling.’

Aplegatt thought it over. He had met Hansom two days before. He knew the messenger and they had exchanged messages as ordered. Hansom took the letters and the message for King Demavend and galloped off through Temeria and Mahakam to Vengerberg. Aplegatt, meanwhile, having received the messages for King Vizimir of Redania, rode towards Oxenfurt and Tretogor. He had over three hundred miles to cover.

‘I’ll eat and be on my way,’ he declared. ‘The moon is full and the road is level.’

‘As you will.’

The gruel he was served was thin and tasteless, but the messenger paid no attention to such trifles. At home, he enjoyed his wife’s cooking, but on the road he made do with whatever came his way. He slowly slurped it, clumsily gripping the spoon in fingers made numb from holding the reins.

A cat that had been snoozing on the stove bench suddenly lifted its head and hissed.

‘A royal messenger?’

Aplegatt shuddered. The question had been asked by the man sitting in the shadows, who now emerged to stand beside him. His hair was as white as milk. He had a leather band stretched across his forehead and was wearing a silver-studded leather jacket and high boots. The pommel of the sword slung across his back glistened over his right shoulder.

‘Where does the road take you?’

‘Wherever the royal will sends me,’ answered Aplegatt coldly. He never answered any other way to questions of that nature.

The white-haired man was silent for some time, looking searchingly at the messenger. He had an unnaturally pale face and strange, dark eyes.

‘I imagine,’ he finally said, in an unpleasant, somewhat husky voice, ‘the royal will orders you to make haste? Probably in a hurry to get off, are you?’

‘What business is it of yours? Who are you to hasten me?’

‘I’m no one,’ said the white-haired man, smiling hideously, ‘and I’m not hurrying you. But if I were you I’d leave here as quickly as possible. I wouldn’t want anything ill to befall you.’

Aplegatt also had a tried and tested answer to comments like that. Short and blunt. Not aggressive, calm; but emphatically reminding the listener who the royal messenger served and what was risked by anyone who dared touch him. But there was something in the white-haired man’s voice that stopped Aplegatt from giving his usual answer.

‘I must let my horse rest, sir. An hour, maybe two.’

‘Indeed,’ nodded the white-haired man, upon which he lifted his head, seeming to listen to the sounds which reached him from outside. Aplegatt also pricked up his ears but heard only crickets.

‘Then rest,’ said the white-haired man, straightening the sword belt which passed diagonally across his chest. ‘But don’t go out into the courtyard. Whatever happens, don’t go out.’

Aplegatt refrained from further questions. He felt instinctively it would be better not to. He bent over his bowl and resumed fishing out the few bits of pork floating in the gruel. When he looked up the white-haired one was no longer in the room.

A moment later a horse neighed and hooves clattered in the courtyard.

Three men entered the inn. On seeing them the innkeeper began wiping the beer mug he was holding more quickly. The woman with the baby moved closer to her slumbering husband and woke him with a poke. Aplegatt grabbed the stool where he had laid his belt and short sword and pulled it a little closer.

The men went over to the bar, casting keen glances at the guests and sizing them up. They walked slowly, their spurs and weapons jangling.

‘Welcome, good sirs,’ said the innkeeper, clearing his throat. ‘How may I serve you?’

‘With vodka,’ said one of them, short and stocky with long arms like an ape’s, furnished with two Zerrikan sabres hanging crossed on his back. ‘Fancy a drop, Professor?’

‘With the utmost pleasure,’ responded the other man, straightening a pair of gold-framed glasses made of bluish-coloured crystal, which were perched on his hooked nose. ‘As long as the

liquor hasn't been adulterated with any additives.'

The innkeeper poured. Aplegatt noticed that his hands were trembling slightly. The men leaned back against the bar and unhurriedly drank from the earthenware cups.

'My dear innkeeper,' began the one in the glasses suddenly. 'I conjecture that two ladies rode through here not long ago, speeding their way towards Gors Velen?'

'All sorts ride through here,' mumbled the innkeeper.

'You could not have missed the aforementioned ladies,' said the bespectacled one slowly. 'One is black-haired and exceedingly fair. She rides a black gelding. The other is younger, fair-haired and green-eyed and journeys on a dappled grey mare. Have they been here?'

'No,' interrupted Aplegatt, suddenly going cold, 'they haven't.'

Greyfeathered danger. Hot sand . . .

'A messenger?'

Aplegatt nodded.

'Travelling from where to where?'

'From where and to where the royal fortune sends me.'

'Have your travels adventitiously crossed the path of the women on the road about whom I enquired?'

'No.'

'Your denial is too swift,' barked the third man, as tall and thin as a beanpole. His hair was black and glistened as if covered in grease. 'And it seems to me you weren't trying especially hard to remember.'

'Let it drop, Heimo,' said the bespectacled man, waving his hand. 'He's a messenger. Don't vex yourself. What is this station's name, innkeeper?'

'Anchor.'

'What is the proximity of Gors Velen?'

'Beg pardon?'

'How many miles?'

'Can't say I've ever measured it. But it'll be a three-day journey . . .'

‘On horseback?’

‘By cart.’

‘Hey,’ called the stocky one suddenly in a hushed voice, straightening up and looking out onto the courtyard through the wide-open door. ‘Have a butchers, Professor. Who would that be? Isn’t it that . . . ?’

The man in glasses also looked out at the courtyard, and his face suddenly tightened.

‘Yes,’ he hissed. ‘It’s indisputably him. It appears fortune smiles on us.’

‘Will we wait till he comes in?’

‘He won’t. He saw our horses.’

‘He knows we’re—’

‘Silence, Yaxa. He’s saying something.’

‘You have a choice,’ a slightly gruff but powerful voice resounded from the courtyard, a voice which Aplegatt recognised at once. ‘One of you will come out and tell me who hired you. Then you may ride away without any trouble. Or all three of you may come out. I’m waiting.’

‘Whoreson . . .’ growled the black-haired man. ‘He knows. What do we do?’

The bespectacled man put his mug down on the bar with a slow movement.

‘We do what we’re paid to do.’

He spat on his palm, flexed his fingers and drew his sword. At the sight of it the two other men also bared their blades. The innkeeper opened his mouth to shout but quickly shut it on seeing the cold eyes peering above the blue glasses.

‘Nobody moves,’ hissed the bespectacled man. ‘And keep schtum. Heimo, when it all kicks off, endeavour to get behind him. Very well, boys, good luck. Out we go.’

It began at once. Groans, the stamping of feet, the crash of blades. And then a scream of the kind that makes one’s hair stand on end.

The innkeeper blanched, the woman with the dark rings under her eyes screamed too, clutching her suckling to her breast. The cat behind the stove leapt to its feet and arched its back, its tail fluffing

up like a brush. Aplegatt slid into the corner on his stool. He had his short sword in his lap but didn't draw it.

Once again the thudding of feet across boards and the whistle and clang of blades came from the courtyard.

'You . . .' shouted someone wildly, but even though it ended with a vile insult, there was more despair in it than fury. 'You . . .'

The whistle of a blade. And immediately after it a high, penetrating scream shredded the air. A thud as if a heavy sack of grain had hit the ground. The clatter of hooves from the hitching post and the neighing of terrified horses.

A thud on the boards once more and the quick, heavy steps of a man running. The woman with the baby clung to her husband, and the innkeeper pressed his back against the wall. Aplegatt drew his short sword, still hiding the weapon beneath the table. The running man was heading straight for the inn, and it was clear he would soon appear in the doorway. But before he did, a blade hissed.

The man screamed and lurched inside. It seemed as though he would fall across the threshold, but he didn't. He took several staggering, laboured steps forward and only then did he topple, falling heavily into the middle of the chamber, throwing up the dust gathered between the floorboards. He fell on his face, inertly, pinning his arms underneath him, his legs bent at the knee. The crystal glasses fell to the floorboards with a clatter and shattered into tiny blue pieces. A dark, gleaming puddle began to spread from beneath the body.

No one moved. Or cried out.

The white-haired man entered the inn.

He deftly sheathed the sword he was holding into the scabbard on his back. He approached the bar, not even gracing the body lying on the floor with a glance. The innkeeper cringed.

'Those evil men . . .' said the white-haired one huskily, 'those evil men are dead. When the bailiff arrives, it may turn out there was a bounty on their heads. He should do with it as he sees fit.'

The innkeeper nodded eagerly.

'It may turn out,' said the white-haired man a moment later, 'that their comrades or cronies may ask what befell these evil men. Tell them the Wolf bit them. The White Wolf. And add that they should keep glancing over their shoulders. One day they'll look back and see the Wolf.'

When, after three days, Aplegatt reached the gates of Tretogor, it was well after midnight. He was furious because he'd wasted time at the moat and shouted himself hoarse – the guards were sleeping sinfully and had been reluctant to open the gate. He got it all off his chest and cursed them painstakingly and comprehensively back to the third generation. He then overheard with pleasure as the commander of the watch – now awake – added totally new details to the charges he had levelled against the soldiers' mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers. Of course, gaining access to King Vizimir was out of the question. That actually suited him, as he was counting on sleeping until matins and the morning bell. He was wrong. Instead of being shown to his billet he was rushed to the guardhouse. Waiting for him there was not the king but the other one, immense and fat. Aplegatt knew him; it was Dijkstra, confidant of the King of Redania. Dijkstra – the messenger knew – was authorised to receive messages meant exclusively for the king's ears. Aplegatt handed him the letters.

'Do you have a spoken message?'

'Yes, sire.'

'Speak.'

'Demavend to Vizimir,' recited Aplegatt, closing his eyes. 'Firstly: the disguised troops are ready for the second night after the July new moon. Take care that Foltest does not let us down. Secondly: I will not grace the conclave of the devious old windbags in Thanedd with my presence, and I advise you to do the same. Thirdly: the Lion Cub is dead.'

Dijkstra grimaced and drummed his fingers on the table.

'Here are letters for King Demavend. And a spoken message . . . Prick up your ears and pay attention. Repeat this to your king, word for word. Only to him, to no one else. No one, do you understand?'

'I do, sire.'

'The message runs thus: Vizimir to Demavend. You must hold back the disguised troops. There has been a betrayal. The Flame has mustered an army in Dol Angra and is only waiting for an excuse. Now repeat.'

Aplegatt repeated it.

'Good,' Dijkstra nodded. 'You will leave at sunup.'

'I've been on the road for five days, Your Excellency,' said the messenger, rubbing his rump. 'Might I but sleep to the morning . . .

Will you permit it?'

'Does now your king, Demavend, sleep at night? Do I sleep? You deserve a punch in the face for the question alone, laddie. You will be given vittles, then stretch out a while on the hay. But you ride at dawn. I've ordered a pure-bred young stallion for you. It'll bear you like the wind. And don't make faces. Take this purse with an extra gratuity, so as not to call Vizimir a skinflint.'

'Thank you, sire.'

'Be careful in the forests by the Pontar. Squirrels have been seen there. But there's no shortage of ordinary brigands in those parts anyway.'

'Oh, I know, sire. Oh, what I did see three days past . . .'

'What did you see?'

Aplegatt quickly reported the events in Anchor. Dijkstra listened, his powerful forearms lying crossed on his chest.

'The Professor . . .' he said lost in thought. 'Heimo Kantor and Little Yaxa. Dispatched by a witcher. In Anchor, on the road to Gors Velen; in other words the road to Thanedd and Garstang . . . And the Lion Cub is dead?'

'What's that, sire?'

'It's of no concern.' Dijkstra raised his head. 'At least not to you. Rest. And at dawn you ride.'

Aplegatt ate what he was brought, lay for a while without sleeping a wink, and was outside the gate by daybreak. The stallion was indeed swift, but skittish. Aplegatt didn't like horses like that.

Something itched unbearably on his back, between his left shoulder blade and his spine. A flea must have bitten him when he was resting in the stable. But there was no way to scratch it.

The stallion danced and neighed. The messenger spurred him and he galloped away. Time was short.

'Gar'ean,' Cairbre hissed, peering from behind a branch, from where he was observing the road. 'En Dh'oine aen evall a strsede!'

Toruviel leapt to her feet, seizing and belting on her sword, and poked Yaevinn in the thigh with the toe of her boot. He had been dozing, leaning against the wall of a hollow, and when he sprang up he scorched his hand as he pushed off from the hot sand.

'Que suecc's?'

‘A rider on the road.’

‘One?’ said Yaevinn, lifting his bow and quiver. ‘Cairbre? Only one?’

‘Only one. He’s getting closer.’

‘Let’s fix him then. It’ll be one less Dh’oine.’

‘Forget it,’ said Toruviel, grabbing him by the sleeve. ‘Why bother? We were supposed to carry out reconnaissance and then join the commando. Are we to murder civilians on the road? Is that what fighting for freedom is about?’

‘Precisely. Stand aside.’

‘If a body’s left on the road, every passing patrol will raise the alarm. The army will set out after us. They’ll stake out the fords, and we might have difficulty crossing the river!’

‘Few people ride along this road. We’ll be far away before anyone finds the body.’

‘That rider’s already far away,’ said Cairbre from the tree. ‘You should have shot instead of yapping. You won’t hit him now. He’s a good two hundred paces away.’

‘With my sixty-pounder?’ Yaevinn stroked his bow. ‘And a thirty-inch arrow? And anyway, that’s never two hundred paces. It’s hundred and fifty, tops. Mire, que spar aen’le.’

‘Yaevinn, forget it . . .’

‘Thaess aep, Toruviel.’

The elf turned his hat around so the squirrel’s tail pinned to it wouldn’t get in the way, quickly and powerfully drew back his bowstring, right to his ear, and then aimed carefully and shot.

Aplegatt did not hear the arrow. It was a ‘silent’ arrow, specially fledged with long, narrow grey feathers, its shaft fluted for increased stiffness and weight reduction. The three-edged, razor-sharp arrow hit the messenger in the back with great force, between his left shoulder blade and his spine. The blades were positioned at an angle – and as they entered his body, the arrow rotated and bored in like a screw, mutilating the tissue, cutting through blood vessels and shattering bone. Aplegatt lurched forward onto his horse’s neck and slid to the ground, limp as a sack of wool.

The sand on the road was hot, heated up so much by the sun that it was painful to the touch. The messenger didn’t feel it. He died at once.

CHAPTER TWO

To say I knew her would be an exaggeration. I think that, apart from the Witcher and the enchantress, no one really knew her. When I saw her for the first time she did not make a great impression on me at all, even in spite of the quite extraordinary accompanying circumstances. I have known people who said that, right away, from the very first encounter, they sensed the foretaste of death striding behind the girl. To me she seemed utterly ordinary, though I knew that ordinary she was not; for which reason I tried to discern, discover – sense – the singularity in her. But I noticed nothing and sensed nothing. Nothing that could have been a signal, a presentiment or a harbinger of those subsequent, tragic events. Events caused by her very existence. And those she caused by her actions.

Dandelion, *Half a Century of Poetry*

Right by the crossroads, where the forest ended, nine posts were driven into the ground. Each was crowned by a cartwheel, mounted flat. Above the wheels teemed crows and ravens, pecking and tearing at the corpses bound to the rims and hubs. Owing to the height of the posts and the great number of birds, one could only imagine what the unidentifiable remains lying on top of the wheels might be. But they were bodies. They couldn't have been anything else.

Ciri turned her head away and wrinkled her nose in disgust. The

wind blew from the posts and the sickening stench of rotting corpses drifted above the crossroads.

‘Wonderful scenery,’ said Yennefer, leaning out of the saddle and spitting on the ground, forgetting that a short time earlier she had fiercely scolded Ciri for doing the same thing. ‘Picturesque and fragrant. But why do this here, at the edge of the wilderness? They usually set things like that up right outside the city walls. Am I right, good people?’

‘They’re Squirrels, noble lady,’ came the hurried explanation from one of the wandering traders they had caught up with at the crossroads. He was guiding the piebald horse harnessed to his fully laden cart. ‘Elves. There, on those posts. And that’s why the posts are by the forest. As a warning to other Squirrels.’

‘Does that mean,’ said the enchantress, looking at him, ‘that captured Scoia’tael are brought here alive . . . ?’

‘Elves, m’lady, seldom let themselves be taken alive,’ interrupted the trader. ‘And even if the soldiers catch one they take them to the city, because civilised non-humans dwell there. When they’ve watched Squirrels being tortured in the town square, they quickly lose interest in joining them. But if any elves are killed in combat, their bodies are taken to a crossroads and hung on posts like this. Sometimes they’re brought from far away and by the time they get here they reek—’

‘To think,’ snapped Yennefer, ‘we have been forbidden from necromantic practices out of respect for the dignity of death and mortal remains; on the grounds that they deserve reverence, peace, and a ritual and ceremonial burial . . .’

‘What are you saying, m’lady?’

‘Nothing. We’re leaving, Ciri, let’s get away from this place. Ugh, I feel as though the stench were sticking to me.’

‘Yuck. Me too,’ said Ciri, trotting around the trader’s cart. ‘Let’s gallop, yes?’

‘Very well . . . Ciri! Gallop, but don’t break your neck!’

They soon saw the city; surrounded by walls, bristling with towers with glistening, pointed roofs. And beyond the city was the sea; greygreen, sparkling in the morning sun, flecked here and there with the white dots of sails. Ciri reined in her horse at the edge of a sandy drop, stood up in her stirrups and greedily breathed in the wind and the scent.

‘Gors Velen,’ said Yennefer, riding up and stopping at her side. ‘We finally made it. Let’s get back on the road.’

They rode off down the road at a canter, leaving several ox carts and people walking, laden down with faggots, behind them.

Once they had overtaken them all and were alone, though, the enchantress slowed and gestured for Ciri to stop.

‘Come closer,’ she said. ‘Closer still. Take the reins and lead my horse. I need both hands.’

‘What for?’

‘I said take the reins, Ciri.’

Yennefer took a small, silver looking glass from her saddlebags, wiped it and then whispered a spell. The looking glass floated out of her hand, rose up and remained suspended above her horse’s neck, right before the enchantress’s face.

Ciri let out a sigh of awe and licked her lips.

The enchantress removed a comb from her saddlebags, took off her beret and combed her hair vigorously for the next few minutes. Ciri remained silent. She knew she was forbidden to disturb or distract Yennefer while she combed her hair. The arresting and apparently careless disarray of her wavy, luxuriant locks was the result of long, hard work and demanded no little effort.

The enchantress reached into her saddlebags once more. She attached some diamond earrings to her ears and fastened bracelets on both wrists. She took off her shawl and undid a few buttons on her blouse, revealing her neck and a black velvet ribbon decorated with an obsidian star.

‘Ha!’ said Ciri at last, unable to hold back. ‘I know why you’re doing that! You want to look nice because we’re going to the city! Am I right?’

‘Yes, you are.’

‘What about me?’

‘What *about* you?’

‘I want to look nice, too! I’ll do my hair—’

‘Put your beret on,’ said Yennefer sharply, eyes still fixed on the looking glass floating above the horse’s ears, ‘right where it was before. And tuck your hair underneath it.’

Ciri snorted angrily but obeyed at once. She had long ago learned

to distinguish the timbre and shades of the enchantress's voice. She had learned when she could get into a discussion and when it was wiser not to.

Yennefer, having at last arranged the locks over her forehead, took a small, green, glass jar out of her saddlebags.

'Ciri,' she said more gently. 'We're travelling in secret. And the journey's not over yet. Which is why you have to hide your hair under your beret. There are people at every gate who are paid for their accurate and reliable observation of travellers. Do you understand?'

'No!' retorted Ciri impudently, reining back the enchantress's black stallion. 'You've made yourself beautiful to make those gate watchmen's eyes pop out! Very secretive, I must say!'

'The city to whose gates we are heading,' smiled Yennefer, 'is Gors Velen. I don't have to disguise myself in Gors Velen; quite the contrary, I'd say. With you it's different. You ought not to be remembered by anyone.'

'The people who'll be staring at you will see me too!'

The enchantress uncorked the jar, which gave off the scent of lilac and gooseberries. She stuck her index finger in and rubbed a little of it under her eyes.

'I doubt,' she said, still smiling mysteriously, 'whether anyone will notice you.'

A long column of riders and wagons stood before the bridge, and travellers crowded around the gatehouse, waiting for their turn to be searched. Ciri fumed and growled, angry at the prospect of a long wait. Yennefer, however, sat up straight in the saddle and rode at a trot, looking high over the heads of the travellers – they parted swiftly for her and made room, bowing in respect. The guards in hauberks also noticed the enchantress at once and gave her free passage, liberally handing out blows with their spear shafts to the stubborn or the overly slow.

'This way, this way, noble lady,' called one of the guards, staring at Yennefer and flushing. 'Come through here, I entreat you. Make way, make way, you churls!'

The hastily summoned officer of the watch emerged from the guardhouse sullen and angry, but at the sight of Yennefer he blushed, opened his eyes and his mouth wide and made a low bow.

'I humbly welcome you to Gors Velen, Your Ladyship,' he

mumbled, straightening up and staring. ‘I am at your command . . . May I be of any service to you? Perhaps an escort? A guide? Should I summon anyone?’

‘That will not be necessary,’ replied Yennefer, straightening up in her saddle and looking down at him. ‘My stay in the city shall be brief. I am riding to Thanedd.’

‘Of course, ma’am,’ said the soldier, shifting from foot to foot and unable to tear his eyes from the enchantress’s face. The other guards also stared. Ciri proudly pulled her shoulders back and raised her head, only to realise no one was looking at her. It was as if she didn’t exist.

‘Yes, ma’am,’ repeated the officer of the guard. ‘To Thanedd, yes . . . For the conclave. I understand, very well. Then I wish you—’

‘Thank you,’ said the enchantress, spurring her horse, clearly uninterested in whatever the officer wanted to wish her. Ciri followed her. The guardsmen bowed to Yennefer as she rode by, but none of them paid Ciri so much as a glance.

‘They didn’t even ask your name,’ she muttered, catching up with Yennefer and carefully guiding her horse between the ruts worn into the muddy road. ‘Did you put a spell on them?’

‘Not on them. On myself.’

The enchantress turned back and Ciri sighed. Yennefer’s eyes burnt with a violet light and her face radiated with beauty. Dazzling beauty. Provocative. Dangerous. And unnatural.

‘The little green jar,’ Ciri realised. ‘What was in it?’

‘Glamarye. An elixir. Or rather a cream for special occasions. Ciri, must you ride into every puddle in the road?’

‘I’m trying to clean my horse’s fetlocks.’

‘It hasn’t rained for a month. That’s slops and horse piss, not water.’

‘Aha . . . Tell me, why did you use that elixir? Did it matter so much to you to—’

‘This is Gors Velen,’ interrupted Yennefer. ‘A city that owes much of its prosperity to sorcerers and enchantresses. Actually, if I’m honest, chiefly to enchantresses. You saw for yourself how enchantresses are treated here. And I had no desire to introduce myself or prove who I am. I preferred to make it obvious at first glance. We turn left after that red house. We’ll walk, Ciri. Slow your

horse down or you'll trample a child.'

'But why did we come *here* then?'

'I just told you.'

Ciri snorted, thinking hard, then pursed her lips and dug her heels hard into her horse. Her mare skittered, almost colliding with a passing horse and cart. The carter got up from his seat, ready to unleash a stream of professional abuse at her, but on seeing Yennefer sat down quickly and began a thorough analysis of the state of his clogs.

'Try to bolt like that once more,' enunciated Yennefer, 'and we'll get cross. You're behaving like an adolescent goat. You're embarrassing me.'

'I figured it out. You want to put me in some school or orphanage, don't you? I don't want to go!'

'Be quiet. People are staring.'

'They're staring at you, not at me! I don't want to go to school! You promised me you'd always be with me, and now you're planning to leave me all by myself! I don't want to be alone!'

'You won't be alone. There are plenty of girls your age at the school. You'll have lots of friends.'

'I don't want any friends. I want to be with you and . . . I thought we'd—'

Yennefer suddenly turned to face her.

'What did you think?'

'I thought we were going to see Geralt,' said Ciri, tossing her head provocatively. 'I know perfectly well what you've been thinking about the entire journey. And why you were sighing at night—'

'Enough,' hissed the enchantress, and the sight of her glaring eyes made Ciri bury her face in her horse's mane. 'You've overstepped the mark. May I remind you that the moment when you could defy me has passed for ever? You only have yourself to blame and now you have to be obedient. You'll do as I say. Understood?'

Ciri nodded.

'Whatever I say will be the best for you. Always. Which is why you will obey me and carry out my instructions. Is that clear? Rein in your horse. We're here.'

'That's the school?' grunted Ciri, looking up at the magnificent

facade of a building. ‘Is that—?’

‘Not another word. Dismount. And mind your manners. This isn’t the school. It’s in Aretuza, not in Gors Velen. This is a bank.’

‘Why do we need a bank?’

‘Think about it. And dismount, as I said. Not in a puddle! Leave your horse; that’s the servant’s job. Take off your gloves. You don’t go into a bank wearing riding gloves. Look at me, Ciri. Straighten your beret. And your collar. Stand up straight. And if you don’t know what to do with your hands then don’t do anything with them!’

Ciri sighed.

The servants who poured out of the entrance and assisted them – falling over each other as they bowed – were dwarves. Ciri looked at them with interest. Although they were all short, sturdy and bearded, in no way did they resemble her companion Yarpen Zigrin or his ‘lads’. These servants looked grey: identically uniformed and unremarkable. They were subservient, too, which could never be said about Yarpen and his lads.

They went inside. The magic elixir was still working, so Yennefer’s appearance immediately caused a great commotion. More dwarves bustled and bowed, and there were further obsequious welcomes and declarations of readiness to serve, which only subsided on the appearance of a fat, opulently attired and white-bearded dwarf.

‘My dear Yennefer!’ boomed the dwarf, jingling a golden chain which dangled from a powerful neck and fell to considerably below his white beard. ‘What a surprise! And what an honour! Please, please come to my office. And you lot; don’t stand there staring. To work, to your abacuses. Wilfli, bring a bottle of Castel de Neuf to my office. Which vintage . . . ? You know what vintage. Be quick, jump to it! This way, this way, Yennefer. It’s an unalloyed joy to see you. You look . . . Oh, dammit, you look drop-dead gorgeous!’

‘As do you,’ the enchantress smiled. ‘You’re keeping well, Giancardi.’

‘Naturally. Please, come through to my office. But no, no, you go first. You know the way after all, Yennefer.’

It was a little dark but pleasantly cool in the office, and the air held a scent Ciri remembered from Jarre the scribe’s tower: the smell of ink and parchment and dust covering the oak furniture,

tapestries and old books.

‘Sit down, please,’ said the banker, pulling a heavy armchair away from the table for Yennefer, and throwing Ciri a curious glance.

‘Hmm . . .’

‘Give her a book, Molnar,’ said the enchantress carelessly, noticing his look. ‘She adores books. She’ll sit at the end of the table and won’t disturb us. Will you, Ciri?’

Ciri did not deign to reply.

‘A book, hmm, hmm,’ said the dwarf solicitously, going over to a chest of drawers. ‘What have we here? Oh, a ledger . . . No, not that. Duties and port charges . . . Not that either. Credit and reimbursement? No. Oh, how did that get here? God only knows . . . But this will probably be just the thing. There you go, miss.’

The book bore the title *Physiologus* and was very old and very tattered. Ciri carefully opened the cover and turned several pages. The book immediately caught her interest, since it concerned mysterious monsters and beasts and was full of illustrations. For the next few moments, she tried to divide her interest between the book and the conversation between the enchantress and the dwarf.

‘Do you have any letters for me, Molnar?’

‘No,’ said the banker, pouring wine for Yennefer and himself. ‘No new ones have arrived. I delivered the last ones a month ago, using our usual method.’

‘I received them, thank you. Did anyone show interest in those letters, by any chance?’

‘No one here,’ smiled Molnar Giancardi. ‘But your suspicions are not unwarranted, my dear. The Vivaldi Bank informed me, confidentially, that several attempts were made to track the letters. Their branch in Vengerberg also uncovered an attempt to track all transactions of your private account. A member of the staff proved to be disloyal.’

The dwarf broke off and looked at the enchantress from beneath his bushy eyebrows. Ciri listened intently. Yennefer said nothing and toyed with her obsidian star.

‘Vivaldi,’ said the banker, lowering his voice, ‘couldn’t or didn’t want to conduct an investigation into the case. The corrupt, disloyal clerk fell, drunk, into a ditch and drowned. An unfortunate accident. Pity. Too quick, too hasty . . .’

‘No use crying over spilt milk,’ the enchantress pouted. ‘I know who was interested in my letters and account; the investigation at Vivaldi’s wouldn’t have produced any revelations.’

‘If you say so . . .’ Giancardi ruffled his beard. ‘Are you going to Thanedd, Yennefer? To the General Mages’ Conclave?’

‘Indeed.’

‘To determine the fate of the world?’

‘Let’s not exaggerate.’

‘Various rumours are doing the rounds,’ said the dwarf coldly. ‘And various things are happening.’

‘What might they be, if it’s not a secret?’

‘Since last year,’ said Giancardi, stroking his beard, ‘strange fluctuations in taxation policy have been observed . . . I know it doesn’t interest you . . .’

‘Go on.’

‘Poll tax and winter billeting tax, both of which are levied directly by the military authorities, have been doubled. Every merchant and entrepreneur also has to pay their “tenth groat” into the royal treasury. This is an entirely new tax: one groat on every noble of turnover. In addition, dwarves, gnomes, elves and halflings are paying increased poll and chimney tax. If they engage in trade or manufacturing they are also charged with a compulsory “non-human” donation of ten per hundred groats. In this way, I hand over sixty per cent of my income to the treasury. My bank, including all its branches, gives the Four Kingdoms six hundred marks a year. For your information, that’s almost three times as much as a wealthy duke or earl pays in levy on an extensive estate.’

‘Are humans not also charged with making the donation for the army?’

‘No. Only the winter billeting tax and poll tax.’

‘That means,’ the enchantress nodded, ‘that the dwarves and other non-humans are financing the campaign being waged against the Scoia’tael in the forests. I expected something like that. But what do taxes have to do with the conclave on Thanedd?’

‘Something always happens after your conclaves,’ muttered the banker. ‘Something *always* happens. This time, I hope it will finally be the opposite. I’m counting on your conclave *stopping* things from happening. I’d be very happy, for example, if these strange price

rises were to stop.'

'Be precise.'

The dwarf leaned back in his chair and linked his fingers across his beard-covered belly.

'I've worked for a good many years in this profession,' he said. 'Sufficiently long to be able to connect certain price fluctuations with certain facts. And recently the prices of precious stones have risen sharply. Because there's a demand for them.'

'Isn't cash usually exchanged for gemstones to avoid losses based on fluctuations in exchange rates and parities of coinage?'

'That too. But gemstones have one other considerable virtue. A pouch of diamonds weighing a few ounces, which can fit inside a pocket, corresponds in value to some fifty marks. The same sum in coins weighs twenty-five pounds and would fill a fair-sized sack. It is considerably quicker and easier to run away with a pouch in one's pocket than with a sack over one's shoulder. And one has one's hands free, which is of no small import. One can hold onto one's wife with one hand and, if needs must, punch someone with the other.'

Ciri snorted quietly, but Yennefer immediately quietened her with a fierce look.

'Which means' – she looked up – 'that some people are preparing, well in advance, to run away. But where to, I wonder?'

'The far north tops the list. Hengfors, Kovir and Poviss. Firstly because it is indeed far away, and secondly because those countries are neutral and are on good terms with Nilfgaard.'

'I see,' said the enchantress, a nasty smile on her lips. 'So it's diamonds into your pocket, grab the wife and head for the north . . . Not too premature? Oh, never mind. So tell me: what else is getting dearer?'

'Boats.'

'What?'

'Boats,' repeated the dwarf, grinning. 'All the boat builders from the coast are building boats, their orders placed by quartermasters from King Foltest's army. The quartermasters pay well and keep placing new orders. Invest in boats, Yennefer, if you have any spare capital. It's a gold mine. You can build a boat from bark and reeds, make out a bill for a barque made of first-rate pine and split the profit with the quartermaster . . .'

‘Don’t joke, Giancardi. Tell me what it’s about.’

‘Those boats,’ said the banker casually, looking at the ceiling, ‘are transported south. To Sodden and Brugge, to the River Jaruga. But from what I hear they aren’t used for catching fish on the river. They’re being hidden in the forest, on the east bank. It’s said the army are spending hours on embarkation and disembarkation drills. But it’s not for real yet.’

‘Aha,’ said Yennefer, biting her lip. ‘And why are some people in such a rush to lend a hand? Jaruga is in the south.’

‘There’s some understandable anxiety,’ muttered the dwarf, glancing over at Ciri, ‘that Emperor Emhyr var Emreis will not be overjoyed when he hears that the aforementioned boats have been launched. Some people think it is sure to infuriate him, and then it’ll be better to be as far as possible from the Nilfgaardian border . . . Hell, at least until the harvest. Once the harvest’s in I’ll sigh with relief. If something’s going to happen, it’ll happen before the harvest.’

‘Before the crops are in the granaries,’ said Yennefer slowly.

‘That’s right. It’s hard to graze horses on stubble, and strongholds with full granaries can endure long sieges. The weather is favourable for farmers and the harvest looks promising . . . yes, the weather is exceptionally beautiful. The sun’s hot, so cats and dogs alike are hoping it’ll soon rain cats and dogs . . . And the Jaruga in Dol Angra is very shallow. It’s easy to ford it. In both directions.’

‘Why Dol Angra?’

‘I hope,’ said the banker, stroking his beard and fixing the sorceress with a penetrating glance, ‘I can trust you.’

‘You’ve always been able to, Giancardi. Nothing has changed.’

‘Dol Angra,’ said the dwarf slowly, ‘means Lyria and Aedirn, who have a military alliance with Temeria. You surely don’t think that Foltest, who’s buying the boats, intends to use them for his own ends, do you?’

‘No,’ said the enchantress slowly. ‘I don’t. Thank you for the information, Molnar. Who knows, perhaps you’re right. Perhaps at the conclave we’ll somehow manage to influence the fate of the world and the people living in it.’

‘Don’t forget about the dwarves,’ snorted Giancardi. ‘Or their banks.’

‘We’ll try not to. Since we’re on the subject . . .’

‘I’m all ears.’

‘I have some expenses, Molnar. And should I take something from my account at the Vivaldi Bank, someone is bound to drown again, so . . .’

‘Yennefer,’ interrupted the dwarf. ‘You have unlimited credit with me. The pogrom in Vengerberg took place long ago. Perhaps you have forgotten, but I never will. None of the Giancardi family will forget. How much do you need?’

‘One thousand five hundred Temerian orens, transferred to the branch of the Cianfanelli Bank in Ellander, in favour of the Temple of Melitele.’

‘Consider it done. A nice transfer; donations to temples aren’t taxed. What else?’

‘What are the annual fees for the school at Aretuza?’

Ciri listened carefully.

‘One thousand two hundred Novigrad crowns,’ said Giancardi. ‘And then you have to add the matriculation fee; around two hundred for a new novice.’

‘It’s bloody gone up.’

‘Everything has. They don’t skimp on novices though; they live like queens at Aretuza. And half the city lives off them: tailors, shoemakers, confectioners, suppliers—’

‘I know. Pay two thousand into the school’s account. Anonymously. With a note that it’s the registration fee and payment of the annual fees for one novice.’

The dwarf put down his quill, looked at Ciri and smiled in understanding. Ciri, pretending to leaf through the book, listened intently.

‘Will that be all, Yennefer?’

‘And three hundred Novigrad crowns for me, in cash. I’ll need at least three dresses for the conclave on Thanedd.’

‘Why cash? I’ll give you a banker’s draft for five hundred. The prices of imported fabric have risen damnably, and you don’t dress in wool or linen, after all. And should you need anything – for yourself or for the future pupil at Aretuza – my shops and storehouses are at your disposal.’

‘Thank you. What interest rate shall we say?’

‘Interest?’ said the dwarf, looking up. ‘You paid the Giancardi family in advance, Yennefer. In Vengerberg. Let’s talk no more about it.’

‘I don’t like debts of this kind, Molnar.’

‘Neither do I. But I’m a merchant, a business-dwarf. I know what an obligation is. I know its value. So I repeat, let’s speak no more about it. You may consider the favours you’ve asked of me sorted. And the favour you didn’t ask about, too.’

Yennefer raised an eyebrow.

‘A certain witcher I consider family,’ chuckled Giancardi, ‘visited the city of Dorian recently. I was informed he ran up a debt of a hundred crowns with a moneylender there. The said moneylender works for me. I’ll cancel the debt, Yennefer.’

The enchantress glanced at Ciri and made a sour grimace.

‘Molnar,’ she said coldly, ‘don’t stick your fingers in a door with broken hinges. I doubt he still holds me dear, and if he learns about any debts being cancelled he’ll hate my guts. You know him, don’t you? Honour is an obsession with him. Was he in Dorian a long time ago?’

‘Some ten days ago. Then he was seen in Little Marsh. I’m informed he went from there to Hirundum, since he had a commission from the farmers there. Some kind of monster to kill, as usual . . .’

‘And, as usual, they’ll be paying him peanuts for killing it.’ Yennefer’s voice changed a little. ‘Which, as usual, will barely cover the cost of medical treatment should he be mauled by the monster. Business as usual. If you really want to do something for me, Molnar, get involved. Contact the farmers from Hirundum and raise the bounty. Give him enough to live on.’

‘Business as usual,’ snorted Giancardi. ‘And if he eventually finds out about it?’

Yennefer fixed her eyes on Ciri, who was watching and listening now, not even attempting to feign interest in *Physiologus*.

‘And from whom,’ she muttered, ‘might he find out?’

Ciri lowered her gaze. The dwarf smiled meaningfully and stroked his beard.

‘Will you be heading towards Hirundum before setting off for Thanedd? Just by chance, of course?’

‘No,’ said the enchantress, turning away. ‘I won’t. Change the subject, Molnar.’

Giancardi stroked his beard again and looked at Ciri. She lowered her head, cleared her throat and fidgeted in her chair.

‘Quite,’ he said. ‘Time to change the subject. But your charge is clearly bored by that book, and by our conversation. And my next topic will bore her even more, I suspect; the fate of the world; the fate of the dwarves of this world; the fate of their banks. What a boring subject for girls, for future graduates of Aretuza . . . Let her spread her wings a little, Yennefer. Let her take a walk around the city—’

‘Oh, yes!’ cried Ciri.

The enchantress looked annoyed and was opening her mouth to protest, but suddenly changed tack. Ciri wasn’t certain, but she suspected the faint wink that accompanied the banker’s suggestion influenced her decision.

‘Let the girl have a look at the wonders of the ancient city of Gors Velen,’ added Giancardi, smiling broadly. ‘She deserves a little freedom before Aretuza. And we’ll chat about certain issues of a . . . hmm . . . personal nature. No, I’m not suggesting the girl goes alone, even though it’s a safe city. I’ll assign her a companion and guardian. One of my younger clerks . . .’

‘Forgive me, Molnar,’ said Yennefer, ignoring the smile, ‘but I’m not convinced that, in the present times and even in a safe city, the presence of a dwarf . . .’

‘It didn’t even occur to me,’ said Giancardi indignantly, ‘to send her with a dwarf. The clerk I have in mind is the son of a respected merchant, every inch a human, if you’ll excuse the expression. Did you think I only employ dwarves? Hey, Wifli! Summon Fabio, and look lively!’

‘Ciri.’ The enchantress walked over to her, bending forward slightly. ‘Make sure there’s no funny business, nothing I’ll have to be ashamed of. And keep schtum, got it? Promise me you’ll watch your words and deeds. Don’t just nod. Promises are made aloud.’

‘I promise, Yennefer.’

‘And glance at the sun from time to time. You’re to be back at noon. Punctually. And should . . . no, I don’t imagine anyone will recognise you. But should you notice someone observing you too intently . . .’

The enchantress put her hand in her pocket and pulled out a small piece of chrysoprase marked with runes, ground and polished into the shape of an hourglass.

'Put that in your pouch and don't lose it. In case of emergencies . . . do you recall the spell? Just use it discreetly; activation emits a powerful echo, and the amulet transmits waves when it's in use. Should there be someone nearby who's sensitive to magic, you'll reveal yourself to them rather than remain hidden. Ah, and take this . . . should you wish to buy something.'

'Thank you, madam.' Ciri put the amulet and coins into her pouch and looked with interest at the boy who had rushed into the office. He was freckled, and his wavy, chestnut hair fell onto the high collar of his grey clerk's uniform.

'Fabio Sachs,' said Giancardi by way of introduction. The boy bowed courteously.

'Fabio, this is Madam Yennefer, our honoured guest and respected client. And this young lady, her ward, wishes to visit our city. You shall be accompanying her and acting as her guide and guardian.'

The boy bowed once more, this time towards Ciri.

'Ciri,' said Yennefer coldly. 'Please stand up.'

She stood up, slightly taken aback, for she knew the custom well enough to know it wasn't expected of her. And she understood at once what Yennefer had seen. The clerk might look the same age as Ciri, but he was a head shorter.

'Molnar,' said the enchantress. 'Who is taking care of whom? Couldn't you assign someone of slightly more substantial dimensions to this task?'

The boy blushed and looked at his superior questioningly. Giancardi nodded his head in assent. The clerk bowed a third time.

'Your Highness,' he began, fluently and confidently. 'I may not be tall, but you can rely on me. I know the city, the suburbs and the surroundings very well. I shall look after this young lady to the best of my ability. And if I, Fabio Sachs the Younger, son of Fabio Sachs, do something to the best of my ability, then . . . many an older boy would not better it.'

Yennefer looked at him for a while and then turned towards the banker.

'Congratulations, Molnar,' she said. 'You know how to choose

your staff. You will have cause to be grateful to your young clerk in the future. It's true: the purest gold rings truest when you strike it. Ciri, I entrust you into the care of Fabio, son of Fabio, in absolute confidence, since he is a serious, trustworthy man.'

The boy blushed to the roots of his chestnut hair. Ciri felt herself blushing, too.

'Fabio,' said the dwarf, opening a small chest and rummaging around in its clinking contents, 'here's half a noble and three – two – five-groat pieces, in the event the young lady requests anything. Should she not, you shall return it. Very well, you may go.'

'By noon, Ciri,' reminded Yennefer. 'And not a moment later.'

'I remember, I remember.'

'My name is Fabio,' said the boy, as soon as they'd run down the stairs and out into the busy street. 'And you're Ciri, right?'

'Yes.'

'What would you like to see in Gors Velen, Ciri? The main street? Goldsmiths' alley? The seaport? Or maybe the market square and the market?'

'Everything.'

'Hmm . . .' mused the boy seriously. 'We've only got till noon . . . It would be best to go to the market square. It's market day today; you can see heaps of amazing things! But first we'll go up onto the wall, where there's a view of the entire bay and the famous Isle of Thanedd. How does that sound?'

'Let's go.'

Carts rumbled past, horses and oxen plodded, coopers rolled barrels along the noisy street, and everyone was in a hurry. Ciri was a little bewildered by the bustle and commotion; she clumsily stepped off the wooden footpath and ended up ankle-deep in mud and muck. Fabio tried to take her arm, but she pulled away.

'I don't need any help to walk!'

'Hmm . . . of course not. Let's go then. We're in the main street here. It's called Kardo Street and connects the two gates: the main gate and the sea gate. You get to the town hall that way. Do you see the tower with the gold weathervane? That's the town hall. And there, where that colourful sign's hanging, that's a tavern called The Unlaced Corset. But we won't, ah . . . won't be going there. We're going over there. We'll take a short cut through the fish market in

Winding Street.'

They turned into a narrow street and came out into a small square squeezed between some buildings. It was full of stalls, barrels and vats, all strongly smelling of fish. The market was full of bustle and noise, with the stallholders and customers alike trying to outshout the seagulls circling above. There were cats sitting at the foot of the wall, pretending that the fish didn't interest them in the least.

'Your mistress,' said Fabio suddenly, weaving his way between the stalls, 'is very strict.'

'I know.'

'She isn't a close relative, is she? It's obvious right away.'

'Is it? How can you tell?'

'She's very beautiful,' said Fabio, with the cruel, casual frankness of a young person. Ciri turned away abruptly. But before she could treat Fabio to a stinging comment about his freckles or his height, the boy was pulling her between handcarts, barrels and stalls, explaining all the time that the bastion towering above the square was called the Thief's Bastion, that the stones used for its construction came from the seabed and that the trees growing at its foot were called plantains.

'You're very quiet, Ciri,' he suddenly said.

'Me?' Ciri pretended to be astonished. 'Not at all! I'm just listening carefully to what you're saying. It's all really interesting, you know? And I just wanted to ask you . . .'

'Fire away.'

'Is it far to . . . to the city of Aretuza?'

'It isn't far at all. Aretuza isn't even a city. We'll go up on the wall and I'll show you. Look, the steps are over there.'

The wall was high and the steps steep. Fabio was sweating and panting, and no small wonder, because he never stopped talking while they climbed. Ciri learned that the wall surrounding the city of Gors Velen was a recent construction, much more recent than the city itself, which had been built long before by the elves. She also found out it was thirty-five feet high and that it was a so-called case-mate wall, made of hewn stones and unfired brick, because that type of construction was the most resistant to blows from battering rams.

At the top they were greeted and fanned by a fresh sea wind. Ciri breathed it in joyfully after the heavy, stagnant stuffiness of the city. She rested her elbows on the top of the wall, looking down over the harbour dotted with colourful sails.

'What's that, Fabio? That mountain?'

'That's the Isle of Thanedd.'

The island seemed very close, and it didn't resemble an island. It looked like the base of a gigantic stone column stuck into the seabed, a huge ziggurat encircled by a spirally twisting road and zigzagging steps and terraces. The terraces were green with groves and gardens, and protruding from the greenery – which clung to the rocks like swallows' nests – rose soaring white towers and the ornate domes of groups of buildings framed by cloisters. The buildings gave no clue at all that they had been constructed from stone. They seemed to have been carved directly from the mountain's rocky slopes.

'All of this was built by elves,' explained Fabio. 'It's said they did it with the help of magic. However, for as long as anyone can remember, Thanedd has belonged to sorcerers. Near the summit, where you can see those gleaming domes, is Garstang Palace. The great Conclave of Mages will begin there in a few days. And there, look, on the very top. That solitary tower with battlements is Tor Lara, the Tower of Gulls . . .'

'Can you get there overland? I can see it's very close.'

'Yes, you can. There's a bridge connecting the bay to the island. We can't see it because the trees are in the way. Do you see those red roofs at the foot of the mountain? That's Loxia Palace. The bridge ends there. You have to pass through Loxia to reach the road to the upper terraces . . .'

'And those lovely cloisters and little bridges? And those gardens? How do they stay on the rock without falling off . . . ? What is that palace?'

'That's Aretuza, the place you were asking about. The famous school for young enchantresses is there.'

'Oh,' said Ciri, moistening her lips, 'it's there . . . Fabio?'

'Yes.'

'Do you ever see the young enchantresses who attend the school? The school at Aretuza?'

The boy looked at her, clearly astonished.

‘No, never! No one sees them! They aren’t allowed to leave the island or visit the city. And no one has access to the school. Even the burgrave and the bailiff can only travel as far as Loxia if they have business for the enchantresses. It’s on the lowest level.’

‘That’s what I thought.’ Ciri nodded, staring at Aretuza’s shimmering roofs. ‘It’s not a school. It’s a prison. On an island, on a rock, above a cliff. Quite simply: a prison.’

‘I suppose it is,’ admitted Fabio after a moment’s thought. ‘It’s pretty difficult to get out of there . . . But no, it’s not like being in prison. The novices are girls, after all. They need protecting—’

‘From what?’

‘Er . . .’ the boy stammered. ‘I mean, you know what . . .’

‘No, I don’t.’

‘Oh . . . I think . . . Look, Ciri, no one locks them up in the school by force. They must want to be there . . .’

‘Of course,’ smiled Ciri mischievously. ‘If they want to, they can stay in that prison. If they didn’t, they wouldn’t allow themselves to be locked up there. There’s nothing to it. You’d just have to choose the right moment to make a break for it. But you’d have to do it before you end up there, because once you went in it would be too late . . .’

‘What? Run away? Where would they run to—?’

‘They,’ she interrupted, ‘probably wouldn’t have anywhere to go, the poor things. Fabio? Where’s that town . . . Hirundum?’

The boy looked at her in surprise.

‘Hirundum’s not a city,’ he said. ‘It’s a huge farm. There are orchards and gardens there which supply vegetables and fruit to all the towns and cities in the area. There are also fishponds where they breed carp and other fish.’

‘How far is it from here to Hirundum? Which way is it? Show me.’

‘Why do you want to know?’

‘Just show me, will you?’

‘Do you see that road leading westwards? Where those wagons are? That’s the road to Hirundum. It’s about fifteen miles away, through forests all the way.’

‘Fifteen miles,’ repeated Ciri. ‘Not far, if you’ve got a good horse .

. . Thank you, Fabio.'

'What are you thanking me for?'

'Never mind. Now take me to the town square. You promised.'

'Let's go.'

Ciri had never before seen such a crush and hubbub as there was in the market square in Gors Velen. The noisy fish market they'd walked through a little earlier seemed like a quiet temple compared to this place. It was absolutely huge, but still so crowded that Ciri assumed they would only be able to look at it from a distance. There would be no chance of actually getting into it. Fabio, however, bravely forced his way into the seething crowd, pulling her along by the hand. Ciri felt dizzy at once.

The market traders bellowed, the customers bellowed even louder, and children lost in the crowd howled and wailed. Cattle lowed, sheep bleated, and poultry clucked and quacked. Dwarven craftsmen doggedly banged their hammers onto sheets of metal, cursing foully whenever they interrupted their hammering to take a drink. Pipes, fiddles and dulcimers could be heard from various parts of the square; apparently some minstrels and musicians were performing. To cap it all, someone hidden in the crowd was blowing a brass trumpet incessantly. That someone was clearly not a musician.

Dodging a pig that trotted past with a piercing squeal, Ciri fell against a cage of chickens. A moment later, she was jostled by a passer-by and trod on something soft that meowed. She jumped back and barely avoided being trampled on by a huge, smelly, revolting, fearsome-looking beast, shoving people aside with its shaggy flanks.

'What was that?' she groaned, trying to regain her balance. 'Fabio?'

'A camel. Don't be afraid.'

'I'm not afraid! The thought of it!'

Ciri looked around curiously. She watched halflings at work creating ornate wineskins from goat's hide in full view of the public, and she was delighted by the beautiful dolls on display at a stall run by a pair of half-elves. She looked at wares made of malachite and jasper, which a gruff, gloomy gnome was offering for sale. She inspected the swords in a swordsmith's workshop with interest and the eye of an expert. She watched girls weaving wicker

baskets and concluded that there was nothing worse than work.

The horn blower stopped blowing. Someone had probably killed him.

'What smells so delicious round here?'

'Doughnuts,' said Fabio, feeling the pouch. 'Do you wish to eat one?'

'I wish to eat two.'

The vendor handed them three doughnuts, took the five-groat piece and gave them four coppers in change, one of which he broke in half. Ciri, slowly regaining her poise, watched the operation of the coin being broken while voraciously devouring the first doughnut.

'Is that,' she asked, getting started on the second, 'where the expression "not worth a broken groat" comes from?'

'That's right,' said Fabio, swallowing his doughnut. 'There aren't any smaller coins than groats. Don't people use half-groats where you come from?'

'No.' Ciri licked her fingers. 'Where I come from we used gold ducats. And anyway all that breaking business was stupid and pointless.'

'Why?'

'Because I wish to eat a third doughnut.'

The plum-jam-filled doughnuts acted like the most miraculous elixir. Ciri was now in a good mood, and the teeming square had stopped terrifying her and had even begun to please her. Now she didn't let Fabio drag her behind him, but pulled him into the biggest crowd herself, towards a place where someone on a makeshift rostrum built of barrels was addressing the crowd. The speaker was fat and a bit past it. Ciri recognised him as a wandering priest by his shaved head and greyish-brown robes. She had seen his kind before, as they would occasionally visit the Temple of Melitele in Ellander. Mother Nenneke never referred to them as anything other than 'fanatical chumps'.

'There is but one law in the world!' roared the podgy priest. 'Divine law! The whole of nature is subject to that law, the whole of earth and everything that lives on the earth! And spells and magic are contrary to that law! Thus are sorcerers damned, and close is the day of wrath when fire will pour from the heavens and destroy their vile island! Then down will come the walls of Loxia, Aretuza

and Garstang, where those pagans are gathering to hatch their intrigues! Those walls will tumble down . . .'

'And we'll have to build the sodding things again,' muttered a journeyman bricklayer in a lime-spattered smock standing next to Ciri.

'I admonish you all, good and pious people,' yelled the priest. 'Don't believe the sorcerers, don't turn to them for advice or aid! Be beguiled neither by their beautiful looks nor their clever speech, for verily I do say to you that those magicians are like whitened graves, beautiful on the outside but full of putrefaction and rotten bones on the inside!'

'See what a powerful gob 'e 'as on 'im?' remarked a young woman with a basket full of carrots. 'E's 'aving a go at the magicians, coz 'e's jealous of 'em and that's that.'

'Course he is,' said the bricklayer. 'Look at his noggin, he's bald as an egg, and that belly hangs down to his knees. On the other hand, sorcerers are handsome; they don't get fat or bald . . . And sorceresses, well, they're just gorgeous . . .'

'Only because they've sold their souls to the devil for their beauty!' yelled a short individual with a shoemaker's hammer stuck into his belt.

'Fool of a cobbler! Were it not for the ladies of Aretuza, you'd long since have gone begging! Thanks to them you've got food in your belly!'

Fabio pulled Ciri by the sleeve, and they plunged once more into the crowd, which carried them towards the middle of the square. They heard the pounding of a drum and loud shouting, calling for silence. The crowd had no intention of being quiet, but it didn't bother the town crier on the wooden platform in the least. He had a powerful, trained voice and knew how to use it.

'Let it be known,' he bellowed, unfurling a roll of parchment, 'that Hugo Ansbach of halfling stock is outlawed, for he gave lodgings and victuals to those villainous elves called Squirrels. The same applies to Justin Ingvar, a blacksmith of dwarven stock, who forged arrowheads for those wrongdoers. Thus does the burgrave announce that both are wanted and orders them to be hunted down. Whosoever seizes them will earn a reward of fifty crowns. Any who gives them victuals or shelter shall be considered an accomplice to their crime and shall suffer the same punishment. And should they be apprehended in a village or hamlet, the entire village or hamlet

will pay a fine—'

'But who,' shouted someone in the crowd, 'would give a halfling shelter? They should be hunted on their farms, and when they're found, all those non-humans should be slung into the dungeons!'

'To the gallows, not the dungeons!'

The town crier began to read further announcements issued by the burgrave and town council, and Ciri lost interest. She was just about to extricate herself from the crowd when she suddenly felt a hand on her bottom. A totally non-accidental, brazen and extremely skilled hand.

The crush ought to have prevented her from turning around to look, but in Kaer Morhen Ciri had learned how to manoeuvre in places that were difficult to move around in. She turned around, causing something of a disturbance. The young priest with the shaved head standing right behind her smiled an arrogant, rehearsed smile. 'Right, then,' said that smile, 'what are we going to do now? You'll blush sweetly and that'll be the end of it, won't it?'

It was clear the priest had never had to deal with one of Yennefer's pupils.

'Keep your hands to yourself, baldy!' yelled Ciri, white with rage. 'Grab your own arse, you . . . You whitewashed tomb!'

Taking advantage of the fact that the priest was pinned in by the crowd and couldn't move, she intended to kick him, but Fabio prevented that, hurriedly pulling her well away from the priest and the site of the incident. Seeing that she was trembling with rage, he treated her to a few fritters dusted with caster sugar, at the sight of which Ciri immediately calmed down and forgot about the incident. From where they were standing by the stall they had a view of a scaffold with a pillory, but with no criminal in it. The scaffold itself was decorated with garlands of flowers and was being used by a group of wandering minstrels, dressed up like parrots, sawing away vigorously at violins and playing flutes and bagpipes. A young black-haired woman in a sequined waistcoat sang and danced, shaking a tambourine and merrily stamping tiny slippers.

To bite a witch beside a path,

Some vipers did contrive.

The snakes all perished one by one,

The witch is still alive.

The crowd gathered around the scaffold laughed heartily and clapped along. The fritter seller threw another batch into the hot

oil. Fabio licked his fingers and tugged Ciri away by the sleeve.

There were innumerable stalls and delicious foods were being offered everywhere. They each ate a cream bun, then shared a smoked eel, which they followed with something very strange, which had been fried and impaled on a skewer. After that, they stopped by some barrels of sauerkraut and pretended to be tasting it, as if intending to buy a large quantity. When they had eaten their fill but then didn't buy anything the stallholder called them 'a pair of little shits'.

They walked on. Fabio bought a small basket of bergamot pears with the rest of the money. Ciri looked up at the sky but decided it still wasn't noon.

'Fabio? What are those tents and booths over there, by the wall?'

'Sideshows. Want to see?'

'Yes.'

There was a crowd of men in front of the first tent, shuffling about excitedly. The sounds of a flute floated out from inside.

'The black-skinned Leila . . .' read Ciri, struggling to decipher the lopsided, crooked writing on the flap, 'reveals all the secrets of her body in the dance . . . What nonsense! What kind of secrets . . . ?'

'Come on, let's go,' said Fabio, urging her on and blushing slightly. 'Oh, look, this is more interesting. There's a clairvoyant here who'll tell your fortune. I've still got two groats. That should be enough—'

'Waste of money,' snorted Ciri. 'Some prophecy it'll be, for two groats! To predict the future you have to be a prophetess. Divination is a great gift. Even among enchantresses, no more than one in a hundred has that kind of ability—'

'A fortune-teller predicted,' interrupted the boy, 'that my eldest sister would get married and it came true. Don't make faces, Ciri. Come on, let's have our fortunes told . . .'

'I don't want to get married. I don't want my fortune told. It's hot and that tent stinks of incense. I'm not going in. Go in yourself, if you want, and I'll wait. I just don't understand why you want a prophecy. What would you like to know?'

'Well . . .' stammered Fabio. 'Mostly, it's . . . it's if I'm going to travel. I'd like to travel. And see the whole world . . .'

He will, thought Ciri suddenly, feeling dizzy. *He'll sail on great*

white sailing ships . . . He'll sail to countries no one has seen before him . . . Fabio Sachs, explorer. He'll give his name to a cape, to the very furthest point of an as-yet unnamed continent. When he's fifty-four, married with a son and three daughters, he'll die far from his home and his loved ones . . . of an as-yet unnamed disease . . .

'Ciri! What's the matter with you?'

She rubbed her face. She felt as though she were coming up through water, rising to the surface from the bottom of a deep, ice-cold lake.

'It's nothing . . .' she mumbled, looking around and coming back to herself. 'I felt dizzy . . . It's because of this heat. And because of that incense from the tent . . .'

'Because of that cabbage, more like,' said Fabio seriously. 'We oughtn't to have eaten so much. My belly's gurgling too.'

'There's nothing wrong with me!' snapped Ciri, lifting her head briskly and actually feeling better. The thoughts that had flown through her mind like a whirlwind dissipated and were lost in oblivion. 'Come on, Fabio. Let's go.'

'Do you want a pear?'

'Course I do.'

A group of teenage boys were playing spinning tops for money. The top, carefully wound up with string, had to be set spinning with a deft tug, like cracking a whip, to make it follow a circular path around a course drawn with chalk. Ciri had beaten most of the boys in Skellige and all the novices at the Temple of Melitele at spinning tops. So she was toying with the thought of joining the game and relieving the urchins not only of their coppers, but also of their patched britches, when her attention was suddenly caught by some loud cheering.

At the very end of a row of tents and booths stood a curious semicircular enclosure squeezed between the foot of the wall and some stone steps. It was formed from sheets of canvas stretched over six-foot poles. There was an entrance between two of the poles, blocked by a tall, pockmarked man wearing a jerkin and striped trousers tucked into sailor's boots. A small group of people milled around in front of him, and folk would throw a few coppers into the pockmarked man's hand and then disappear behind the canvas. The pockmarked man was dropping the money into a large sack, which he jingled as he shouted hoarsely.

‘Roll up, roll up! Over here! You will see, with your own eyes, the most frightful creature the gods ever created! Horror of horrors! A live basilisk, the venomous terror of the Zerrikan deserts, the devil incarnate, an insatiable man-eater! You’ve never seen such a monster, folks. Freshly caught, brought from beyond the seas in a coracle. Come and see this vicious, live basilisk with your own eyes, because you’ll never see one again. Not never, not nowhere! Last chance! Here, behind me, for a mere fifteen groats. Just ten groats for women with children!’

‘Ha,’ said Ciri, shooing wasps away from the pears. ‘A basilisk? A live one? This I must see. I’ve only seen them in books. Come on, Fabio.’

‘I haven’t got any more money . . .’

‘But I have. I’ll pay for you. Come on, in we go.’

‘That’ll be six,’ said the pockmarked man, looking down at the four coppers in his palm. ‘*Three* five-groat pieces each. Only women with children get in cheap.’

‘He,’ replied Ciri, pointing at Fabio with a pear, ‘is a child. And I’m a woman.’

‘Only women carrying children,’ growled the pockmarked man. ‘Go on, chuck in two more five-groat pieces, clever little miss, or scram and let other people through. Make haste, folks! Only three more empty spaces!’

Inside the canvas enclosure townspeople were milling around, forming a solid ring around a stage constructed of wooden planks. On the stage stood a wooden cage covered with a carpet. Having let in the final spectators, the pockmarked man jumped onto the stage, seized a long pole and used it to pull the carpet away. The air filled with the smell of offal mixed with an unpleasant reptilian stench. The spectators rumbled and stepped back a little.

‘You are being sensible, good people,’ said the pockmarked man. ‘Not too close, for it may be perilous!’

Inside the cage, which was far too cramped for it, lay a lizard. It was covered in dark, strangely shaped scales and curled up into a ball. When the pockmarked man knocked the cage with his pole, the reptile writhed, grated its scales against the bars, extended its long neck and let out a piercing hiss, revealing sharp, white fangs, which contrasted vividly with the almost black scales around its maw. The spectators exhaled audibly. A shaggy little dog in the arms of a woman who looked like a stallholder yapped shrilly.

‘Look carefully, good people,’ called the pockmarked man. ‘And be glad that beasts like this don’t live near our city! This monstrous basilisk is from distant Zerrikania! Don’t come any closer because, though it’s secure in a cage, its breath alone could poison you!’

Ciri and Fabio finally pushed their way through the ring of spectators.

‘The basilisk,’ continued the pockmarked man on stage, resting on the pole like a guard leaning on his halberd, ‘is the most venomous beast in the world! For the basilisk is the king of all the serpents! Were there more basilisks, this world would disappear without a trace! Fortunately, it is a most rare monster; it only ever hatches from an egg laid by a cockerel. And you know yourselves that not every cockerel can lay an egg, but only a knavish one who presents his rump to another cockerel in the manner of a mother hen.’

The spectators reacted with general laughter to this superior – or possibly posterior – joke. The only person not laughing was Ciri. She didn’t take her eyes off the creature, which, disturbed by the noise, was writhing and banging against the bars of the cage, biting them and vainly trying to spread its wings in the cramped space.

‘An egg laid by a cockerel like that,’ continued the pockmarked man, ‘must be brooded by a hundred and one venomous snakes! And when the basilisk hatches from the egg –’

‘That isn’t a basilisk,’ said Ciri, chewing a bergamot pear. The pockmarked man looked at her, askance.

‘– when the basilisk hatches, I was saying,’ he continued, ‘then it devours all the snakes in the nest, imbibing their venom without suffering any harm from it. It becomes so swollen with venom itself that it is able to kill not only with its teeth, not only with its touch, but with its breath alone! And when a mounted knight ups and stabs a basilisk with his spear, the poison runs up the shaft, killing both rider and horse outright!’

‘That’s the falsest lie,’ said Ciri aloud, spitting out a pip.

‘It’s the truest truth!’ protested the pockmarked man. ‘He kills them; he kills the horse and its rider!’

‘Yeah, right!’

‘Be quiet, miss!’ shouted the market trader with the dog. ‘Don’t interfere! We want to marvel and listen!’

‘Ciri, stop it,’ whispered Fabio, nudging her in the ribs. Ciri snorted at him, reaching into the basket for another pear.

‘Every animal,’ said the pockmarked man, raising his voice against the murmur which was intensifying among the spectators, ‘flees the basilisk as soon as it hears its hiss. Every animal, even a dragon – what am I saying? – even a cockrodile, and a cockrodile is awfully dreadful, as anyone who’s seen one knows. The one and only animal that doesn’t fear the basilisk is the marten. The marten, when it sees the monster in the wilderness, runs as fast as it can into the forest, looks for certain herbs known only to it and eats them. Then the basilisk’s venom is harmless, and the marten can bite it to death . . .’

Ciri snorted with laughter and made a long-drawn-out, extremely rude noise with her lips.

‘Hey, little know-it-all!’ burst out the pockmarked man. ‘If it’s not to your liking, you know where the door is! No one’s forcing you to listen or look at the basilisk!’

‘That’s no basilisk!’

‘Oh, yeah? So what is it, Miss Know-It-All?’

‘It’s a wyvern,’ said Ciri, throwing away the pear stalk and licking her fingers. ‘It’s a common wyvern. Young, small, starving and dirty. But a wyvern, that’s all. Vyverne, in the Elder Speech.’

‘Oh, look at this!’ shouted the pockmarked man. ‘What a clever clogs! Shut your trap, because when I—’

‘I say,’ spoke up a fair-haired young man in a velvet beret and a squire’s doublet without a coat of arms. He had a delicate, pale girl in an apricot dress on his arm. ‘Not so fast, my good animal catcher! Do not threaten the noble lady, for I will readily tan your hide with my sword. And furthermore, something smacks of trickery here!’

‘What trickery, young sir knight?’ choked the pockmarked man. ‘She’s lying, the horri— I meant to say, the high-born young lady is in error. It *is* a basilisk!’

‘It’s a wyvern,’ repeated Ciri.

‘What do you mean, a Vernon! It’s a basilisk! Just look how menacing it is, how it hisses, how it bites at its cage! Look at those teeth! It’s got teeth, I tell you, like—’

‘Like a wyvern,’ scowled Ciri.

‘If you’ve taken leave of your senses,’ said the pockmarked man, fixing her with a gaze that a real basilisk would have been proud of, ‘then come closer! Step up, and let it breathe on you! You laughed at its venom. Now let’s see you croak! Come along, step up!’

‘Not a problem,’ said Ciri, pulling her arm out of Fabio’s grasp and taking a step forward.

‘I shan’t allow it!’ cried the fair-haired squire, dropping his apricot companion’s arm and blocking Ciri’s way. ‘It cannot be! You are risking too much, fair lady.’

Ciri, who had never been addressed like that before, blushed a little, looked at the young man and fluttered her eyelids in a way she had tried out numerous times on the scribe Jarre.

‘There’s no risk whatsoever, noble knight,’ she smiled seductively, in spite of all Yennefer’s warnings, and reminders about the fable of the simpleton gazing foolishly at the cheese. ‘Nothing will happen to me. That so-called poisonous breath is claptrap.’

‘I would, however, like to stand beside you,’ said the youth, putting his hand on the hilt of his sword. ‘To protect and defend . . . Will you allow me?’

‘I will,’ said Ciri, not knowing why the expression of rage on the apricot maiden’s face was causing her such pleasure.

‘It is I who shall protect and defend her!’ said Fabio, sticking his chest out and looking at the squire defiantly. ‘And I shall stand with her too!’

‘Gentlemen.’ Ciri puffed herself up with pride and stuck her nose in the air. ‘A little more dignity. Don’t shove. There’ll be room enough for everyone.’

The ring of spectators swayed and murmured as she bravely approached the cage, followed so closely by the boys that she could almost feel their breath on her neck. The wyvern hissed furiously and struggled, its reptilian stench assaulting their noses. Fabio gasped loudly, but Ciri didn’t withdraw. She drew even closer and held out a hand, almost touching the cage. The monster hurled itself at the bars, raking them with its teeth. The crowd swayed once more and someone cried out.

‘Well?’ Ciri turned around, hands proudly on her hips. ‘Did I die? Has that so-called venomous monster poisoned me? He’s no more a basilisk than I’m a—’

She broke off, seeing the sudden paleness on the faces of Fabio and the squire. She turned around quickly and saw two bars of the cage parting under the force of the enraged lizard, tearing rusty nails out of the frame.

‘Run!’ she shouted at the top of her voice. ‘The cage is breaking!’

The crowd rushed, screaming, for the door. Several of them tried to tear their way through the canvas sheeting, but they only managed to entangle themselves and others in it, eventually collapsing into a struggling, yelling mass of humanity. Just as Ciri was trying to jump out of the way the squire seized her arm, and the two of them staggered, tripped and fell to the ground, taking Fabio down with them. Anxious yaps came from the stallholder's shaggy little dog, colourful swearwords from the pockmarked man and piercing shrieks from the disorientated apricot maiden.

The bars of the cage broke with a crack and the wyvern struggled free. The pockmarked man jumped down from the stage and tried to restrain it with his pole, but the writhing monster knocked it out of his hand with one blow of its claws and lashed him with its spiny tail, transforming his pockmarked cheek into a bloody pulp. Hissing and spreading its tattered wings, the wyvern flew down from the stage; its sights were set on Ciri, Fabio and the squire, who were trying to get to their feet. The apricot maiden fainted and fell flat on her back. Ciri tensed, preparing to jump, but realised she wouldn't make it.

They were saved by the shaggy little dog who, still yapping shrilly, broke free from its owner's arms – she had fallen and become entangled in her own six skirts – and lunged at the monster. The wyvern hissed, rose up, pinned the cur down with its talons, twisted its body with a swift, serpentine movement and sank its teeth into the dog's neck. The dog howled wildly.

The squire struggled to his knees and reached down to his side, but didn't find his hilt. Ciri had been too quick for him. She had drawn his sword from its scabbard in a lightning-fast movement and leapt into a half-turn. The wyvern rose, the dog's severed head hanging in its sharp-toothed jaws.

It seemed to Ciri that all the movements she had learned in Kaer Morhen were performing themselves, almost without her conscious will or participation. She slashed the astonished wyvern in the belly and immediately spun away to avoid it. The lunging lizard fell to the sand spurting blood. Ciri jumped over it, skilfully avoiding its swishing tail. Then, with a sure, accurate and powerful blow, she hacked into the monster's neck, jumped back, and made an instinctive – but now unnecessary – evasive manoeuvre, and then struck again at once, this time chopping through its backbone. The wyvern writhed briefly in pain and then stopped moving; only its serpentine tail continued to thrash and slap the ground, raining sand all around.

Ciri quickly shoved the bloodied sword into the squire's hand.

'Danger over!' she shouted to the fleeing crowd and the spectators still trying to extricate themselves from the canvas sheeting. 'The monster's dead! This brave knight has killed him dead . . .'

She suddenly felt a tightening in her throat and a whirling in her stomach; everything went black. Something hit her in the bottom with tremendous force, making her teeth snap together. She looked around blankly. The thing that had struck her was the ground.

'Ciri . . .' whispered Fabio, kneeling beside her. 'What's the matter? By the gods, you're as white as a sheet . . .'

'It's a pity,' she muttered, 'you can't see yourself.'

People crowded around. Several of them prodded the wyvern's body with sticks and pokers. A few of them began dressing the pockmarked man's wounds. The rest cheered the heroic squire: the fearless dragon killer, the only person to keep a cool head, and prevent a massacre. The squire revived the apricot maiden, still staring somewhat dumbstruck at the blade of his sword which was covered with smeared streaks of drying blood.

'My hero . . .' said the apricot maiden, coming to and throwing her arms around the squire's neck. 'My saviour! My darling!'

'Fabio,' said Ciri weakly, seeing the city constables pushing through the crowd. 'Help me get up and get us out of here. Quickly.'

'Poor children . . .' said a fat townswoman in a cap as she watched them sneak away from the crowd. 'Oh, you were lucky. Were it not for this valiant young knight, your mothers would be sorely grieving!'

'Find out who that young squire serves!' shouted a craftsman in a leather apron. 'That deed deserves a knightly belt and spurs!'

'And to the pillory with the animal catcher! He deserves a thrashing! Bringing a monster like that into the city, among people . . .'

'Water, and quickly! The maiden's fainted again!'

'My darling Foo-Foo!' the stallholder suddenly howled, as she leaned over what was left of the shaggy little dog. 'My poor little sweetheart! Someone, please! Catch that wench, that rascal who infuriated the dragon! Where is she? Someone grab her! It wasn't the animal catcher; she's to blame for all this!'

The city constables, helped by numerous volunteers, began to shove their way through the crowd and look around. Ciri had overcome her dizziness.

'Fabio,' she whispered. 'Let's split up. We'll meet up in a bit in that alleyway we came along. Go. And if anyone stops you to ask, you don't know me or anything about me.'

'But . . . Ciri—'

'Go!'

She squeezed Yennefer's amulet in her fist and murmured the activation spell. It started working in an instant, and there was no time to lose. The constables, who had been forcing their way through the crowd towards her, stopped, confused.

'What the bloody hell?' said one of them in astonishment, looking, it would have seemed, straight at Ciri. 'Where is she? I just saw her . . .'

'There, over there!' yelled another, pointing the wrong way.

Ciri turned around and walked away, still a little dazed and weakened by the rush of adrenaline and the activation of the amulet. The amulet was working perfectly; no one could see her and no one was paying any attention to her. Absolutely no one. As a consequence she was jostled, stamped on and kicked innumerable times before she finally extricated herself from the crowd. By some miracle she escaped being crushed by a chest thrown from a cart. She almost had an eye poked out by a pitchfork. Spells, it turned out, had their good and bad sides, and as many advantages as disadvantages.

The amulet's effects did not last long. Ciri was not powerful enough to control it or extend the time the spell was active. Fortunately, the spell wore off at the right moment, just as she left the crowd and saw Fabio waiting for her in the alley.

'Oh my,' said the boy. 'Oh my goodness, Ciri. You're here. I was worried . . .'

'You needn't have been. Come on, quickly. Noon has passed. I've got to get back.'

'You were pretty handy with that monster.' The boy looked at her in admiration. 'You moved like lightning! Where did you learn to do that?'

'What? The squire killed the wyvern.'

‘That’s not true. I saw—’

‘You didn’t see anything! Please, Fabio, not a word to anyone. Anyone. And particularly not to Madam Yennefer. Oh, I’d be in for it if she found out . . .’

She fell silent.

‘Those people were right.’ She pointed behind her, towards the market square. ‘I provoked the wyvern . . . It was all my fault . . .’

‘No, it wasn’t,’ retorted Fabio firmly. ‘That cage was rotten and bodged together. It could have broken any second: in an hour, tomorrow, the next day . . . It’s better that it happened now, because you saved—’

‘The squire did!’ yelled Ciri. ‘The squire! Will you finally get that into your head? I’m telling you, if you grass me up, I’ll turn you into a . . . a . . . well something horrible! I know spells! I’ll turn you into —’

‘Stop,’ someone called out behind them. ‘That’s quite enough of that!’

One of the women walking behind them had dark, smoothly combed hair, shining eyes and thin lips. She had a short mauve camaka cape trimmed with dormouse fur thrown over her shoulders.

‘Why aren’t you in school, novice?’ she asked in a cold, resonant voice, eyeing Ciri with a penetrating gaze.

‘Wait, Tissaia,’ said the other woman, who was younger, tall and fair-haired, and wore a green dress with a plunging neckline. ‘I don’t know her. I don’t think she’s—’

‘Yes, she is,’ interrupted the dark-haired woman. ‘I’m certain she’s one of your girls, Rita. You can’t know them all. She’s one of the ones who sneaked out of Loxia during the confusion when we were moving dormitories. And she’ll admit as much in a moment. Well, novice, I’m waiting.’

‘What?’ frowned Ciri.

The woman pursed her thin lips and straightened her cuffs.

‘Who did you steal that amulet of concealment from? Or did someone give it to you?’

‘What?’

‘Don’t test my patience. Name, class, and the name of your

preceptress. Quickly!'

'What?'

'Are you acting dumb, novice? Your name! What is your name?'

Ciri clenched her teeth together and her eyes flared with a green glow.

'Anna Ingeborga Klopstock,' she muttered brazenly.

The woman raised a hand and Ciri immediately realised the full extent of her error. Only once had Yennefer, wearied by Ciri's endless complaining, showed her how a paralysing spell worked. The sensation had been extremely unpleasant. It was the same this time, too.

Fabio yelled weakly and lunged towards her, but the fair-haired woman seized him by the collar and held him fast. The boy struggled but the woman's grip was like iron. Ciri couldn't budge an inch either. She felt as though she were slowly becoming rooted to the spot. The dark-haired woman leaned over her and fixed her with her shining eyes.

'I do not approve of corporal punishment,' she said icily, straightening her cuffs once more. 'But I'll do my best to have you flogged, novice. Not for disobedience, nor for theft, nor for truancy. Not because you are wearing non-regulation clothing. Not for being in the company of a boy and not even for talking to him about matters you are forbidden to speak of. You will be flogged for not recognising an arch-mistress.'

'No!' shrieked Fabio. 'Don't harm her, noble lady! I'm a clerk in Mr Molnar Giancardi's bank, and this young lady is—'

'Shut up!' yelled Ciri. 'Shut—' The gagging spell was cast quickly and brutally. She tasted blood in her mouth.

'Well?' the fair-haired woman urged Fabio, releasing the boy and tenderly smoothing his ruffled collar. 'Speak. Who is this haughty young maid?'

Margarita Laux-Antille emerged from the pool with a splash, spraying water everywhere. Ciri couldn't stop herself looking. She had seen Yennefer naked on several occasions and hadn't imagined anyone could have a more shapely figure. She was wrong. Even marble statues of goddesses and nymphs would have blushed at the sight of Margarita Laux-Antille undressed.

The enchantress took a pail of cold water and poured it over her breasts, swearing lewdly and then shaking herself off.

‘You, girl.’ She beckoned to Ciri. ‘Be so good as to hand me a towel. And please stop being angry with me.’

Ciri snorted quietly, still piqued. When Fabio had revealed who she was, the enchantresses had dragged her half the length of the city, making a laughing stock of her. Naturally, the matter was cleared up instantly in Giancardi’s bank. The enchantresses apologised to Yennefer, asking for their behaviour to be excused. They explained that the Aretuza novices had been temporarily moved to Loxia because the school’s rooms had been turned into accommodation for the participants of the mages’ conclave. Taking advantage of the confusion around the move, several novices had slipped out of Thanedd and played truant in the city. Margarita Laux-Antille and Tissaia de Vries, alarmed by the activation of Ciri’s amulet, had mistaken her for one of their truants.

The enchantresses apologised to Yennefer, but none of them thought of apologising to Ciri. Yennefer, listening to the apologies, simply looked at her and Ciri could feel her ears burning with shame. But it was worse for Fabio; Molnar Giancardi admonished him so severely the boy had tears in his eyes. Ciri felt sorry for him but was also proud of him; Fabio kept his promise and didn’t breathe a word about the wyvern.

Yennefer, it turned out, knew Tissaia and Margarita very well. The enchantresses invited her to the Silver Heron, the best and most expensive inn in Gors Velen, where Tissaia de Vries was staying, delaying her trip to the island for reasons known only to herself. Margarita Laux-Antille, who, it turned out, was the rectoress of Aretuza, had accepted the older enchantress’s invitation and was temporarily sharing the apartment with her. The inn was truly luxurious; it had its own bathhouse in the cellars, which Margarita and Tissaia had hired for their exclusive use, paying extortionate sums of money for it. Yennefer and Ciri, of course, were encouraged to use the bathhouse too. As a result, all of them had been soaking in the pool and perspiring in the steam by turns for several hours, gossiping the entire time.

Ciri gave the enchantress a towel. Margarita pinched her gently on the cheek. Ciri snorted again and dived with a splash into the rosemary-perfumed water of the pool.

‘She swims like a young seal,’ laughed Margarita, stretching out beside Yennefer on a wooden lounger, ‘and is as shapely as a naiad. Will you give her to me, Yenna?’

‘That’s why I brought her here.’

‘Which class shall I put her in? Does she know the basics?’

‘She does, but she can start at the beginning like everyone else. It won’t do her any harm.’

‘That would be wise,’ said Tissaia de Vries, busily correcting the arrangement of cups on the marble tabletop, which was covered in a thin layer of condensation. ‘That would be wise indeed, Yennefer. The girl will find it easier if she begins with the other novices.’

Ciri hauled herself out of the pool and sat on the edge, wringing her hair out and splashing her feet in the water. Yennefer and Margarita gossiped lazily, wiping their faces from time to time with cloths soaked in cold water. Tissaia, modestly swathed in a sheet, didn’t join in the conversation, and gave the impression of being utterly absorbed in tidying the objects on the table.

‘My humble apologies, noble ladies,’ called the innkeeper suddenly, unseen, from above. ‘Please forgive my daring to disturb, but . . . an officer wishes to talk to Madam de Vries urgently. Apparently the matter will brook no delay!’

Margarita Laux-Antille giggled and winked at Yennefer, upon which they pulled the towels from their hips and assumed exotic and extremely provocative poses.

‘Let the officer enter,’ shouted Margarita, trying not to laugh. ‘Welcome. We’re ready.’

‘Children,’ sighed Tissaia de Vries, shaking her head. ‘Cover yourself, Ciri.’

The officer came in, but the enchantresses’ prank misfired. The officer wasn’t embarrassed at the sight of them, and didn’t blush, gape or goggle, because the officer was a woman. A tall, slender woman with a thick, black plait and a sword at her side.

‘Madam,’ said the woman stiffly, her hauberk clanking as she gave Tissaia de Vries a slight bow, ‘I report the execution of your instructions. I would like to ask for permission to return to the garrison.’

‘You may,’ replied Tissaia curtly. ‘Thank you for the escort and your help. Have a safe journey.’

Yennefer sat up on her lounger, looking at the black, gold and red rosette on the soldier’s shoulder.

‘Do I know you?’

The warrior bowed stiffly and wiped her sweat-covered face. It

was hot in the bathhouse, and she was wearing a hauberk and leather tunic.

'I often used to visit Vengerberg, Madam Yennefer,' she said. 'My name is Rayla.'

'Judging by the rosette, you serve in King Demavend's special units.'

'Yes, madam.'

'Your rank?'

'Captain.'

'Very good.' Margarita Laux-Antille laughed. 'I note with pleasure that Demavend's army has finally begun to award commissions to soldiers with balls.'

'May I withdraw?' said the soldier, standing up straight and resting her hand on the hilt of her sword.

'You may.'

'I sensed hostility in your voice, Yenna,' said Margarita a moment later. 'What do you have against the captain?'

Yennefer stood up and took two goblets from the table.

'Did you see the posts by the crossroads?' she asked. 'You must have seen them, must have smelled the stench of rotting corpses. Those posts are their idea and their work. She and her subordinates from the special units. They're a gang of sadists!'

'There's a war on, Yennefer. Rayla must have seen her comrades-in-arms falling, alive, into the Squirrels' clutches many times. Then hung by their arms from trees as target practice. Blinded, castrated, with their feet burnt in campfires. Falka herself wouldn't have been ashamed of the atrocities committed by the Scoia'tael.'

'The methods of the special units are remarkably similar to those of Falka. But that's not the point, Rita. I'm not getting sentimental about the fate of elves and I know what war is. I know how wars are won, too. They're won by soldiers who fight for their countries and homes with conviction and sacrifice. Not by soldiers like her, by mercenaries fighting for money who are unable and unwilling to sacrifice themselves. They don't even know what sacrifice is. And if they do, they despise it.'

'To hell with her, her dedication and her contempt. What does it matter to us? Ciri, throw something decent on, pop upstairs and fetch us another carafe. I feel like getting drunk today.'

Tissaia de Vries sighed, shaking her head. It didn't escape Margarita's attention.

'Fortunately,' she giggled, 'we aren't at school any longer, mistress dear. We can do what we want now.'

'Even in the presence of a future novice?' asked Tissaia scathingly. 'When I was rectoress at Aretuza—'

'We remember, we remember,' interrupted Yennefer with a smile, 'and even if we'd prefer to forget, we never will. Go and fetch that carafe, Ciri.'

Upstairs, waiting for the carafe, Ciri witnessed the officer depart with her squad of four soldiers. She watched their posture, expressions, clothing and arms in fascination and admiration. Right then Rayla, the captain with the black plait, was arguing with the innkeeper.

'I'm not going to wait until daybreak! And I couldn't give a damn if the gates are locked. I want to leave immediately. I know the inn has its own postern in the stables. I order it to be opened!'

'But the regulations—'

'I don't give a damn about the regulations! I'm carrying out the orders of Arch-Mistress de Vries!'

'All right, all right, captain. Don't shout. I'll open up . . .'

The postern, it turned out, was in a narrow, securely gated passageway, leading straight beyond the city walls. Before Ciri took the carafe from the servant's hands, she saw the postern being opened and Rayla and her unit riding out, into the night.

Ciri was deep in thought.

'Oh, at last,' said Margarita cheerfully, though it was unclear whether she was referring to the sight of Ciri or the carafe she was carrying. Ciri put the carafe on the table – very clearly wrongly, because Tissaia de Vries repositioned it at once. When Yennefer poured, she spoiled the entire arrangement too, and Tissaia had to put it right again. Imagining Tissaia as a teacher filled Ciri with dread.

Yennefer and Margarita returned to their interrupted conversation, not sparing the contents of the carafe. Ciri realised it wouldn't be long before she would have to go and get a fresh one. She pondered, listening to the enchantresses' discussion.

'No, Yenna.' Margarita shook her head. 'You aren't up to speed, I

see. I've dumped Lars. That's history. Elaine deireadh, as the elves would say.'

'And that's why you want to get drunk?'

'That's one of the reasons,' confirmed Margarita Laux-Antille. 'I'm sad. I can't hide it. I was with him for four years, after all. But I had to dump him. It was hopeless . . .'

'Particularly,' snorted Tissaia de Vries, staring at the golden wine as she swilled it around her cup, 'since Lars was married.'

'I consider that of no importance,' said the enchantress, shrugging. 'All the attractive men of a certain age and who interest me are married. I can't help that. Lars loved me and, I would add, loved me for quite some time . . . Ah, what can I say? He wanted too much. He jeopardised my freedom, and the thought of monogamy makes me sick. And after all, I was only following your example, Yenna. Do you remember that conversation in Vengerberg? When you decided to break up with that witcher of yours? I advised you then to think twice. I told you, you can't find love in the street. But you were right. Love is love, and life is life. Love passes . . .'

'Don't listen to her, Yennefer,' said Tissaia coldly. 'She's bitter and full of regrets. Do you know why she's not going to the banquet at Aretuza? Because she's ashamed to show up alone, without the man she's been involved with for four years. The man people envied her for. Who she lost because she was unable to value his love.'

'Perhaps we could talk about something else,' suggested Yennefer in an apparently carefree but slightly altered voice. 'Ciri, pour us some wine. Oh hell, that carafe's small. Be so kind as to bring us another.'

'Bring two,' laughed Margarita, 'and as a reward you'll get a sip and be able to sit with us; you won't have to strain your ears from a distance. Your education can begin here, right now, before you join me at Aretuza.'

'Education!' Tissaia raised her eyes to the ceiling. 'By the gods!'

'Oh, do be quiet, beloved mistress,' said Margarita, slapping a hand against her wet thigh, pretending to be angry. 'I'm the rectoress of the school now! You didn't manage to flunk me during the final exams!'

'I regret that.'

'I do, too! Just imagine, I'd have a private practice now, like

Yenna. I wouldn't have to sweat with novices. I wouldn't have to wipe the noses of the blubbering ones or lock horns with the cheeky ones. Ciri, listen to me and learn. An enchantress always takes action. Wrongly or rightly; that is revealed later. But you should act, be brave, seize life by the scruff of the neck. Believe me, little one, you should only regret inactivity, indecisiveness, hesitation. You shouldn't regret actions or decisions, even if they occasionally end in sadness and regret. Look at that serious lady sitting there pulling faces and pedantically correcting everything in sight. That's Tissaia de Vries, arch-mistress, who has educated dozens of enchantresses. Teaching them how to act. Teaching them that indecision—'

'Enough, Rita.'

'Tissaia's right,' said Yennefer, still staring into the corner of the bathhouse. 'Stop. I know you're feeling low because of Lars, but don't moralise. The girl still has time for that kind of learning. And she won't receive it in school. Ciri, go and get another carafe.'

Ciri stood up. She was completely dressed.

And her mind was utterly made up.

'What?' Yennefer shrieked. 'What do you mean she's gone?'

'She ordered me . . .' mumbled the innkeeper, pale, with his back pressed against the wall. 'She ordered me to saddle a horse . . .'

'And you obeyed her? Rather than ask us?'

'Madam! How was I to know? I was sure she was leaving on your orders . . . It never once occurred to me—'

'You damned fool!'

'Take it easy, Yennefer,' said Tissaia, pressing a hand against her forehead. 'Don't succumb to your emotions. It's night. They won't let her through the gate.'

'She ordered the postern opened . . .' whispered the innkeeper.

'And was it?'

'Because of the conclave, madam,' said the innkeeper, lowering his eyes, 'the city is full of sorcerers . . . People are afraid. No one dares to get in their way . . . How could I refuse her? She spoke just like you do, madam, in exactly the same tone, and she looked the same way . . . No one even dared to look her in the eye, never mind ask a question . . . She was like you . . . The spitting image . . . She even ordered a quill and ink and wrote a letter.'

‘Hand it over!’

Tissaia de Vries was quicker, and read aloud:

Madam Yennefer,

Forgive me. I’m riding to Hirundum because I want to see Geralt. I want to see him before I start school. Forgive my disobedience, but I must. I know you’ll punish me, but I don’t want to regret my indecision and hesitation. If I’m to have regrets, let them be for deeds and actions. I’m an enchantress. I seize life by the scruff of the neck. I’ll return when I can.

Ciri

‘Is that all?’

‘There’s also a postscript.’

Tell Madam Rita she won’t have to wipe my nose at school.

Margarita Laux-Antille shook her head in disbelief as Yennefer cursed. The innkeeper flushed and opened his mouth. He’d heard many curses in his life, but never that one.

The wind blew from the land towards the sea. Waves of cloud drifted over the moon, suspended over the forest. The road to Hirundum was plunged into darkness making galloping too dangerous. Ciri slowed to a trot, but she didn’t consider slowing to a walk. She was in a hurry.

The growling of an approaching storm could be heard in the distance, and from time to time the horizon was lit up by a flash of lightning, revealing the toothed saw of treetops against the dusk.

She reined in her horse. She was at a junction; the road forked and both forks looked identical.

Why hadn’t Fabio said anything about a fork in the road? *And anyway, I never get lost. After all, I always know which way to walk or ride . . .*

So why don’t I know which road to take now?

A huge shape glided silently past her head and Ciri felt her heart in her throat. The horse neighed, kicked and galloped off, choosing the right-hand fork. After a moment, she reined it in.

‘It was just an owl,’ she panted, trying to calm herself and the horse. ‘Just an ordinary bird . . . There’s nothing to be afraid of . . .’

The wind grew stronger, and the dark clouds completely covered the moon. But before her, in the vista of the road, in the hole

gaping among the trees, it was light. She rode faster, the sand flying up from the horse's hooves.

A little later she had to stop. In front of her was a cliff and the sea, from which the familiar black cone of the island rose up. The lights of Garstang, Loxia and Aretuza could not be seen from where she was. She could only see the soaring, solitary tower which crowned Thanedd.

Tor Lara.

A blinding bolt of lightning connected the overcast sky to the pinnacle of the tower, and a moment later it thundered. Tor Lara glowered at her, its windows become red eyes. For a second it seemed a fire was burning inside the tower.

Tor Lara . . . The Tower of Gulls . . . *Why does its name fill me with such dread?*

The gale tossed the trees around. The branches whispered. Ciri screwed up her eyes, and dust and leaves struck her cheek. She turned the snorting, skittering horse back, having regained her orientation. The Isle of Thanedd faced north, so she must have ridden westwards. The sandy road lay in the dusk like a bright, white ribbon. She set off again at a gallop.

Ciri suddenly saw some riders in a flash of lightning. Dark, vague, moving shapes on both sides of the road. It thundered once more and she heard a cry.

'Gar'ean!'

Without thinking, she spurred her horse, reined it back, turned around and galloped away. Behind her there were shouts, whistles, neighing and the thudding of hooves.

'Gar'ean! Dh'oine!'

Galloping, the thud of hooves, the rush of the wind. Darkness, with the white trunks of roadside birches flashing by. Lightning. A thunderclap. And, in its light, two riders trying to block her way. One reached out, trying to grab her reins. He had a squirrel's tail attached to his hat. Ciri kicked her horse with her heels, clinging to its neck, the speed pulling her over to one side. Lightning. Behind her rose shouting, whistling and a clap of thunder.

'Spar'le, Yaevinn!'

Gallop, gallop! Quicker, horse! Lightning. Thunder. A fork in the road. *To the left! I never lose my way!* Another fork. *To the right! Gallop, horse! Faster, faster!*

The road went uphill, sand under the horse's hooves. The horse, even though it was being spurred on, slowed . . .

She looked around at the top of the hill. Another lightning flash lit up the road. It was totally empty. She listened hard but only heard the wind whistling in the leaves. It thundered again.

There's no one here. Squirrels . . . it's just a memory from Kaedwen. The Rose of Shaerrawedd . . . I imagined it. There isn't a living soul here. No one's chasing me . . .

The wind struck her. *The wind's blowing from the land*, she thought, *and I can feel it on my right cheek . . .*

I'm lost.

Lightning. It lit up the surface of the sea against the black cone of the Isle of Thanedd. And Tor Lara. The Tower of Gulls. The tower that was drawing Ciri like a magnet . . . *But I don't want to go to that tower. I'm riding to Hirundum. I must see Geralt.*

Lightning flashed again.

A black horse stood between her and the cliff. And on it sat a knight in a helmet adorned with the wings of a bird of prey. Its wings suddenly flapped, the bird took flight . . .

Cintra!

Paralysing fear. Her hands gripping the reins tightly. Lightning. The black knight spurred his horse. He had a ghastly mask instead of a face. The wings flapped . . .

The horse set off at a gallop without needing to be urged. Darkness illuminated by lightning. The forest was coming to an end. The splash and squelch of swamp under the horse's hooves. Behind her the swish of a raptor's wings. Closer and closer . . . Closer . . .

A furious gallop, her eyes watering from their speed. Lightning sliced the sky, and in its flash Ciri saw alders and willows on either side of the road. But they weren't trees. They were the servants of the Alder King. Servants of the black knight, who was galloping after her, with raptor's wings swishing on his helmet. Misshapen monsters on both sides of the road stretched their gnarled arms towards her; they laughed insanely, the black jaws of their hollows opening wide. Ciri flattened herself against the horse's neck. Branches whistled, lashed her and tore at her clothes. The distorted trunks creaked and the hollow jaws snapped, howling with scornful laughter . . .

The Lion Cub of Cintra! Child of the Elder Blood!

The black knight was right behind her; Ciri felt his hand trying to seize her long hair. The horse, urged on by her cries, leapt forward, cleared an unseen obstacle with a powerful bound, crashed through reeds, stumbled . . .

She reined it in, leaning back in the saddle, and turned the snorting horse back. She screamed wildly, furiously. She yanked her sword from its scabbard and whirled it above her head. *This is Cintra no longer! I'm no longer a child! I'm no longer helpless! I won't allow it . . .*

'I forbid it! You will not touch me again! You will never touch me!'

Her horse landed in the water with a splash and a squelch, belly-deep. Ciri leaned forward, cried out, urged her mount on with her heels and struggled back onto the causeway again. *Ponds*, she thought. *Fabio talked about fishponds. It's Hirundum. I've made it. I never lose my way . . .*

Lightning. Behind her the causeway, ahead of her a black wall of forest cutting into the sky like a saw blade. And no one there. Silence broken only by the howling of the gale. Somewhere on the marsh she could hear a frightened duck quacking.

Nobody. There is no one on the causeway. No one's following me. It was a phantom, a nightmare. Memories from Cintra. I only imagined it.

A small light in the distance. A lighthouse. Or a fire. *It's a farm. Hirundum. It's close now. Only one more effort . . .*

Flashes of lightning. One. Another. Yet another. Each without a thunderclap. The wind suddenly dropped. The horse neighs, tosses its head and rears up.

Against the black sky appears a milky, quickly brightening ribbon, writhing like a serpent. The wind hits the willows once more, throwing up clouds of leaves and dry grass.

The distant lights vanish. They disappear and blur in the deluge of the million blue sparks which suddenly light up the entire swamp. The horse snorts, whinnies and charges frantically across the causeway. Ciri struggles to remain in the saddle.

The vague, ghastly shapes of riders become visible in the ribbon sliding across the sky. As they come closer and closer, they can be seen ever more clearly. Buffalo horns and ragged crests sway on their helmets, and cadaverous masks show white beneath them. The riders sit on horses' skeletons, cloaked in ragged caparisons. A fierce

gale howls among the willows, blades of lightning slash the black sky. The wind moans louder and louder. No, it's not the wind. It's ghostly singing.

The ghastly cavalcade turns and hurtles straight at her. The hooves of the spectral horses stir up the glow of the will o' the wisps suspended above the swamps. At the head of the cavalcade gallops the King of the Wild Hunt. A rusty helmet sways above his skull-like face, its gaping eye sockets burning with a livid flame. A ragged cloak flutters. A necklace, as empty as an old peapod, rattles against the rusty cuirass, a necklace which, it is said, once contained precious stones, which fell out during the frenzied chase across the heavens. And became stars . . .

It isn't true! It doesn't exist! It's a nightmare, a phantom, an illusion! I'm only imagining this!

The King of the Wild Hunt spurs on his skeleton steed and erupts in wild, horrifying laughter.

O, Child of the Elder Blood! You belong to us! You are ours! Join our procession, join our hunt! We will race, race unto the very end, unto eternity, unto the very end of existence! You are ours, starry-eyed daughter of chaos! Join us; learn the joy of the hunt! You are ours. You are one of us! Your place is among us!

'No!' she cries. 'Be gone! You are corpses!'

The King of the Wild Hunt laughs, the rotten teeth snapping above his rusted gorget. The skull's eye sockets glitter lividly.

Yes, we are corpses. But you are death.

Ciri clung to the horse's neck. She didn't have to urge her horse on. Sensing the pursuing apparitions behind her, the steed thundered across the causeway at a breakneck gallop.

*

The halfling Bernie Hofmeier, a Hirundum farmer, lifted his shock of curly locks, listening to the sound of the distant thunder.

'It's a dangerous thing,' he said, 'a storm like this without any rain. Lightning will strike somewhere and then you've got a fire on your hands . . .'

'A little rain would come in handy,' sighed Dandelion, tightening up the pegs of his lute, 'because you could cut the air with a knife . . . My shirt's stuck to my back and the mosquitoes are biting . . . But I reckon it'll blow over. The storm has been circling, circling, but for a while there's been lightning somewhere in the north. Over the

sea, I think.'

'It's hitting Thanedd,' confirmed the halfling, 'the highest point in the area. That tower on the island, Tor Lara, attracts lightning like nobody's business. It looks like it's on fire during a decent storm. It's a wonder it doesn't fall apart . . .'

'It's magic,' said the troubadour with conviction. 'Everything on Thanedd is magic, even the rock itself. And sorcerers aren't afraid of thunderbolts. What am I saying? Did you know, Bernie, that they can even catch thunderbolts?'

'Get away! You're lying, Dandelion.'

'May the lightning strike me—' the poet broke off, anxiously looking up at the sky. 'May a goose nip me if I'm lying. I'm telling you, Hofmeier, sorcerers catch thunderbolts. I've seen it with my own eyes. Old Gorazd, the one who was killed on Sodden Hill, once caught a thunderbolt in front of my very eyes. He took a long, thin piece of metal, he hooked one end of it onto the top of his tower, and the other—'

'You should put the other end in a bottle,' suddenly squeaked Hofmeier's son, who was hanging around on the veranda. He was a tiny little halfling with a thick mop of hair as curly as a ram's fleece. 'In a glass demijohn, like the ones Daddy makes wine in. The lightning whizzes down the wire into the demijohn—'

'Get inside, Franklin!' yelled the farmer. 'Time for bed, this minute! It'll be midnight soon and there's work to be done tomorrow! And just you wait till I catch you, spouting off about demijohns and wires. The strap'll be out for you! You won't be able to sit down for the next two Sundays! Petunia, get him out of here! And bring us more beer!'

'You've had quite enough,' said Petunia Hofmeier angrily, gathering up her son from the veranda. 'You've already put away a skinful.'

'Stop nagging. Just look out for the Witcher's coming. A guest ought to be offered hospitality.'

'When the Witcher arrives I'll bring some. For him.'

'Stingy cow,' muttered Hofmeier so that his wife didn't hear. 'All her kin, the Biberveldts from Knotweed Meadow, every last one of them is a tight-fisted, stingy, skinflint . . . But the Witcher's taking his time. He went over to the ponds and disappeared. 'E's a strange one. Did you see how he looked at the girls, at Cinia and Tangerine,

when they were playing in the yard of an evening? He had a strange look about him. And now . . . I can't help feeling he went away to be by himself. And he took shelter with me because my farm's out of the way, far from the others. You know him best, Dandelion, you say . . .'

'Do I know him?' said the poet, swatting a mosquito on his neck, plucking his lute and staring at the black outlines of willows by the pond. 'No, Bernie. I don't know him. I don't think anyone knows him. But something's happening to him, I can see it. Why did he come here, to Hirundum? To be nearer the Isle of Thanedd? And yesterday, when I suggested we both ride to Gors Velen, from where you can see Thanedd, he refused without a second thought. What's keeping him here? Did you give him some well-paid contracts?'

'Not a chance,' muttered the halfling. 'To be honest, I don't believe there was ever a monster here at all. That kid who drowned in the pond might have got cramp. But everyone started yelling that it was a drowner or a kikimora and we ought to call a witcher . . . And they promised him such a paltry purse it's shameful. And what does he do? He's been roaming around the causeway for three nights; he sleeps during the day or sits saying nothing, like a straw man, watching the children and the house . . . Strange. Peculiar, I'd say.'

'And you'd be right.'

Lightning flashed, lighting up the farmyard and the farm buildings. For a moment, the ruins of the elven palace at the end of the causeway flashed white. A few seconds later, a clap of thunder rolled over the ponds. A sudden wind got up, and the trees and reeds by the pond whispered and bent. The surface of the water rippled, went dull and then ruffled up the leaves of the water lilies.

'The storm seems to be coming towards us,' said the farmer, looking up at the sky. 'Perhaps the sorcerers used magic to drive it from the island. They say at least two hundred of them have turned up on Thanedd . . . What do you think, Dandelion, what will they be debating on that island of theirs? Will any good come of it?'

'For us? I doubt it,' said the troubadour, strumming the lute strings with his thumb. 'Those conclaves usually mean a fashion show, lots of gossiping, and a good chance for backbiting and infighting. Arguments about whether to make magic more universal, or make it more elite. Quarrels between those who serve kings and those who prefer to bring pressure to bear on kings from

afar . . .’

‘Ha,’ said Bernie Hofmeier. ‘Seems to me that during the conclave there’ll be as much thunder and lightning on Thanedd as there is during a storm.’

‘Perhaps. But of what interest is it to us?’

‘To you, none,’ said the halfling gloomily. ‘Because all you do is pluck away at your lute and screech. You look at the world around and see only rhymes and notes. But just last Sunday some horsemen trampled my cabbages and turnips. Twice. The army are chasing the Squirrels, the Squirrels are evading the army and running from them, and they both use the same road through my cabbage patch . . .’

‘Do not grieve for the cabbage when the forest is burning,’ recited the poet.

‘You, Dandelion,’ said Bernie Hofmeier, frowning at him. ‘When you come out with stuff like that I don’t know whether to cry, laugh or kick your arse. I kid you not! And I’m telling you, a wretched time has come. There are stakes and gibbets by the highways, corpses in the fields and by forest tracks. Gorblimey, the country must have looked like this in Falka’s times. And how can anyone live here? During the day, the king’s men come and threaten to put us in the stocks for helping the Squirrels; at night the elves show up, and just try turning them down! They poetically promise that we’ll see the night sky glow red. They’re so poetic you could throw up. But anyhow, with them both we’re caught between two fires . . .’

‘And are you counting on the mages’ conclave changing anything?’

‘That I am. You said yourself that two factions are battling it out among the mages. It was sometimes thus, that the sorcerers held the kings back and put an end to wars and disturbances. After all, it was the sorcerers who made peace with Nilfgaard three years since. Mebbe this time too . . .’

Bernie Hofmeier fell silent and listened carefully. Dandelion silenced the resonating strings with his hand.

The Witcher emerged from the gloom on the causeway. He walked slowly towards the house. Lightning flashed once more. By the time it thundered, the Witcher was already with them on the veranda.

‘Well, Geralt?’ asked Dandelion, by way of ending the awkward silence. ‘Did you track the fiend down?’

‘No. It isn’t a night for tracking. It’s a turbulent night. Uneasy . . . I’m tired, Dandelion.’

‘Well, sit down, relax.’

‘You misunderstood me.’

‘Indeed,’ muttered the halfling, looking at the sky and listening. ‘A turbulent night, something ill is hanging in the air . . . The animals are restless in the barn . . . And screams can be heard in that wind . . .’

‘The Wild Hunt,’ said the Witcher softly. ‘Close the shutters securely, Mr Hofmeier.’

‘The Wild Hunt?’ said Bernie, terrified. ‘Spectres?’

‘Never fear. It’ll pass by high up. It always passes by high during the summer. But the children may wake, for the Hunt brings nightmares. Better close the shutters.’

‘The Wild Hunt,’ said Dandelion, glancing anxiously upwards, ‘heralds war.’

‘Poppycock. Superstitions.’

‘Wait! A short time before the Nilfgaardian attack on Cintra—’

‘Silence!’ the Witcher gestured him to be quiet and sat up straight with a jerk, staring into the darkness.

‘What the . . . ?’

‘Horsemen.’

‘Hell,’ hissed Hofmeier, springing up from the bench. ‘At night it can only be Scoia’tael . . .’

‘A single horse,’ the Witcher interrupted, picking his sword up from the bench. ‘A single, real horse. The rest are the spectres of the Hunt . . . Damn, it can’t be . . . in the summer?’

Dandelion had also leapt to his feet but was too ashamed to run away, because neither Geralt nor Bernie was preparing to flee. The Witcher drew his sword and ran towards the causeway, and the halfling rushed after him without a second thought, armed with a pitchfork. Lightning flashed once more, and a galloping horse came into view on the causeway. Behind the horse came something vague, an irregular cloud, a whirl, a phantom, woven from the gloom and glow. Something that caused panicky fear and a

revolting, gut-wrenching dread.

The Witcher yelled, lifting his sword. The rider saw him, spurred the horse on and looked back. The Witcher yelled again. The thunder boomed.

There was a flash, but it wasn't lightning this time. Dandelion crouched by the bench and would have crawled under it had it not been too low. Bernie dropped the pitchfork. Petunia Hofmeier, who had run out of the house, shrieked.

A blinding flash materialised into a transparent sphere, and inside it loomed a shape, assuming contours and shapes at frightening speed. Dandelion recognised it at once. He knew those wild, black curls and the obsidian star on a velvet ribbon. What he didn't know and had never seen before was the face. It was a face of rage and fury, the face of the goddess of vengeance, destruction and death.

Yennefer raised a hand and screamed a spell. Spirals shot from her hands with a hiss, showering sparks, cutting the night sky and reflecting thousands of sparkles on the surface of the ponds. The spirals penetrated the cloud that was chasing the lone rider like lances. The cloud seethed, and it seemed to Dandelion that he could hear ghastly cries, that he could see the vague, nightmarish silhouettes of spectral horses. He only saw it for a split second, because the cloud suddenly contracted, clustered up into a ball and shot upwards into the sky, lengthening and dragging a tail behind it like a comet's as it sped away. Darkness fell, only lit by the quivering glare of the lamp being held by Petunia Hofmeier.

The rider came to a halt in the yard in front of the house, slithered down from the saddle, and took some staggering steps. Dandelion realised who it was immediately. He had never seen the slim, flaxen-haired girl before. But he knew her at once.

'Geralt . . .' said the girl softly. 'Madam Yennefer . . . I'm sorry . . . I had to. You know, I mean . . .'

'Ciri,' said the Witcher. Yennefer took a step towards the girl, but then stopped. She said nothing.

Who will the girl choose? wondered Dandelion. *Neither of them – the Witcher nor the enchantress – will take a step nor make a gesture. Which will she approach first? Him? Or her?*

Ciri did not walk to either of them. She was unable to decide. Instead of moving, she fainted.

The house was empty. The halfling and his entire family had left for

work at daybreak. Ciri pretended to be asleep but she heard Geralt and Yennefer go out. She slipped out from the sheets, dressed quickly and stole silently out of the room, following them to the orchard.

Geralt and Yennefer turned to face the causeway between the ponds, which were white and yellow with water lilies. Ciri hid behind a ruined wall and watched them through a crack. She had imagined that Dandelion, the famous poet whose work she had read countless times, was still asleep. But she was wrong. The poet Dandelion wasn't asleep. And he caught her in the act.

'Hey,' he said, coming up unexpectedly and chuckling. 'Is it polite to eavesdrop and spy on people? More discretion, little one. Let them be together for a while.'

Ciri blushed, but then immediately narrowed her lips.

'First of all, I'm not your little one,' she hissed haughtily. 'And second of all, I'm not really disturbing them, am I?'

Dandelion grew a little serious.

'I suppose not,' he said. 'It seems to me you might even be helping them.'

'How? In what way?'

'Don't kid me. That was very cunning yesterday, but you didn't fool me. You pretended to faint, didn't you?

'Yes, I did,' she muttered, turning her face away. 'Madam Yennefer realised but Geralt didn't . . .'

'They carried you into the house together. Their hands were touching. They sat by your bed almost until morning but they didn't say a word to each other. They've only decided to talk now. There, on the causeway, by the pond. And you've decided to eavesdrop on what they're saying . . . And watch them through a hole in the wall. Are you so desperate to know what they're doing there?'

'They aren't doing anything there,' said Ciri, blushing slightly. 'They're talking a little, that's all.'

'And you,' said Dandelion, sitting down on the grass under an apple tree and leaning back against the trunk, having first checked whether there were any ants or caterpillars on it. 'You'd like to know what they're talking about, wouldn't you?'

'Yes . . . No! And anyway . . . Anyway, I can't hear anything. They're too far away.'

‘I’ll tell you,’ laughed the bard. ‘If you want.’

‘And how are you supposed to know?’

‘Ha, ha. I, my dear Ciri, am a poet. Poets know everything about things like this. I’ll tell you something else; poets know more about this sort of thing than the people involved do.’

‘Of course you do!’

‘I give you my word. The word of a poet.’

‘Really? Well then . . . Tell me what they’re talking about? Tell me what it all means!’

‘Look through that hole again and tell me what they’re doing.’

‘Hmm . . .’ Ciri bit her lower lip, then leaned over and put her eye closer to the hole. ‘Madam Yennefer is standing by a willow . . . She’s plucking leaves and playing with her star. She isn’t saying anything and isn’t even looking at Geralt . . . And Geralt’s standing beside her. He’s looking down and he’s saying something. No, he isn’t. Oh, he’s pulling a face . . . What a strange expression . . .’

‘Childishly simple,’ said Dandelion, finding an apple in the grass, wiping it on his trousers and examining it critically. ‘He’s asking her to forgive him for his various foolish words and deeds. He’s apologising to her for his impatience, for his lack of faith and hope, for his obstinacy, doggedness. For his sulking and posing; which are unworthy of a man. He’s apologising to her for things he didn’t understand and for things he hadn’t wanted to understand—’

‘That’s the falsest lie!’ said Ciri, straightening up and tossing the fringe away from her forehead with a sudden movement. ‘You’re making it all up!’

‘He’s apologising for things he’s only now understood,’ said Dandelion, staring at the sky, and he began to speak with the rhythm of a balladeer. ‘For what he’d like to understand, but is afraid he won’t have time for . . . And for what he will never understand. He’s apologising and asking for forgiveness . . . Hmm, hmm . . . Meaning, conscience, destiny? Everything’s so bloody banal . . .’

‘That’s not true!’ Ciri stamped. ‘Geralt isn’t saying anything like that! He’s not even speaking. I saw for myself. He’s standing with her and saying nothing . . .’

‘That’s the role of poetry, Ciri. To say what others cannot utter.’

‘It’s a stupid role. And you’re making everything up!’

‘That is also the role of poetry. Hey, I hear some raised voices coming from the pond. Have a quick look, and see what’s happening there.’

‘Geralt,’ said Ciri, putting her eye once more to the hole in the wall, ‘is standing with his head bowed. And Yennefer’s yelling at him. She’s screaming and waving her arms. Oh dear . . . What can it mean?’

‘It’s childishly simple.’ Dandelion stared at the clouds scudding across the sky. ‘Now she’s saying sorry to him.’

CHAPTER THREE

Thus do I take you, to have and to hold, for the most wondrous and terrible of times, for the best and the worst of times, by day and by night, in sickness and in health. For I love you with all my heart and swear to love you eternally, until death do us part.

Traditional marriage vows

We know little about love. Love is like a pear. A pear is sweet and has a distinct shape. Try to define the shape of a pear.

Dandelion, *Half a Century of Poetry*

Geralt had reason to suspect – and had long suspected – that sorcerers' banquets differed from the feasts of ordinary mortals. He never suspected, however, that the differences could be so great or so fundamental.

The offer of accompanying Yennefer to the banquet preceding the sorcerers' conclave surprised but did not dumbfound him, since it was not the first such proposal. Previously, when they lived together and things were good between them, Yennefer had wanted to attend assemblies and conclaves with him at her side. At that time, he steadfastly refused. He was convinced he would be treated by the sorcerers at best as a freak and a spectacle, and at worst as an intruder and a pariah. Yennefer scoffed at his fears, but had

never insisted. Since in other situations she was capable of insisting until the house shook and windows shattered, that had confirmed Geralt's belief that his decision had been right.

This time he agreed. Without a second thought. The offer came after a long, frank and emotional conversation. After a conversation which had brought them closer again, consigned the old conflicts to the shadows and to oblivion, and melted the ice of resentment, pride and stubbornness. After their conversation on the causeway in Hirundum, Geralt would have agreed to any – absolutely any – proposition of Yennefer's. He would not even have declined had she suggested they walked into hell to drink a cup of boiling tar with some fiery demons.

And on top of it there was Ciri, without whom neither that conversation nor that meeting could have happened. Ciri, in whom – according to Codringher – some unknown sorcerer had taken an interest. Geralt expected his presence at the convocation to provoke that sorcerer and force his hand. But he didn't tell Yennefer a single word about it.

They rode straight from Hirundum to Thanedd: Geralt, Yennefer, Ciri and Dandelion. First they stopped at the immense palace complex of Loxia, at the south-eastern foot of the mountain. The palace was already teeming with delegates to the conclave and their companions but accommodation was immediately found for Yennefer. They spent the entire day in Loxia. Geralt whiled away the day talking to Ciri. Dandelion ran around collecting and spreading gossip, and the enchantress measured and chose clothes. When evening finally came, the Witcher and Yennefer joined the colourful procession heading towards Aretuza and the palace, where the banquet was due to take place. And now, in Aretuza, Geralt knew surprise and astonishment, even though he'd vowed to himself he wouldn't be surprised by anything and nothing would astonish him.

The palace's huge central hall had been constructed in the shape of a letter 'T'. The long side had narrow and extremely tall windows, reaching almost to the tops of the columns that supported the ceiling. The ceiling was so high it was difficult to make out the details of the frescoes decorating it, in particular the gender of the naked figures, which were their most common motif. The windows were of stained glass, which must have cost an absolute fortune, but in spite of that a draught could be felt distinctly in the hall. Geralt was initially surprised the candles didn't go out, but on closer inspection he understood why. The candelabras were magical, and

possibly even illusory. In any case, they gave plenty of light, incomparably more than candles would have.

When they entered, a good hundred people were already there. The hall, the Witcher estimated, could have held at least three times as many, even if the tables had been arranged in a semicircle in the centre, as was customary. But there was no traditional semicircle. It appeared they would be banqueting standing up, doggedly wandering along walls adorned with tapestries, garlands and pennants, all waving in the draught. Rows of long tables had been arranged under the tapestries and garlands, and the tables were piled high with elaborate dishes served on even more elaborate table settings, among elaborate flower arrangements and extraordinary ice carvings. On closer examination, Geralt noted there was considerably more elaboration than food.

'There's no fare,' he stated in a glum voice, smoothing down the short, black, silver-braided, narrow-waisted tunic Yennefer had dressed him in. Tunics like that – the latest fashion – were called doublets. The Witcher had no idea where the name came from. And no desire to find out.

Yennefer didn't react. Geralt wasn't expecting her to, knowing well that the enchantress was not generally inclined to react to statements of that kind. But he didn't give up. He continued to complain. He simply felt like moaning.

'There's no music. It's draughty as hell. There's nowhere to sit down. Are we going to eat and drink standing up?'

The enchantress gave him a meaningful, violet glance.

'Indeed,' she said, surprisingly calmly. 'We shall be eating standing up. You should also know that stopping too long by the food table is considered an indiscretion.'

'I shall try to behave,' he muttered. 'Particularly since I observe there isn't much to stop by.'

'Drinking in an unrestrained way is also considered a breach of etiquette,' said Yennefer, continuing her instructions and paying absolutely no attention to his grizzling. 'Avoiding conversations is considered an inexcusable indiscretion—'

'And if that beanpole in those ridiculous pantaloons points me out to his two girlfriends,' he interrupted, 'is that considered a faux pas?'

'Yes. But a minor one.'

‘What are we going to be doing, Yen?’

‘Circulating around the hall, greeting people, paying them compliments, engaging in conversation . . . Stop tugging your doublet and flattening your hair.’

‘You wouldn’t let me wear a headband . . .’

‘Your headband’s pretentious. Well then, take my arm and let’s go. Standing near the entrance is considered a faux pas.’

They wandered through the hall, which was gradually filling up with guests. Geralt was ravenously hungry but quickly realised Yennefer hadn’t been joking. It became clear that the etiquette observed by mages did indeed demand that one eat and drink very little, and do it with a nonchalant air. To cap it all, every stop at the food table carried with it social obligations. Someone would notice you, express their joy at the fact and then approach and offer their greetings, which were as effusive as they were disingenuous. After the compulsory air kisses or unpleasantly weak handshakes, after the insincere smiles and even less sincere, although well-concocted, compliments, followed a brief and tediously banal conversation about nothing.

The Witcher looked around eagerly, searching for familiar faces, mainly in the hope he wasn’t the only person present who didn’t belong to this magical fraternity. Yennefer had assured him he wouldn’t be, but in spite of that he couldn’t see anyone who wasn’t a member of the Brotherhood, or at least he was unable to recognise anyone.

Pageboys carrying trays weaved among the guests, serving wine. Yennefer didn’t drink at all. The Witcher wanted to get tight, but couldn’t. Instead, he found his doublet was. Under the arms.

Skilfully steering Geralt with her arm, the enchantress pulled him away from the table and led him into the middle of the hall, to the very centre of general interest. His resistance counted for nothing. He realised what this was all about. It was quite simply a display.

Geralt knew what to expect, so with stoical calm he endured the glances of the enchantresses, brimming with insalubrious curiosity, and the enigmatic smirks of the sorcerers. Although Yennefer assured him that propriety and tact forbade the use of magic at this kind of event, he didn’t believe the mages were capable of restraining themselves, particularly since Yennefer was provocatively thrusting him into the limelight. And he was right not to believe. He felt his medallion vibrating several times, and the

pricking of magical impulses. Some sorcerers, or more precisely some enchantresses, brazenly tried to read his thoughts. He was prepared for that, knew what was happening, and knew how to respond. He looked at Yennefer walking alongside him, at white-and-black-and-diamond Yennefer, with her raven hair and violet eyes, and the sorcerers trying to sound him out became unsettled and disorientated; confronted with his blissful satisfaction, they were clearly losing their composure and poise. *Yes*, he answered in his thoughts, *you're not mistaken. There is only she, Yennefer, at my side, here and now, and only she matters. Here and now. And what she was long ago, where she was long ago and who she was with long ago doesn't have any, doesn't have the slightest, importance. Now she's with me, here, among you all. With me, with no one else. That's what I'm thinking right now, thinking only about her, thinking endlessly about her, smelling the scent of her perfume and the warmth of her body. And you can all choke on your envy.*

The enchantress squeezed his forearm firmly and moved closer to his side.

'Thank you,' she murmured, guiding him towards the tables once again. 'But without such excessive ostentation, if you don't mind.'

'Do you mages always take sincerity for ostentation? Is that why you don't believe in sincerity, even when you read it in someone's mind?'

'Yes. That *is* why.'

'But you still thank me?'

'Because I believe you,' she said, squeezing his arm even tighter and picking up a plate. 'Give me a little salmon, Witcher. And some crab.'

'These crabs are from Poviss. They were probably caught a month ago; and it's really hot right now. Aren't you worried . . . ?'

'These crabs,' she interrupted, 'were still creeping along the seabed this morning. Teleportation is a wonderful invention.'

'Indeed,' he concurred. 'It ought to be made more widely available, don't you think?'

'We're working on it. Come on, give me some. I'm hungry.'

'I love you, Yen.'

'I said drop the ostentation . . .' she broke off, tossed her head, drew some black curls away from her cheek and opened her violet eyes wide. 'Geralt! It's the first time you've ever said that!'

‘It can’t be. You’re making fun of me.’

‘No, no I’m not. You used only to think it, but today you said it.’

‘Is there such a difference?’

‘A huge one.’

‘Yen . . .’

‘Don’t talk with your mouth full. I love you too. Haven’t I ever told you? Heavens, you’ll choke! Lift your arms up and I’ll thump you in the back. Take some deep breaths.’

‘Yen . . .’

‘Keep breathing, it’ll soon pass.’

‘Yen!’

‘Yes. I’m repaying sincerity with sincerity.’

‘Are you feeling all right?’

‘I was waiting,’ she said, squeezing lemon on the salmon. ‘It wouldn’t have been proper to react to a declaration made as a thought. I was waiting for the words. I was able to reply, so I replied. I feel wonderful.’

‘What’s up?’

‘I’ll tell you later. Eat. This salmon is delicious, I swear on the Power, absolutely delicious.’

‘May I kiss you? Right now, here, in front of everyone?’

‘No.’

‘Yennefer!’ A dark-haired sorceress passing alongside freed her arm from the crook of her companion’s elbow and came closer. ‘So you made it? Oh, how divine! I haven’t seen you for ages!’

‘Sabrina!’ said Yennefer, displaying such genuine joy that anyone apart from Geralt might have been deceived. ‘Darling! How wonderful!’

The enchantresses embraced gingerly and kissed each other beside their ears and their diamond and onyx earrings. The two enchantresses’ earrings, resembling miniature bunches of grapes, were identical; but the whiff of fierce hostility immediately floated in the air.

‘Geralt, if I may. This is a school friend of mine, Sabrina Glevissig of Ard Carraigh.’

The Witcher bowed and kissed the raised hand. He had already observed that all enchantresses expected to be greeted by being kissed on the hand, a gesture which awarded them the same status as princesses, to put it mildly. Sabrina Glevissig raised her head, her earrings shaking and jingling. Gently, but ostentatiously and impudently.

'I've been so looking forward to meeting you, Geralt,' she said with a smile. Like all enchantresses, she didn't recognise any 'sirs', 'Your Excellencies' or other forms of address used among the nobility. 'You can't believe how delighted I am. You've finally stopped hiding him from us, Yenna. Speaking frankly, I'm amazed you put it off for so long. You have absolutely nothing to be ashamed of.'

'I agree,' replied Yennefer nonchalantly, narrowing her eyes a little and ostentatiously tossing her hair back from her own earrings. 'Gorgeous blouse, Sabrina. Simply stunning. Isn't it, Geralt?'

The Witcher nodded and swallowed. Sabrina Glevissig's blouse, made of black chiffon, revealed absolutely everything there was to reveal, and there was plenty of it. Her crimson skirt, gathered in by a silver belt with a large rose-shaped buckle, was split up the side, in keeping with the latest fashion. Fashion demanded it be split halfway up the thigh, but Sabrina wore hers split to halfway up her hip. And a very nice hip at that.

'What's new in Kaedwen?' asked Yennefer, pretending not to see what Geralt was looking at. 'Is your King Henselt still wasting energy and resources chasing the Squirrels through the forests? Is he still thinking about a punitive expedition against the elves from Dol Blathann?'

'Let's give politics a rest,' smiled Sabrina. Her slightly too-long nose and predatory eyes made her resemble the classic image of a witch. 'Tomorrow, at the Council, we'll be politicking until it comes out of our ears. And we'll hear plenty of moralising, too. About the need for peaceful coexistence . . . About friendship . . . About the necessity to adopt a loyal position regarding the plans and ambitions of our kings . . . What else shall we hear, Yennefer? What else are the Chapter and Vilgefortz preparing for us?'

'Let's give politics a rest.'

Sabrina Glevissig gave a silvery laugh, echoed by the gentle jingling of her earrings.

‘Indeed. Let’s wait until tomorrow. Tomorrow . . . Everything will become clear tomorrow. Oh, politics, and those endless debates, what an awful effect they have on the complexion. Fortunately, I have an excellent cream. Believe me, darling, wrinkles disappear like morning mist . . . Shall I give you the formula?’

‘Thank you, darling, but I don’t need it. Truly.’

‘Oh, I know. I always envied your complexion at school. How many years is it now, by the gods?’

Yennefer pretended she was returning a greeting to someone passing alongside, while Sabrina smiled at the Witcher and joyously thrust out everything the black chiffon wasn’t hiding. Geralt swallowed again, trying not to look too blatantly at her pink nipples, only too visible beneath the transparent material. He glanced timidly at Yennefer. The enchantress smiled, but he knew her too well. She was incandescent.

‘Oh, forgive me,’ said Yennefer suddenly. ‘I can see Philippa over there; I just have to talk to her. Come with me, Geralt. Bye-bye, Sabrina.’

‘Bye, Yenna,’ said Sabrina Glevissig, looking the Witcher in the eyes. ‘Congratulations again on your . . . taste.’

‘Thank you,’ said Yennefer, her voice suspiciously cold. ‘Thank you, darling.’

Philippa Eilhart was accompanied by Dijkstra. Geralt, who’d once had a fleeting contact with the Redanian spy, ought in principle to have been pleased; he had finally met someone he knew, who – like he – didn’t belong to the fraternity. Yet he wasn’t glad at all.

‘How lovely to see you, Yenna,’ said Philippa, giving Yennefer an air kiss. ‘Greetings, Geralt. You both know Count Dijkstra, don’t you?’

‘Who doesn’t?’ said Yennefer, bowing her head and proffering her hand to Dijkstra. The spy kissed it with reverence. ‘I’m delighted to see you again, Your Excellency.’

‘It’s a joy for me to see you again, Yennefer,’ replied the chief of King Vizimir’s secret service. ‘Particularly in such agreeable company. Geralt, my respects come from the bottom of my heart . . .’

Geralt, refraining from telling Dijkstra *his* respect came from the heart of his bottom, shook the proffered hand – or rather tried to. Its dimensions exceeded the norm which made made shaking it

practically impossible.

The gigantic spy was dressed in a light beige doublet, unbuttoned informally. He clearly felt at ease in it.

‘I noticed,’ said Philippa, ‘you talking to Sabrina.’

‘That’s right,’ snorted Yennefer. ‘Have you seen what she’s wearing? You’d either have to have no taste or no shame to . . . She’s bloody older than me by at least— Never mind. And as if she still had anything to show! The revolting cow!’

‘Did she try to question you? Everyone knows she spies for Henselt of Kaedwen.’

‘You don’t say?’ said Yennefer, faking astonishment, which was rightly considered an excellent joke.

‘And you, Your Excellency, are you enjoying our celebration?’ asked Yennefer, after Philippa and Dijkstra had stopped laughing.

‘Extraordinarily,’ said King Vizimir’s spy, giving a courtly bow.

‘If we presume,’ said Philippa, smiling, ‘that the Count is here on business, such an assurance is extremely complimentary. And, like every similar compliment, not very sincere. Only a moment ago, he confessed he’d prefer a nice, murky atmosphere, the stink of flaming brands and scorched meat on a spit. He also misses a traditional table swimming in spilt sauce and beer, which he could bang with his beer mug to the rhythm of a few filthy, drunken songs, and which he could gracefully slide under in the early hours, to fall asleep among hounds gnawing bones. And, just imagine, he remains deaf to my arguments extolling the superiority of our way of banqueting.’

‘Indeed?’ said the Witcher, looking at the spy more benignly. ‘And what were those arguments, if I might ask?’

This time his question was clearly treated as an excellent joke, because both enchantresses began laughing at the same time.

‘Oh, you men,’ said Philippa. ‘You don’t understand anything. How can you show off your dress or your figure if you’re hiding behind a table in the gloom and smoke?’

Geralt, unable to find the words, merely bowed. Yennefer squeezed his arm gently.

‘Oh,’ she said. ‘I see Triss Merigold over there. I just have to exchange a few words with her . . . Excuse me for abandoning you. Take care, Philippa. We will certainly find an opportunity for a chat

today. Won't we, Your Excellency?'

'Undoubtedly,' said Dijkstra, smiling and bowing low. 'At your service, Yennefer. Your wish is my command.'

They went over to Triss, who was shimmering in shades of blue and pale green. On seeing them, Triss broke off her conversation with two sorcerers, smiled radiantly and hugged Yennefer; the ritual of kissing the air near each other's ears was repeated. Geralt took the proffered hand, but decided to act contrary to the rules of etiquette; he embraced the chestnut-haired enchantress and kissed her on her soft cheek, as downy as a peach. Triss blushed faintly.

The sorcerers introduced themselves. One of them was Drithelm of Pont Vanis, the other his brother, Detmold. They were both in the service of King Esterad of Kovir. Both proved to be taciturn and both moved away at the first opportunity that presented itself.

'You were talking to Philippa and Dijkstra of Tretogor,' observed Triss, playing with a lapis-lazuli heart set in silver and diamonds, which hung around from her neck. 'You know who Dijkstra is, of course?'

'Yes, we do,' said Yennefer. 'Did he talk to you? Did he try to get anything out of you?'

'He tried,' said the enchantress, smiling knowingly and giggling. 'Quite subtly. But Philippa was doing a good job throwing him off his stride. And I thought they were on better terms.'

'They're on excellent terms,' Yennefer warned her gravely. 'Be careful, Triss. Don't breathe a word to him about – about you know who.'

'I know. I'll be careful. And by the way . . .' Triss lowered her voice. 'How's she doing? Will I be able to see her?'

'If you finally decide to run classes at Aretuza,' smiled Yennefer, 'you'll be able to see her very often.'

'Ah,' said Triss, opening her eyes widely. 'I see. Is Ciri . . . ?'

'Be quiet, Triss. We'll talk about it later. Tomorrow. After the Council.'

'Tomorrow?' said Triss, smiling strangely. Yennefer frowned, but before she had time to ask a question, a slight commotion suddenly broke out in the hall.

'They're here,' said Triss, clearing her throat. 'They've finally arrived.'

‘Yes,’ confirmed Yennefer, tearing her gaze from her friend’s eyes. ‘They’re here. Geralt, at last you’ll have a chance to meet the members of the Chapter and the High Council. If the opportunity presents itself I’ll introduce you, but it won’t hurt if you know who’s who beforehand.’

The assembled sorcerers parted, bowing with respect at the personages entering the hall. The first was a middle-aged but vigorous man in extremely modest woollen clothing. At his side strode a tall, sharp-featured woman with dark, smoothly combed hair.

‘That is Gerhart of Aelle, also known as Hen Gedymdeith, the oldest living sorcerer,’ Yennefer informed Geralt in hushed tones. ‘The woman walking beside him is Tissaia de Vries. She isn’t much younger than Hen, but is not afraid of using elixirs to hide it.’

Behind the couple walked an attractive woman with very long, dark golden hair, and a grey-green dress decorated with lace, which rustled as she moved.

‘Francesca Findabair, also called Enid an Gleanna, the Daisy of the Valleys. Don’t goggle, Witcher. She is widely considered to be the most beautiful woman in the world.’

‘Is she a member of the Chapter?’ he whispered in astonishment. ‘She looks very young. Is that also thanks to magical elixirs?’

‘Not in her case. Francesca is a pure-blooded elf. Observe the man escorting her. He’s Vilgefortz of Roggeveen and he really is young. But incredibly talented.’

In the case of sorcerers, as Geralt knew, the term ‘young’ covered any age up to and including a hundred years. Vilgefortz looked thirty-five. He was tall and well-built, wore a short jerkin of a knightly cut – but without a coat of arms, naturally. He was also fiendishly handsome. It made a great impression, even considering that Francesca Findabair was flowing gracefully along at his side, with her huge, doe eyes and breathless beauty.

‘That short man walking alongside Vilgefortz is Artaud Terranova,’ explained Triss Merigold. ‘Those five constitute the Chapter—’

‘And that girl with a strange face, walking behind Vilgefortz?’

‘That’s his assistant, Lydia van Bredevoort,’ said Yennefer coldly. ‘A meaningless individual, but looking her directly in the face is considered a serious faux pas. Take note of those three men

bringing up the rear; they're all members of the Council. Fercart of Cidaris, Radcliffe of Oxenfurt and Carduin of Lan Exeter.'

'Is that the whole Council? In its entirety? I thought there were more of them.'

'The Chapter numbers five, and there are another five in the Council. Philippa Eilhart is another Council member.'

'The numbers still don't add up,' he said, shaking his head. Triss giggled.

'Haven't you told him? Do you really not know, Geralt?'

'Know what, exactly?'

'That Yennefer's also a member of the Council. Ever since the Battle of Sodden. Haven't you boasted about it to him yet, darling?'

'No, darling,' said the enchantress, looking her friend straight in the eyes. 'For one thing, I don't like to boast. For another, there's been no time. I haven't seen Geralt for ages, and we have a lot of catching up to do. There's already a long list. We're going through it point by point.'

'I see,' said Triss hesitantly. 'Hmm . . . After such a long time I understand. You must have lots to talk about . . .'

'Talking,' smiled Yennefer suggestively, giving the Witcher another smouldering glance, 'is way down the list. Right at the very bottom, Triss.'

The chestnut-haired enchantress was clearly discomfited and blushed faintly.

'I see,' she said, playing in embarrassment with her lapis-lazuli heart.

'I'm so glad you do. Geralt, bring us some wine. No, not from that page. From that one, over there.'

He complied, sensing at once a note of compulsion in her voice. As he took the goblets from the tray the page was carrying, he discreetly observed the two enchantresses. Yennefer was speaking quickly and quietly, while Triss Merigold was listening intently, with her head down. When he returned, Triss had gone. Yennefer didn't show any interest in the wine, so he placed the two unwanted goblets on a table.

'Sure you didn't go a bit too far?' he asked coldly. Yennefer's eyes flared violet.

‘Don’t try to make a fool out of me. Did you think I don’t know about you and her?’

‘If that’s what you—’

‘That’s precisely what,’ she said, cutting him off. ‘Don’t make stupid faces, and refrain from comments. And above all, don’t try to lie to me. I’ve known Triss longer than I’ve known you. We like each other. We understand each other wonderfully and will always do so, irrespective of various minor . . . incidents. Just then it seemed to me she had some doubts. So I put her right, and that’s that. Let’s not discuss it any further.’

He didn’t intend to. Yennefer pulled her curls back from her cheek.

‘Now I shall leave you for a moment; I must talk to Tissaia and Francesca. Have some more food, because your stomach’s rumbling. And be vigilant. Several people are sure to accost you. Don’t let them walk all over you and don’t tarnish my reputation.’

‘You can be sure of that.’

‘Geralt?’

‘Yes.’

‘A short while ago you expressed a desire to kiss me here, in front of everyone. Do you still hold to that?’

‘I do.’

‘Just try not to smudge my lipstick.’

He glanced at the assembly out of the corner of his eye. They were watching the kiss, but not intrusively. Philippa Eilhart, standing nearby, with a group of young sorcerers, winked at him and feigned applause.

Yennefer pulled her mouth away from his and heaved a deep sigh.

‘A trifling thing, but pleasing,’ she purred. ‘All right, I’m going. I’ll be right back. And later, after the banquet . . . Hmm . . .’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Please don’t eat anything containing garlic.’

After she had gone the Witcher abandoned convention, unfastened his doublet, drank both goblets of wine and tried to get down to some serious eating. Nothing came of it.

‘Geralt.’

‘Your Excellency.’

‘Lay off the titles,’ frowned Dijkstra. ‘I’m no count. Vizimir ordered me to introduce myself like that, so as not affront courtiers or sorcerers with my peasant origins. So, how’s it going impressing people with your outfit and your figure? And pretending to have fun?’

‘I don’t have to pretend. I’m not here in a professional capacity.’

‘That’s interesting,’ smiled the spy, ‘but confirms the general opinion, that says you’re special; one of a kind. Because everyone else is here in a professional capacity.’

‘That’s what I was afraid of,’ said Geralt, also deeming it appropriate to smile. ‘I guessed I’d be one of a kind. Meaning out of place.’

The spy inspected the nearby dishes and then picked up and devoured the large, green pod of a vegetable unfamiliar to Geralt.

‘By the way,’ he said, ‘thank you for the Michelet brothers. Plenty of people in Redania sighed with relief when you hacked the four of them to death in the port in Oxenfurt. I laughed out loud when the university physician who was summoned to the investigation concluded – after examining the wounds – that someone had used a scythe blade mounted upright.’

Geralt didn’t comment. Dijkstra put another pod into his mouth.

‘It’s a pity,’ he continued, chewing, ‘that after dispatching them you didn’t report to the mayor. There was a bounty on them, dead or alive. A considerable one.’

‘Too many problems with my tax return already,’ said the Witcher, also deciding to sample a green pod, which turned out to taste like soapy celery. ‘Besides, I had to get away quickly, because . . . But I’m probably boring you, Dijkstra. You know everything, after all.’

‘Not a bit of it,’ smiled the spy. ‘I really don’t. Where would I learn such things from, anyway?’

‘From the reports of, oh, I don’t know, Philippa Eilhart.’

‘Reports, tales, rumours. I have to listen to them; it’s my job. But at the same time, my job forces me to sift every detail through a very fine sieve. Recently, just imagine, I heard that someone hacked the infamous Professor and his two comrades to death. It happened outside an inn in Anchor. The person who did it was also in too much of a hurry to collect the bounty.’

Geralt shrugged.

‘Rumours. Sift them through a fine sieve and you’ll see what remains.’

‘I don’t have to. I know what will remain. Most often, it’s a deliberate attempt at disinformation. Ah, and while we’re on the subject of disinformation, how is little Cirilla doing? Poor, sickly little girl, so prone to diphtheria? She’s healthy, I trust?’

‘Drop it, Dijkstra,’ replied the Witcher coldly, looking the spy straight in the eye. ‘I know you’re here in a professional capacity, but don’t be overzealous.’

The spy chortled and two passing sorceresses looked at him in astonishment. And with interest.

‘King Vizimir,’ said Dijkstra, his chuckle over, ‘pays me an extra bonus for every mystery I solve. My zealousness guarantees me a decent living. You can laugh, but I have a wife and children.’

‘I don’t see anything funny about it. Work to support your wife and children, but not at my expense, if you don’t mind. It seems to me there’s no shortage of mysteries and riddles in this hall.’

‘Quite. The whole of Aretuza is one great riddle. You must have noticed. Something’s in the air, Geralt. And, for the sake of clarity, I don’t mean the candelabras.’

‘I don’t get it.’

‘I believe you. Because I don’t get it either. And I’d like very much to. Wouldn’t you? Oh, I beg your pardon. Because you’re sure to know it all too. From the reports of, oh, I don’t know, the enchanting Yennefer of Vengerberg. But just think, there were times when I would pick up scraps of information from the enchanting Yennefer too. Ah, where are the snows of yesteryear?’

‘I really don’t know what you mean, Dijkstra. Could you express your thoughts more lucidly? Do your best. On condition you’re not doing it out of professional considerations. Forgive me, but I have no intention of earning you an extra bonus.’

‘Think I’m trying to trick you dishonourably?’ scowled the spy. ‘To get information out of you using deceit? You’re being unfair, Geralt. It simply interests me whether you see the same patterns in this hall that are so obvious to me.’

‘So what’s so obvious to you?’

‘Doesn’t the total absence of crowned heads – which is blatantly

apparent at this gathering – surprise you?'

'It doesn't surprise me in the least,' said Geralt, finally managing to stab a marinated olive with a toothpick. 'I'm sure kings prefer traditional banquets, seated at a table, which one can gracefully slide beneath in the early hours. And what's more . . .'

'What is more?' asked Dijkstra, putting four olives – which he had unceremoniously extracted from the bowl with his fingers – into his mouth.

'What is more,' said the Witcher, looking at the small crowd passing through the hall, 'the kings didn't bother to make the effort. They sent an army of spies in their stead. Both members of the fraternity and not. Probably in order to find out what's really in the air here.'

Dijkstra spat the olive stones out onto the table, took a long fork from the silver tray and used it to rummage around in a deep, crystal bowl.

'And Vilgefortz,' he said, continuing to rummage, 'made sure no spy was absent. He has all the royal spies in one pot. Why would Vilgefortz want all the royal spies in one pot, Witcher?'

'I have no idea. And it interests me little. I told you I'm here as a private individual. I'm – how shall I put it? – outside the pot.'

King Vizimir's spy fished a small octopus out of the bowl and examined it in disgust.

'People eat these?' he said, shaking his head in fake sympathy, and then turning towards Geralt.

'Listen to me carefully, Witcher,' he said quietly. 'Your convictions about privacy, your certainty that you don't care about anything and that you couldn't possibly care about anything . . . they perturb me and that inclines me to take a gamble. Do you like a flutter?'

'Be precise, please.'

'I suggest a wager,' said Dijkstra, raising the fork with the octopus impaled on it. 'I venture that in the course of the next hour, Vilgefortz will ask you to join him in a long conversation. I venture that during this conversation he will prove to you that you aren't here as a private individual and you *are* in his pot. Should I be wrong, I'll eat this shit in front of you, tentacles and all. Do you accept the wager?'

'What will I have to eat, should I lose?'

‘Nothing,’ said Dijkstra and quickly looked around. ‘But should you lose, you’ll report the entire content of your conversation with Vilgefortz to me.’

The Witcher was silent for a while, and looked calmly at the spy.

‘Farewell, Your Excellency,’ he said at last. ‘Thank you for the chat. It was educational.’

Dijkstra was somewhat annoyed.

‘Would you say so—?’

‘Yes, I would,’ interrupted Geralt. ‘Farewell.’

The spy shrugged his shoulders, threw the octopus and fork into the bowl, turned on his heel and walked away. Geralt didn’t watch him go. He slowly moved to the next table, led by the desire to get his hands on some of the huge pink and white prawns piled up on a silver platter among lettuce leaves and quarters of lime. He had an appetite for them but, still feeling curious eyes on him, wanted to consume the crustaceans in a dignified manner, without losing face. He approached extravagantly slowly, picking at delicacies from the other dishes cautiously and with dignity.

Sabrina Glevissig stood at the next table, deep in conversation with a flame-haired enchantress he didn’t know. The redhead wore a white skirt and a blouse of white georgette. The blouse, like that of Sabrina’s, was totally transparent, but had several strategically placed appliqués and embroideries. The appliqués – noticed Geralt – had an interesting quality: they became opaque and then transparent by turns.

The enchantresses were talking, sustaining themselves with slices of langouste. They were conversing quietly in the Elder Speech. And although they weren’t looking at him, they were clearly talking about him. He discreetly focused his sensitive witcher hearing, pretending to be utterly absorbed by the prawns.

‘. . . with Yennefer?’ enquired the redhead, playing with a pearl necklace, coiled around her neck like a dog’s collar. ‘Are you serious, Sabrina?’

‘Absolutely,’ answered Sabrina Glevissig. ‘You won’t believe it, but it’s been going on for several years. And I’m surprised indeed he can stand that vile toad.’

‘Why be surprised? She’s put a spell on him. She has him under a charm. Think I’ve never done that?’

‘But he’s a witcher! They can’t be bewitched. Not for so long, at

any rate.'

'It must be love then,' sighed the redhead. 'And love is blind.'

'He's blind, more like,' said Sabrina, grimacing. 'Would you believe, Marti, that she dared to introduce me to him as an old school friend? Bloody hell, she's older than me by . . . Oh, never mind. I tell you, she's hellishly jealous about that Witcher. Little Merigold only smiled at him and that hag bawled her out and sent her packing in no uncertain terms. And right now . . . Take a look. She's standing there, talking to Francesca, without ever taking her eyes off her Witcher.'

'She's afraid,' giggled the redhead, 'that we'll have our way with him, even if only for tonight. Are you up for it, Sabrina? Shall we try? He's a fit lad, not like those conceited weaklings of ours with all their complexes and pretensions . . .'

'Don't talk so loud, Marti,' hissed Sabrina. 'Don't look at him and don't grin. Yennefer's watching us too. And stay classy. Do you really want to seduce him? That would be in bad taste.'

'Hmm, you're right,' agreed Marti after a moment's thought. 'But what if he suddenly came over and suggested it himself?'

'In that case,' said Sabrina Glevissig, glancing at the Witcher with a predatory, coal-black eye. 'I'd give it to him without a second thought, even lying on a rock.'

'I'd even do it lying on a hedgehog,' sniggered Marti.

The Witcher, staring at the tablecloth, hid his foolish expression behind a prawn and a lettuce leaf, extremely pleased to have the mutation of his blood vessels which prevented him from blushing.

'Witcher Geralt?'

He swallowed the prawn and turned around. A sorcerer who looked familiar smiled faintly, touching the embroidered facings of his purple doublet.

'Dorregaray of Vole. But we are acquainted. We met . . .'

'I remember. Excuse me; I didn't recognise you right away. Glad to . . .'

The sorcerer smiled a little more broadly, taking two goblets from a tray being carried by a pageboy.

'I've been watching you for some time,' he said, handing one of the glasses to Geralt. 'You've told everyone Yennefer has introduced you to that you're enjoying yourself. Is that duplicity or a lack of

criticism?'

'Courtesy.'

'Towards them?' said Dorregaray, indicating the banqueters with a sweeping gesture. 'Believe me, it's not worth the effort. They're a vain, envious and mendacious bunch; they don't appreciate your courtesy. Why, they treat it as sarcasm. With them, Witcher, you have to use their own methods. Be obsessive, arrogant and rude, and then at least you'll impress them. Will you drink a glass of wine with me?'

'The gnat's piss they serve here?' smiled Geralt pleasantly. 'With the greatest revulsion. Well, but if you like it . . . then I'll force myself.'

Sabrina and Marti, listening intently from their table, snorted noisily. Dorregaray sized them both up with a contemptuous glance, turned, clinked his goblet against the Witcher's and smiled, this time genuinely.

'A point to you,' he admitted freely. 'You learn quickly. Where the hell did you acquire that wit, Witcher? On the road you insist on roaming around, hunting endangered species? Your good health. You may laugh, but you're one of the few people in this hall I feel like proposing such a toast to.'

'Indeed?' said Geralt, delicately slurping the wine and savouring the taste. 'In spite of the fact I make my living slaughtering endangered species?'

'Don't try to trip me up,' said the sorcerer, slapping him on the back. 'The banquet has only just begun. A few more people are sure to accost you, so ration out your scathing ripostes more sparingly. But as far as your profession is concerned . . . You, Geralt, at least have enough dignity not to deck yourself out with trophies. But take a good look around. Go on, forget convention for a moment; they like people to stare at them.'

The Witcher obediently fixed his gaze on Sabrina Glevissig's breasts.

'Look,' said Dorregaray, seizing him by the sleeve and pointing at a sorceress walking past, tulle fluttering. 'Slippers made from the skin of the horned agama. Had you noticed?'

He nodded, ingenuously, since he'd only noticed what her transparent tulle blouse *wasn't* covering.

'Oh, if you please, rock cobra,' said the sorcerer, unerringly

spotting another pair of slippers being paraded around the hall. The fashion, which had shortened hemlines to a span above the ankle, made his task easier. ‘And over there . . . White iguana. Salamander. Wyvern. Spectacled caiman. Basilisk . . . Every one of those reptiles is an endangered species. Can’t people bloody wear shoes of calfskin or pigskin?’

‘Going on about leather, as usual, Dorregaray?’ asked Philippa Eilhart, stopping beside them. ‘And tanning and shoemaking? What vulgar, tasteless subjects.’

‘People find a variety of things tasteless,’ said the sorcerer grimacing contemptuously. ‘Your dress has a beautiful trim, Philippa. Diamond ermine, if I’m not mistaken? Very tasteful. I’m sure you’re aware this species was exterminated twenty years ago owing to its beautiful pelt?’

‘Thirty,’ corrected Philippa, stuffing the last of the prawns – which Geralt hadn’t been quick enough to eat – into her mouth one after the other. ‘I know, I know, the species would surely have come back to life, had I instructed my dressmaker to trim my dress with bunches of raw flax. I considered it. But the colours wouldn’t have matched.’

‘Let’s go to that table over there,’ suggested the Witcher easily. ‘I saw a large bowl of black caviar there. And, since the shovelnose sturgeon has almost totally died out, we ought to hurry.’

‘Eating caviar in your company? I’ve dreamed about that,’ said Philippa, fluttering her eyelashes and smelling enticingly of cinnamon and muskroot as she slipped her arm into his. ‘Let’s not hang around. Will you join us, Dorregaray? You won’t? Well, see you later and enjoy yourself.’

The sorcerer snapped his fingers and turned away. Sabrina Glevissig and her redheaded friend watched them walk away with looks more venomous than the endangered rock cobra’s.

‘Dorregaray,’ murmured Philippa, unashamedly snuggling up to Geralt, ‘spies for King Ethain of Cidaris. Be on your guard. That reptiles and skin talk of his is the prelude to being interrogated. And Sabrina Glevissig was listening closely –’

‘– because she spies for Henselt of Kaedwen,’ he finished. ‘I know; you mentioned it. And that redhead, her friend—’

‘She’s no redhead – it’s dyed. Haven’t you got eyes? That’s Marti Södergren.’

‘Who does she spy for?’

‘Marti?’ Philippa laughed, her teeth flashing behind her vividly painted lips. ‘Not for anyone. Marti isn’t interested in politics.’

‘Outrageous! I thought everyone here was a spy.’

‘Many of them are,’ said the enchantress, narrowing her eyes. ‘But not everyone. Not Marti Södergren. Marti is a healer. And a nymphomaniac. Oh, damn, look! They’ve scoffed all the caviar! Down to the last egg; they’ve licked the plate clean! What are we going to do now?’

‘Now,’ smiled Geralt innocently, ‘you’ll announce that some thing’s in the air. You’ll say I have to reject neutrality and make a choice. You’ll suggest a wager. I daren’t even imagine what the prize might be. But I know I’ll have to do something for you should I lose.’

Philippa Eilhart was quiet for a long time, her eyes fixed on his.

‘I should have guessed,’ she said quietly. ‘Dijkstra couldn’t restrain himself, could he? He made you an offer. And I warned him you detest spies.’

‘I don’t detest spies. I detest spying. And I detest contempt. Don’t propose any wagers to me, Philippa. Of course I can sense something in the air. And it can hang there, for all I care. It doesn’t affect or interest me.’

‘You already told me that. In Oxenfurt.’

‘I’m glad you haven’t forgotten. You also recall the circumstances, I trust?’

‘Very clearly. Back then I didn’t reveal to you who Rience – or whatever his name is – was working for. I let him get away. Oh, you were so angry with me . . .’

‘To put it mildly.’

‘Then the time has come for me to be exonerated. I’ll give you Rience tomorrow. Don’t interrupt and don’t make faces. This isn’t a wager à la Dijkstra. It’s a promise, and I keep my promises. No, no questions, please. Wait until tomorrow. Now let’s concentrate on caviar and trivial gossip.’

‘There’s no caviar.’

‘One moment.’

She looked around quickly, waved a hand and mumbled a spell.

The silver dish in the shape of a leaping fish immediately filled with the roe of the endangered shovelnose sturgeon. The Witcher smiled.

'Can one eat one's fill of an illusion?'

'No. But snobbish tastes can be pleasantly titillated by it. Have a try.'

'Hmm . . . Indeed . . . I'd say it's tastier than the real thing . . .'

'And it's not at all fattening,' said the enchantress proudly, squeezing lemon juice over a heaped teaspoon of caviar. 'May I have another goblet of white wine?'

'At your service. Philippa?'

'Yes.'

'I'm told etiquette precludes the use of spells here. Wouldn't it be safer, then, to conjure up the illusion of the taste of caviar alone, without the caviar? Just the sensation? You'd surely be able to . . .'

'Of course I would,' said Philippa Eilhart, looking at him through her crystal goblet. 'The construction of such a spell is easy as pie. But were you only to have the sensation of taste, you'd lose the pleasure the activity offers. The process, the accompanying ritual movements, the gestures, the conversation and eye contact which accompanies the process . . . I'll entertain you with a witty comparison. Would you like that?'

'Please do. I'm looking forward to it.'

'I'd also be capable of conjuring the sensation of an orgasm.'

Before the Witcher had regained the power of speech, a short, slim sorceress with long, straight, straw-coloured hair came over to him. He recognised her at once – she was the one in the horned agama skin slippers and the green tulle top, which didn't even cover a minor detail like the small mole above her left breast.

'I'm sorry,' she said, 'but I have to interrupt your little flirting session, Philippa. Radcliffe and Detmold would like to talk to you for a moment. It's urgent.'

'Well, if it's like that, I'm coming. Bye, Geralt. We'll continue our flirting later!'

'Ah,' said the blonde, sizing him up. 'Geralt. The Witcher, the man Yennefer lost her head over? I've been watching you and wondering who you might be. It was tormenting me terribly.'

'I know that kind of torment,' he replied, smiling politely. 'I'm

experiencing it right now.'

'Do excuse the gaffe. I'm Keira Metz. Oh, caviar!'

'Be careful. It's an illusion.'

'Bloody hell, you're right!' said the sorceress, dropping the spoon as though it was the tail of a black scorpion. 'Who was so barefaced . . . You? Can you create fourth-level illusions?'

'I,' he lied, continuing to smile, 'am a master of magic. I'm pretending to be a witcher to remain incognito. Do you think Yennefer would bother with an ordinary witcher?'

Keira Metz looked him straight in the eyes and scowled. She was wearing a medallion in the form of an ankh cross; silver and set with zircon.

'A drop of wine?' he suggested, trying to break the awkward silence. He was afraid his joke hadn't been well received.

'No thank you . . . O fellow master,' said Keira icily. 'I don't drink. I can't. I plan to get pregnant tonight.'

'By whom?' asked the fake-redheaded friend of Sabrina Glevissig, who was dressed in a transparent, white, georgette blouse, decorated with cleverly positioned details, walking over to them. 'By whom?' she repeated, innocently fluttering her long eyelashes.

Keira turned and gave her an up-and-down glare, from her white iguana slippers to her pearl-encrusted tiara.

'What business is it of yours?'

'It isn't. Professional curiosity. Won't you introduce me to your companion, the famous Geralt of Rivia?'

'With great reluctance. But I know I won't be able to fob you off. Geralt, this is Marti Södergren, seductress. Her speciality is aphrodisiacs.'

'Must we talk shop? Oh, have you left me a little caviar? How kind of you.'

'Careful,' chorused Keira and the Witcher. 'It's an illusion.'

'So it is!' said Marti Södergren, leaning over and wrinkling her nose, after which she picked up a goblet and looked at the traces of crimson lipstick on it. 'Ah, Philippa Eilhart. I should have known. Who else would have dared to do something so brazen? That revolting snake. Did you know she spies for Vizimir of Redania?'

'And is a nymphomaniac?' risked the Witcher. Marti and Keira

snorted in unison.

‘Is that what you were counting on, fawning over her and flirting with her?’ asked the seductress. ‘If so, you ought to know someone’s played a mean trick on you. Philippa lost her taste for men some time ago.’

‘But perhaps you’re really a woman?’ asked Keira Metz, pouting her glistening lips. ‘Perhaps you’re only pretending to be a man, my fellow master of magic? To remain incognito? Do you know, Marti, he confessed a moment ago that he likes to pretend.’

‘He likes to and knows how to,’ smiled Marti spitefully. ‘Right, Geralt? A while back I saw you pretending to be hard of hearing and unable to understand the Elder Speech.’

‘He has endless vices,’ said Yennefer coldly, walking over and imperiously linking arms with the Witcher. ‘He has practically nothing but vices. You’re wasting your time, ladies.’

‘So it would seem,’ agreed Marti Södergren, still smiling spitefully. ‘Here’s hoping you enjoy the party, then. Come on, Keira, let’s have a goblet of something . . . alcohol-free. Perhaps I’ll also decide to have a try tonight.’

‘Phew,’ he exclaimed, once they’d gone. ‘Right on time, Yen. Thank you.’

‘You’re thanking me? Not sincerely, I should imagine. There are precisely eleven women in this hall flashing their tits through transparent blouses. I leave you for just half an hour, and I catch you talking to two of them –’

Yennefer broke off and looked at the fish-shaped dish.

‘– and eating illusions,’ she finished. ‘Oh, Geralt, Geralt. Come with me. I can introduce you to several people who are worth knowing.’

‘Would one of them be Vilgefortz?’

‘Interesting,’ said the enchantress, squinting, ‘that you should ask about him. Yes, Vilgefortz would like to meet you and talk to you. I warn you that the conversation may appear banal and frivolous, but don’t let that deceive you. Vilgefortz is an expert, exceptionally intelligent old hand. I don’t know what he wants from you, but stay vigilant.’

‘I will,’ he sighed. ‘But I can’t imagine your wily old fox is capable of surprising me. Not after what I’ve been through here. I’ve been mauled by spies and jumped by endangered reptiles and

ermines. I've been fed non-existent caviar. Nymphomaniacs with no interest in men have questioned my manhood. I've been threatened with rape on a hedgehog, menaced by the prospect of pregnancy, and even of an orgasm, but one without any of the ritual movements. Ugh . . .'

'Have you been drinking?'

'A little white wine from Cidaris. But there was probably an aphrodisiac in it . . . Yen? Are we going back to Loxia after the conversation with Vilgefortz?'

'No, we aren't.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'I want to spend the night in Aretuza. With you. An aphrodisiac, you say? In the wine? How fascinating . . .'

'Oh heavens, oh heavens,' sighed Yennefer, stretching and throwing a thigh over the Witcher's. 'Oh heavens, oh heavens. I haven't made love for so long . . . For so very long.'

Geralt disentangled his fingers from her curls without responding. Firstly, her statement might have been a trap; he was afraid there might be a hook hidden in the bait. Secondly, he didn't want to wipe away with words the taste of her delight, which was still on his lips.

'I haven't made love to a man who declared his love to me and to whom I declared my love for a very long time,' she murmured a moment later, when it was clear the Witcher wasn't taking the bait. 'I forgot how wonderful it can be. Oh heavens, oh heavens.'

She stretched even more vigorously, reaching out with her arms and seizing the corners of the pillow in both hands, so that her breasts, now flooded in moonlight, took on curves that made themselves felt as a shudder in the Witcher's lower back. He hugged her, and they both lay still, spent, their ardour cooled.

Outside their chamber cicadas chirped and from far off quiet voices and laughter could also be heard, testimony that the banquet still wasn't over, in spite of the late hour.

'Geralt?'

'Yes, Yen?'

'Tell me.'

'About the conversation with Vilgefortz? Now? I'll tell you in the morning.'

‘Right now, if you please.’

He looked at the writing desk in the corner of the chamber. On it were various books and other objects which the novice who had been temporarily rehoused to accommodate Yennefer in Loxia had been unable to take with her. A plump ragdoll in a ruffled dress, lovingly placed to lean up against the books and crumpled from frequent cuddling, was also there. She didn’t take the doll, he thought, to avoid exposing herself to her friends’ teasing in a Loxia dormitory. She didn’t take her doll with her. And she probably couldn’t fall asleep without it tonight.

The doll stared at him with button eyes. He looked away.

When Yennefer had introduced him to the Chapter, he’d observed the sorcerers’ elite intently. Hen Gedymdeith only gave him a tired glance; it was apparent the banquet had already exhausted the old man. Artaud Terranova bowed with an ambiguous grimace, shifting his eyes from him to Yennefer, but immediately became serious when he realised others were watching him. The blue, elven eyes of Francesca Findabair were as inscrutable and hard as glass. The Daisy of the Valleys smiled when he was introduced to her. That smile, although incredibly beautiful, filled the Witcher with dread. During the introductions Tissaia de Vries, although apparently preoccupied with her sleeves and jewellery, which seemed to required endless straightening, smiled at him considerably less beautifully but with considerably more sincerity. And it was Tissaia who immediately struck up a conversation with him, referring to one of his noble witcher deeds which he, incidentally, could not recall and suspected she had invented.

And then Vilgefortz joined the conversation. Vilgefortz of Roggeveen, a sorcerer of imposing stature, with noble and beautiful features and a sincere and honest voice. Geralt knew he could expect anything from people who looked like that.

They spoke briefly, sensing plenty of anxious eyes on them. Yennefer looked at the Witcher. A young sorceress with friendly eyes, constantly trying to hide the bottom of her face behind a fan, was looking at Vilgefortz. They exchanged several conventional comments, after which Vilgefortz suggested they continue their conversation in private. It seemed to Geralt that Tissaia de Vries was the only person surprised by this proposition.

‘Have you fallen asleep, Geralt?’ muttered Yennefer, shaking him out of his musings. ‘You’re meant to be telling me about your conversation.’

The doll looked at him from the writing desk with its button gaze. He looked away again.

‘As soon as we entered the cloister,’ he began a moment later, ‘that girl with the strange face . . .’

‘Lydia van Bredevoort. Vilgefortz’s assistant.’

‘Yes, that’s right, you said. Just a meaningless person. So, when we entered the cloister that meaningless person stopped, looked at him and asked him something. Telepathically.’

‘It wasn’t an indiscretion. Lydia can’t use her voice.’

‘I guessed as much. Because Vilgefortz didn’t answer her using telepathy. He replied . . .’

‘Yes, Lydia, that’s a good idea,’ answered Vilgefortz. ‘Let’s take a walk through the Gallery of Glory. You’ll have the opportunity to take a look at the history of magic, Geralt of Rivia. I have no doubt you’re familiar with it, but now you’ll have the chance to become acquainted with its visual history, too. If you’re a connoisseur of painting, please don’t be horrified. Most of them are the work of the enthusiastic students of Aretuza. Lydia, be so good as to lighten the gloom around here a little.’

Lydia van Bredevoort passed her hand through the air, and it immediately became lighter in the corridor.

The first painting showed an ancient sailing craft being hurled around by whirlpools among reefs protruding from the surf. A man in white robes stood on the prow of the ship, his head encircled by a bright halo.

‘The first landing,’ guessed the Witcher.

‘Indeed,’ Vilgefortz confirmed. ‘The Ship of Outcasts. Jan Bekker is bending the Power to his will. He calms the waves, proving that magic need not be evil or destructive but may save lives.’

‘Did that event really take place?’

‘I doubt it,’ smiled the sorcerer. ‘It’s more likely that, during the first journey and landing, Bekker and the others were hanging over the side, vomiting bile. After the landing which, by a strange twist of fate, was successful, he was able to overcome the Power. Let’s go on. Here we see Jan Bekker once more, forcing water to gush from the rock, in the very spot where the first settlement was established. And here, if you please, Bekker – surrounded by settlers – drives away the clouds and holds back a tempest to save the harvest.’

‘And here? What event is shown in this painting?’

‘The identification of the Chosen Ones. Bekker and Giambattista put the children of the settlers through a magical test as they arrived, in order to reveal Sources. The selected children were taken from their parents and brought to Mirthe, the first seat of the mages. Right now, you are looking at a historical moment. As you can see, all the children are terrified, and only that determined brown-haired girl is holding a hand out to Giambattista with a completely trusting smile. She became the famous Agnes of Glanville, the first woman to become an enchantress. The woman behind her is her mother. You can see sadness in her expression.’

‘And this crowd scene?’

‘The Novigradian Union. Bekker, Giambattista and Monck are concluding a pact with rulers, priests and druids. A pact of nonaggression codifying the separation of magic and state. Dreadful kitsch. Let’s go on. Here we see Geoffrey Monck setting off up the Pontar, which at that time was still called Aevon y Pont ar Gwennelen, the River of Alabaster Bridges. Monck sailed to Loc Muinne, to persuade the elves there to adopt a group of Source children, who were to be taught by elven sorcerers. It may interest you to know that among those children was a little boy, who came to be known as Gerhart of Aelle. You met him a moment ago. That little boy is now called Hen Gedymdeith.’

‘This,’ said the Witcher, looking at the sorcerer, ‘is just calling out for a battle scene. After all, several years after Monck’s successful expedition, the forces of Marshal Raupenneck of Tretogor carried out a pogrom in Loc Muinne and Est Haemlet, killing all of the elves, regardless of age or sex. And a war began, ending with the massacre at Shaerrawedd.’

‘And your impressive knowledge of history,’ Vilgefortz smiled once again, ‘will remind you, however, that no sorcerer of any note took part in those wars. For which reason the subject did not inspire any of the novices to paint a work to commemorate it. Let’s move on.’

‘Very well. What event is shown in this canvas? Oh, I know. It’s Raffard the White reconciling the feuding kings and putting an end to the Six Years’ War. And here we have Raffard refusing to accept the crown. A beautiful, noble gesture.’

‘Do you think so?’ said Vilgefortz, tilting his head. ‘Well, in any case, it was a gesture with the weight of precedent behind it. Raffard did, however, accept the position of first adviser so became

the de facto ruler, since the king was an imbecile.'

'The Gallery of Glory . . .' muttered the Witcher, walking up to the next painting. 'And what do we have here?'

'The historical moment when the first Chapter was installed and the Law enacted. From the left you see seated: Herbert Stammelford, Aurora Henson, Ivo Richert, Agnes of Glanville, Geoffrey Monck and Radmir of Tor Carnedd. This, if I'm to be honest, also cries out for a battle scene to complete it. For soon after, those who refused to acknowledge the Chapter and submit to the Law were wiped out in a brutal war. Raffard the White died, among others. But historical treatises remain silent about it, so as not to spoil a beautiful legend.'

'And here . . . Hmm . . . Yes, a novice probably painted this. And a very young one, at that . . .'

'Undoubtedly. It's an allegory, after all. I'd call it an allegory of triumphant womanliness. Air, water, earth and fire. And four famous enchantresses, all masters at wielding the forces of those elements. Agnes of Glanville, Aurora Henson, Nina Fioravanti and Klara Larissa de Winter. Look at the next – and more effective – painting. Here you also see Klara Larissa opening the academy for girls here, in the building where we now stand. And those are portraits of renowned Aretuza graduates. This shows a long history of triumphant womanhood and the growing feminisation of the profession: Yanna of Murivel, Nora Wagner, her sister Augusta, Jada Glevissig, Leticia Charbonneau, Ilona Laux-Antille, Carla Demetia Crest, Yiolenta Suarez, April Wenhaver . . . And the only surviving one: Tissaia de Vries . . .'

They continued. The silk of Lydia van Bredevoort's dress whispered softly, and the whisper contained a menacing secret.

'And that?' Geralt stopped. 'What is this dreadful scene?'

'The martyrdom of the sorcerer Radmir, flayed alive during the Falka rebellion. In the background burns the town of Mirthe, which Falka had ordered to be consumed by flame.'

'For which act Falka herself was soon consumed by flame. At the stake.'

'That is a widely known fact; Temerian and Redanian children still play at burning Falka on Saovine's Eve. Let's go back, so that you may see the other side of the gallery . . . Ah, I see you have a question.'

‘I’m wondering about the chronology. I know, naturally, how elixirs of youth work, but the simultaneous appearance of living people and long dead ones in these paintings . . .’

‘You mean: you are astonished that you met Hen Gedymdeith and Tissaia de Vries at the banquet, but Bekker, Agnes of Glanville, Stammelford or Nina Fioravanti are not with us?’

‘No. I know you’re not immortal—’

‘What is death?’ interrupted Vilgefortz. ‘To you?’

‘The end.’

‘The end of what?’

‘Existence. It seems to me we’ve moved from art history to philosophy.’

‘Nature doesn’t know the concept of philosophy, Geralt of Rivia. The pathetic – ridiculous – attempts which people undertake to try to understand nature are typically termed philosophy. The results of such attempts are also considered philosophy. It’s as though a cabbage tried to investigate the causes and effects of its existence, called the result of these reflections “an eternal and mysterious conflict between head and root”, and considered rain an unfathomable causative power. We, sorcerers, don’t waste time puzzling out what nature is. We know what it is; for we are nature ourselves. Do you understand?’

‘I’m trying to, but please talk more slowly. Don’t forget you’re talking to a cabbage.’

‘Have you ever wondered what happened when Bekker forced the water to gush from the rock? It’s generally put very simply: Bekker tamed the Power. He forced the element to be obedient. He subdued nature; controlled it . . . What is your relationship to women, Geralt?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

Lydia van Bredevoort turned with a whisper of silk and froze in anticipation. Geralt saw she was holding a wrapped-up painting under one arm. He had no idea where the picture had come from, since Lydia had been empty-handed a moment before. The amulet around his neck vibrated faintly.

Vilgefortz smiled.

‘I enquired,’ he repeated, ‘as to your views concerning the relationship between men and women.’

‘Regarding what respect of that relationship?’

‘Can obedience, in your opinion, be forced upon women? I’m talking about real women, of course, not just the female of the species. Can a real woman be controlled? Overcome? Made to surrender to your will? And if so, how? Answer me.’

The ragdoll didn’t take her eyes off them. Yennefer looked away.

‘Did you answer?’

‘Yes, I did.’

With her left hand, the enchantress squeezed his elbow, and with her right squeezed his fingers, which were touching her breasts.

‘How?’

‘You surely know.’

‘You’ve understood,’ said Vilgefortz a moment later. ‘And you’ve probably always understood. And thus you will also understand that if the concept of will and submission, of commands and obedience, and of male ruler and servant woman will perish and disappear, then unity will be achieved. A community merging into a single entity will be achieved. All will be as one. And if something like that were to occur, death would lose its meaning. Jan Bekker, who was water gushing from the rock, is present there in the banqueting hall. To say that Bekker died is like saying that water has died. Look at that painting.’

Geralt looked.

‘It’s unusually beautiful,’ he said after a moment. At once he felt a slight vibration of his witcher’s medallion.

‘Lydia,’ smiled Vilgefortz, ‘thanks for your acknowledgement. And I congratulate you on your taste. The landscape depicts the meeting between Cregennan of Lod and Lara Dorren aep Shiadhal, the legendary lovers, torn apart and destroyed by the time of contempt. He was a sorcerer and she was an elf, one of the elite of Aen Saevherne, or the Knowing Ones. What might have been the beginning of reconciliation was transformed into tragedy.’

‘I know that story. I always treated it as a fairytale. What really happened?’

‘That,’ said the sorcerer, becoming serious, ‘nobody knows. I mean almost nobody. Lydia, hang up your picture over here. Geralt, have a look at another of Lydia’s impressive works. It’s a portrait of Lara Dorren aep Shiadhal taken from an ancient miniature.’

‘Congratulations,’ said the Witcher, bowing to Lydia van Bredevoort, finding it hard to keep his voice from quavering. ‘It’s a true masterpiece.’

His tone didn’t quaver, even though Lara Dorren aep Shiadhal looked at him from the portrait with Ciri’s eyes.

‘What happened after that?’

‘Lydia remained in the gallery. The two of us went out onto the terrace. And he enjoyed himself at my expense.’

‘This way, Geralt, if you would. Step only on the dark slabs, please.’

The sea roared below, and the Isle of Thanedd stood in the white foam of the breakers. The waves broke against the walls of Loxia, directly beneath them. Loxia sparkled with lights, as did Aretuza. The stone block of Garstang towering above them was black and lifeless, however.

‘Tomorrow,’ said the sorcerer, following the Witcher’s gaze, ‘the members of the Chapter and the Council will don their traditional robes: the flowing black cloaks and pointed hats known to you from ancient prints. We will also arm ourselves with long wands and staffs, thus resembling the wizards and witches parents frighten children with. That is the tradition. We will go up to Garstang in the company of several other delegates. And there, in a specially prepared chamber, we will debate. The other delegates will await our return and our decisions in Aretuza.’

‘Are the smaller meetings in Garstang, behind closed doors, also traditional?’

‘But of course. It’s a long tradition and one which has come about through practical considerations. Gatherings of mages are known to be tempestuous and have led to very frank exchanges of views. During one of them, ball lightning damaged Nina Fioravanti’s coiffure and dress. Nina reinforced the walls of Garstang with an incredibly powerful aura and an anti-magic blockade, which took her a year to prepare. From that day on, no spells have worked in Garstang and the discussions have proceeded altogether more peacefully. Particularly when it is remembered to remove all bladed weapons from the delegates.’

‘I see. And that solitary tower on the very summit above Garstang. What is it? Some kind of important building?’

‘It is Tor Lara, the Tower of Gulls. A ruin. Is it important? It probably is.’

‘Probably?’

The sorcerer leaned on the banisters.

‘According to elvish tradition, Tor Lara is connected by a portal to the mysterious, still undiscovered Tor Zireael, the Tower of Swallows.’

‘According to tradition? You haven’t managed to find the portal? I don’t believe you.’

‘You are right not to. We discovered the portal, but it was necessary to block it. There were protests. Everyone was itching to conduct experiments; everyone wanted the fame of being the first to discover Tor Zireael, the mythical seat of elven mages and sages. But the portal is irreversibly warped and transports people chaotically. There were casualties, so it was blocked up. Let’s go, Geralt, it’s getting cold. Carefully. Only walk on the dark slabs.’

‘Why only the dark ones?’

‘These buildings are in ruins. Damp, erosion, strong winds, the salt air; they all have a disastrous effect on the walls. Repairs would cost too much, so we make use of illusion instead of workmen. Prestige, you understand.’

‘It doesn’t apply to everything.’

The sorcerer waved a hand and the terrace vanished. They were standing over a precipice, over an abyss bristling far below with the teeth of rocks jutting from the foam. They were standing on a narrow belt of dark slabs, stretched like a tightrope between the rocky ledge of Aretuza and the pillar holding up the terrace.

Geralt had difficulty keeping his balance. Had he been a man and not a witcher, he would have failed. But even he was rattled. His sudden movement could not have escaped the attention of the sorcerer, and his reaction must also have been visible. The wind rocked him on the narrow footbridge, and the abyss called to him with a sinister roaring of the waves.

‘You’re afraid of death,’ noted Vilgefortz with a smile. ‘You are afraid, after all.’

The ragdoll looked at them with button eyes.

‘He tricked you,’ murmured Yennefer, cuddling up to the Witcher. ‘There was no danger. He’s sure to have protected you and himself with a levitational field. He wouldn’t have taken the risk . . . What happened then?’

‘We went to another wing of Aretuza. He led me to a large chamber, which was probably the office of one of the teachers, or even the rectoress. We sat by a table with an hourglass on it. The sand was trickling through it. I could smell the fragrance of Lydia’s perfume and knew she had been in the chamber before us . . .’

‘And Vilgefortz?’

‘He asked me a question.’

‘Why didn’t you become a sorcerer, Geralt? Weren’t you ever attracted by the Art? Be honest.’

‘I will. I was.’

‘Why, then, didn’t you follow the voice of that attraction?’

‘I decided it would be wiser to follow the voice of good sense.’

‘Meaning?’

‘Years of practice in the witcher’s trade have taught me not to bite off more than I can chew. Do you know, Vilgefortz, I once knew a dwarf who, as a child, dreamed of being an elf. What do you think; would he have become one had he followed the voice of attraction?’

‘Is that supposed to be a comparison? A parallel? If so, it’s utterly ill-judged. A dwarf could not become an elf. Not without having an elf for its mother.’

Geralt remained silent for a long time.

‘I get it,’ he finally said. ‘I should have guessed. You’ve been having a root around in my life history. To what purpose, if you don’t mind?’

‘Perhaps,’ smiled the sorcerer faintly. ‘I’m dreaming of a painting in the Gallery of Glory. The two of us seated at a table and on a brass plaque the title: *Vilgefortz of Roggeveen entering into a pact with Geralt of Rivia*.’

‘That would be an allegory,’ said the Witcher, ‘with the title: *Knowledge Triumphing Over Ignorance*. I’d prefer a more realistic painting, entitled: *In Which Vilgefortz Explains To Geralt What This Is All About*.’

Vilgefortz brought the tips of his fingers together in front of his mouth.

‘Isn’t it obvious?’

‘No.’

‘Have you forgotten? The painting I’m dreaming about hangs in the Gallery of Glory, where future generations, who know perfectly well what it’s all about, what event is depicted in the picture, can look at it. On the canvas, Vilgefortz and Geralt are negotiating and concluding an agreement, as a result of which Geralt, following the voice – not of some kind of attraction or predilection, but a genuine vocation – finally joined the ranks of mages. This brings to an end his erstwhile and not particularly sensible existence, which has no future whatsoever.’

‘Just think,’ said the Witcher after a lengthy silence, ‘that not so long ago I believed that nothing more could astonish me. Believe me, Vilgefortz, I’ll remember this banquet and this pageant of incredible events for a long time. Worthy of a painting, indeed. The title would be: *Geralt Leaving the Isle of Thanedd, Shaking with Laughter*.’

‘I don’t understand,’ said the sorcerer, leaning forward a little. ‘You lost me with the floweriness of your discourse, so liberally sprinkled with sophisticated words.’

‘The causes of the misunderstanding are clear to me. We differ too much to understand each other. You are a mighty sorcerer from the Chapter, who has achieved oneness with nature. I’m a wanderer, a witcher, a mutant, who travels the world and slays monsters for money –’

‘That floweriness,’ interrupted the sorcerer, ‘has been supplanted by banality.’

‘– We differ too greatly,’ said Geralt, not allowing himself to be interrupted, ‘and the minor fact that my mother was, by accident, a sorceress, is unable to erase that difference. But just out of curiosity: who was *your* mother?’

‘I have no idea,’ said Vilgefortz calmly. The Witcher immediately fell silent.

‘Druids from the Kovir Circle,’ said the sorcerer a moment later, ‘found me in a gutter in Lan Exeter. They took me in and raised me. To be a druid, of course. Do you know what a druid is? It’s a kind of mutant, a wanderer, who travels the world and bows to sacred oaks.’

The Witcher said nothing.

‘And later,’ continued Vilgefortz, ‘my gifts revealed themselves during certain druidical rituals. Gifts which clearly and undeniably pointed to my origins. I was begat by two people, evidently

unplanned, and at least one of them was a sorcerer.'

Geralt said nothing.

'The person who discovered my modest abilities was, of course, a sorcerer, whom I met by accident,' continued Vilgefortz calmly. 'He offered me a tremendous gift: the chance of an education and of self-improvement, with a view to joining the Brotherhood of Sorcerers.'

'And you,' said the Witcher softly, 'accepted the offer.'

'No,' said Vilgefortz, his voice becoming increasingly cold and unpleasant. 'I rejected it in a rude – even boorish – way. I unloaded all my anger on the old fool. I wanted him to feel guilty; he and his entire magical fraternity. Guilty, naturally, for the gutter in Lan Exeter; guilty that one or two detestable conjurers – bastards without hearts or human feelings – had thrown me into that gutter at birth, and not before, when I wouldn't have survived. The sorcerer, it goes without saying, didn't understand; wasn't concerned by what I told him. He shrugged and went on his way, by doing so branding himself and his fellows with the stigma of insensitive, arrogant, whoresons, worthy of the greatest contempt.'

Geralt said nothing.

'I'd had a gutful of druids,' said Vilgefortz. 'So I gave up my sacred oak groves and set off into the world. I did a variety of things. I'm still ashamed of some of them. I finally became a mercenary. My life after that unfolded, as you might imagine, predictably. Victorious soldier, defeated soldier, marauder, robber, rapist, murderer, and finally a fugitive fleeing the noose. I fled to the ends of the world. And there, at the end of the world, I met a woman. A sorceress.'

'Be careful,' whispered the Witcher, and his eyes narrowed. 'Be careful, Vilgefortz, that the similarities you're desperately searching for don't lead you too far.'

'The similarities are over,' said the sorcerer without lowering his gaze, 'since I couldn't cope with the feelings I felt for that woman. I couldn't understand her feelings, and she didn't try to help me with them. I left her. Because she was promiscuous, arrogant, spiteful, unfeeling and cold. Because it was impossible to dominate her, and her domination of me was humiliating. I left her because I knew she was only interested in me because my intelligence, personality and fascinating mystery obscured the fact that I wasn't a sorcerer, and it was usually only sorcerers she would honour with more than one

night. I left her because . . . because she was like my mother. I suddenly understood that what I felt for her was not love at all, but a feeling which was considerably more complicated, more powerful but more difficult to classify: a mixture of fear, regret, fury, pangs of conscience and the need for expiation, a sense of guilt, loss, and hurt. A perverse need for suffering and atonement. What I felt for that woman was hate.'

Geralt remained silent. Vilgefortz was looking to one side.

'I left her,' he said after a while. 'And then I couldn't live with the emptiness which engulfed me. And I suddenly understood it wasn't the absence of a woman that causes that emptiness, but the lack of everything I had been feeling. It's a paradox, isn't it? I imagine I don't need to finish; you can guess what happened next. I became a sorcerer. Out of hatred. And only then did I understand how stupid I was. I mistook stars reflected in a pond at night for those in the sky.'

'As you rightly observed, the parallels between us aren't completely parallel,' murmured Geralt. 'In spite of appearances, we have little in common, Vilgefortz. What did you want to prove by telling me your story? That the road to wizardly excellence, although winding and difficult, is available to anyone? Even – excuse my parallel – to bastards or foundlings, wanderers or witchers—'

'No,' the sorcerer interrupted. 'I didn't mean to prove this road is open to all, because that's obvious and was proved long ago. Neither was there a need to prove that certain people simply have no other path.'

'And so,' smiled the Witcher, 'I have no choice? I have to enter into a pact with you, a pact which should someday become the subject of a painting, and become a sorcerer? On account of genetics alone? Give me a break. I know a little about the theory of heredity. My father, as I discovered with no little difficulty, was a wanderer, a churl, a troublemaker and a swashbuckler. My genes on the spear side may be dominant over the genes on the distaff side. The fact that I can swash a buckler pretty well seems to confirm that.'

'Indeed,' the sorcerer derisively smiled. 'The hourglass has almost run its course, and I, Vilgefortz of Roggeveen, master of magic, member of the Chapter, am still discoursing – not unpleasantly – with a churl and swashbuckler, the son of a churl, a swashbuckler and a wanderer. We are talking of matters which, as everyone

knows, are typical fireside debate subjects beloved of churlish swashbucklers. Subjects like genetics, for example. How do you even know that word, my swashbuckling friend? From the temple school in Ellander, where they teach the pupils to read and write just twenty-four runes? Whatever induced you to read books in which words like that and other, similar ones can be found? Where did you perfect your rhetoric and eloquence? And why did you do it? To converse with vampires? Oh, my genetic wanderer, upon whom Tissaia de Vries deigned to smile. Oh, my Witcher, my swashbuckler, who fascinates Philippa Eilhart so much her hands tremble. At the recollection of whom Triss Merigold blushes crimson. Not to mention the effect you have on Yennefer of Vengerberg.'

'Perhaps it's as well you aren't going to mention her. Indeed, so little sand remains in the hourglass I can almost count the grains. Don't paint any more pictures, Vilgefortz. Tell me what this is all about. Tell me using simple words. Imagine we're sitting by the fire, two wanderers, roasting a piglet which we just stole, trying and failing to get drunk on birch juice. Just a simple question. Answer it. As one wanderer to another.'

'What is the simple question?'

'What kind of pact are you proposing? What agreement are we to conclude? Why do you want me in your pot? In this cauldron, which, it seems to me, is starting to boil? What else is hanging in the air here – apart from candelabras?'

'Hmm,' the sorcerer pondered, or pretended to. 'The question is not simple, but I'll try to answer it. But not as a wanderer to a wanderer. I'll answer . . . as one hired swashbuckler to another, similar, swashbuckler.'

'Suits me.'

'Then listen, comrade swashbuckler. Quite a nasty scrap is brewing. A bloody fight for life or death, with no mercy shown. One side will triumph, and the other will be pecked apart by ravens. I put it to you, comrade: join the side with the better chance. Join us. Forget the others, spit on them with utter contempt, because they don't stand a chance. What's the point of perishing with them? No, no, comrade, don't scowl at me. I know what you want to say. You want to say you're neutral. That you don't give a shit about any of them, that you'll simply sit out the slaughter, hunkered down in Kaer Morhen, hidden in the mountains. That's a bad idea, comrade. Everything you love will be with us. If you don't join us, you'll lose

everything. And then you'll be consumed by emptiness, nothingness and hatred. You'll be destroyed by the approaching time of contempt. So be sensible and join the right side when the time comes to choose. And it will come. Trust me.'

'It's incredible,' the Witcher smiled hideously, 'how much my neutrality outrages everybody. How it makes me subject to offers of pacts and agreements, offers of collaboration, lectures about the necessity to make choices and join the right side. Let's put an end to this conversation, Vilgefortz. You're wasting your time. I'm not an equal partner for you in this game. I can't see any chance of the two of us ending up in a painting in the Gallery of Glory. Particularly not in a battle scene.'

The sorcerer said nothing.

'Set out on your chessboard,' said Geralt, 'the kings, queens, elephants and rooks, and don't worry about me, because I mean as much on your chessboard as the dust on it. It's not my game. You say I'll have to choose? I say you're wrong. I won't choose. I'll respond to events. I'll adapt to what others choose. That's what I've always done.'

'You're a fatalist.'

'That's right. Although that's yet another word I ought not to know. I repeat: it's not my game.'

'Really?' said Vilgefortz, leaning across the table. 'In this game, Witcher, on the chessboard, stands a black horse. It's tied to you by bonds of destiny. For good or ill. You know who I'm talking about, don't you? And I'm sure you don't want to lose her, do you? Just know there's only one way not to lose her.'

The Witcher's eyes narrowed.

'What do you want from that child?'

'There's only one way for you to find out.'

'I'm warning you. I won't let anyone harm her—'

'There's only one way you could prevent that. I offered you that option, Geralt of Rivia. Think over my offer. You have the entire night. Think, as you look up at the sky. At the stars. And don't mistake them with their reflection in a pond. The sand has run out.'

'I'm afraid for Ciri, Yen.'

'There's no need.'

'But . . .'

‘Trust me,’ she said, hugging him. ‘Trust me, please. Don’t worry about Vilgefortz. He’s a wily old fox. He wanted to trick you, to provoke you. And he was partly successful. But it’s not important. Ciri is in my care, and she’ll be safe in Aretuza. She’ll be able to develop her abilities here, and no one will interfere with that. No one. But forget about her becoming a witcher. She has other talents. And she’s destined for other work. You can trust me.’

‘I trust you.’

‘That’s significant progress. And don’t worry about Vilgefortz. Tomorrow will explain many matters and solve many problems.’

Tomorrow, he thought. *She’s hiding something from me. And I’m afraid to ask what. Codringher was right. I’ve got mixed up in a dreadful mess, but now there’s no way out. I have to wait and see what tomorrow – which is supposed to explain everything – will bring. I have to trust her. I know something’s going to happen. I’ll wait. And adapt to the situation.*

He looked at the writing desk.

‘Yen?’

‘I’m here.’

‘When you were a pupil at Aretuza . . . When you slept in a chamber like this . . . Did you have a doll you couldn’t sleep without? Which you put on the writing desk during the day?’

‘No,’ said Yennefer, moving suddenly. ‘I didn’t have a doll of any kind. Don’t ask me about that, Geralt. Please, don’t ask me.’

‘Aretuza,’ he whispered, looking around. ‘Aretuza on the Isle of Thanedd. It’ll become her home. For so many years . . . When she leaves here she’ll be a mature woman . . .’

‘Stop that. Don’t think about it and don’t talk about it. Instead . . .’

‘What, Yen?’

‘Love me.’

He embraced her. And touched her. And found her. Yennefer, in some astonishing way hard and soft at the same time, sighed loudly. The words they had uttered broke off, perished among the sighs and quickened breaths, ceased to have any meaning and were dissipated. So they remained silent, and focused on the search for one another, on the search for the truth. They searched for a long time, lovingly and very thoroughly, fearful of needless haste,

recklessness and nonchalance. They searched vigorously, intensively and passionately, fearful of needless self-doubt and indecision. They searched cautiously, fearful of needless tactlessness.

They found one another, conquered their fear and, a moment later, found the truth, which exploded under their eyelids with a terrible, blinding clarity, tore apart the lips pursed in determination with a moan. Then time shuddered spasmodically and froze, everything vanished, and touch became the only functioning sense.

An eternity passed, reality returned and time shuddered once more and set off again, slowly, ponderously, like a great, fully laden cart. Geralt looked through the window. The moon was still hanging in the sky, although what had just happened ought in principle to have struck it down from the sky.

'Oh heavens, oh heavens,' said Yennefer much later, slowly wiping a tear from her cheek.

They lay still among the dishevelled sheets, among thrills, among steaming warmth and waning happiness and among silence, and all around whirled vague darkness, permeated by the scent of the night and the voices of cicadas. Geralt knew that, in moments like this, the enchantress's telepathic abilities were sharpened and very powerful, so he thought about beautiful matters and beautiful things. About things which would give her joy. About the exploding brightness of the sunrise. About fog suspended over a mountain lake at dawn. About crystal waterfalls, with salmon leaping up them, gleaming as though made of solid silver. About warm drops of rain hitting burdock leaves, heavy with dew.

He thought for her and Yennefer smiled, listening to his thoughts. The smile quivered on her cheek along with the crescent shadows of her eyelashes.

'A home?' asked Yennefer suddenly. 'What home? Do you have a home? You want to build a home? Oh . . . I'm sorry. I shouldn't . . .'

He was quiet. He was angry with himself. As he had been thinking for her, he had accidentally allowed her to read a thought about herself.

'A pretty dream,' said Yennefer, stroking him lightly on the shoulder. 'A home. A house built with your own hands, and you and I in that house. You would keep horses and sheep, and I would have a little garden, cook food and card wool, which we would take to market. With the pennies earned from selling the wool and various crops we would buy what we needed; let's say some copper

cauldrons and an iron rake. Every now and then, Ciri would visit us with her husband and three children, and Triss Merigold would occasionally look in, to stay for a few days. We'd grow old together, beautifully and with dignity. And should I ever get bored, you would play for me in the evening on your homemade bagpipes. Playing the bagpipes – as everyone knows – is the best remedy for depression.'

The Witcher said nothing. The enchantress cleared her throat softly.

'I'm sorry,' she said, a moment later. He got up on an elbow, leaned across and kissed her. She moved suddenly, and hugged him. Wordlessly.

'Say something.'

'I wouldn't like to lose you, Yen.'

'But you have me.'

'The night will end.'

'Everything ends.'

No, he thought. *I don't want it to be like that. I'm tired. Too tired to accept the perspective of endings which are beginnings, and starting everything over again. I'd like . . .*

'Don't talk,' she said, quickly placing her fingers on his lips. 'Don't tell me what you'd like and what you desire. Because it might turn out I won't be able to fulfil your desires, and that causes me pain.'

'What do you desire, Yen? What do you dream about?'

'Only about achievable things.'

'And about me?'

'I already have you.'

He remained quiet for a long time, waiting until she broke the silence.

'Geralt?'

'Mm?'

'Love me, please.'

At first, satiated with each other, they were both full of fantasy and invention, creative, imaginative and craving for the new. As usual, it quickly turned out it was at once too much and too little.

They understood it simultaneously and once more made love to one another.

When Geralt had recovered his senses, the moon was still in its place. The cicadas were playing wildly, as though they also wanted to conquer anxiety and fear with madness and abandon. From a nearby window in the left wing of Aretuza, someone craving sleep yelled out, fulminating sternly and demanding quiet. From a window on the other side someone else, clearly with a more artistic soul, applauded enthusiastically and congratulated them.

‘Oh, Yen . . .’ whispered the Witcher reproachfully.

‘I had a reason . . .’ She kissed him and then buried her cheek in the pillow. ‘I had a reason to scream. So I screamed. It shouldn’t be suppressed. It would be unhealthy and unnatural. Hold me, please.’

CHAPTER FOUR

***The Lara Portal**, also known as **Benavent's Portal**, after its discoverer. Located on the Isle of Thanedd, on the uppermost floor of the Tower of Gulls. A fixed portal, periodically active. Principles of functioning: unknown. Destination: unknown, but probably skewed, owing to damage. Numerous forks or dispersions possible.*

Important information: a chaotic and lethally dangerous portal. All experimentation categorically forbidden. Magic may not be used in the Tower of Gulls or in close proximity to it, particularly not teleportational magic. In exceptional cases, the Chapter will examine applications for permission to enter Tor Lara and for inspections of the portal. Applications should be supported by evidence of research work already in progress and of specialisation in the subject area.

Bibliography: Geoffrey Monck, The Magic of the Elder Folk; *Immanuel Benavent,* The Portal of Tor Lara; *Nina Fioravanti,* The Theory and Practice of Teleportation; *Ransant Alvaro,* The Gates of Mystery.

Prohibita (list of banned artefacts),

Ars Magica, Edition LVIII

In the beginning there was only pulsating, shimmering chaos, a cascade of images and a whirling abyss of sounds and voices. Ciri saw a tower reaching up to the sky with thunderbolts dancing

across the roof. She heard the cry of a raptor and suddenly *became* it. She was flying with enormous speed and beneath her was a stormy sea. She saw a small button-eyed doll and suddenly *was* that doll, and all around her teemed the darkness, pulsing with the sounds of cicadas. She saw a large black and white tomcat and suddenly *was* that cat, surrounded by a sombre house, darkened wood panelling and the smell of candles and old books. Several times, she heard someone call her name; summon her. She saw silver salmon leaping up waterfalls, heard the sound of rain drumming against leaves. And then she heard Yennefer's strange, long-drawn-out scream. And it was that scream that woke her, pulled her out of the chasm of timelessness and chaos.

Now, vainly trying to recall the dream, she could only hear the soft sounds of lute and flute, the jingling of a tambourine, singing and laughter. Dandelion and the group of minstrels he had chanced upon continued to have the time of their lives in the chamber at the end of the corridor.

A shaft of moonlight shone through the window, somewhat lightening the gloom and making the chamber in Loxia resemble a dream world. Ciri threw off the sheet. She was bathed in sweat and her hair was stuck to her forehead. It had taken her a long time to fall asleep the night before; it had been stuffy, even though the window had been wide open. She knew what had caused it. Before leaving with Geralt, Yennefer had encircled the chamber with protective charms. Ostensibly it was in order to prevent anyone from entering, though Ciri suspected their true purpose was to stop her leaving. She was, quite simply, a prisoner. Yennefer, although clearly happy to be back with Geralt, had neither forgiven nor forgotten Ciri's wilful and reckless flight to Hirundum, even though it had led to her reunion with Geralt.

The meeting with Geralt itself had filled Ciri with sadness and disappointment. The Witcher had been taciturn, tense, restless and demonstrably insincere. Their conversation had faltered and limped along, losing its way in sentences and questions which suddenly broke off. The Witcher's eyes and thoughts kept running away from her and fleeing into the distance. Ciri knew where they were running to.

Dandelion's soft, mournful singing and the music he raised from the lute's strings, murmuring like a stream flowing over pebbles, drifted to her from the chamber at the end of the corridor. She recognised it as the melody the bard had started composing some days before. The ballad – as Dandelion had boasted several times –

bore the title *Elusive* and was intended to earn the poet first place at the annual bard's tournament due to take place in the later autumn at Vartburg Castle. Ciri listened carefully to the words.

O'er glistening roofs you float

Through lily-strewn rivers you dive

Yet one day I will know your truths

If only I am still alive . . .

Hooves thundered, riders galloped in the night, and on the horizon the sky bloomed with the glow of many fires. A bird of prey screeched and spread its wings, taking flight. Ciri plunged into sleep once more, hearing people calling her name over and over. Once it was Geralt, once Yennefer, once Triss Merigold, finally – several times – a sad, slim, fair-haired girl she didn't recognise, who looked out at her from a miniature, framed in horn and brass.

Then she saw a black and white cat, and a moment later, she again *was* that cat, and seeing with its eyes. She was in a strange, dark house. She saw great shelves of books, and a lectern lit by several candlesticks, with two men sitting at it, poring over scrolls. One of the men was coughing and wiping his lips with a handkerchief. The second, a midget with a huge head, sat on a chair on wheels. He had no legs.

'Extraordinary . . .' sighed Fenn, running his eyes over the decaying parchment. 'It's hard to believe . . . Where did you get these documents?'

'You wouldn't believe me if I told you,' Codringher coughed. 'Have you only now realised who Cirilla, Princess of Cintra, really is? The Child of the Elder Blood; the last offshoot of that bloody tree of hatred! The last branch and, on it, the last poisoned apple . . .'

'The Elder Blood . . . So far back in time . . . Pavetta, Calanthe, Adalia, Elen, Fiona . . .'

'And Falka.'

'By the gods, but that's impossible. Firstly, Falka had no children! Secondly, Fiona was the legitimate daughter of —'

'Firstly, we know nothing about Falka's youth. Secondly, Fenn, don't make me laugh. You know, of course, that I'm overcome with spasms of mirth at the sound of the word "legitimate". I believe that document, because in my opinion it's authentic and speaks the truth. Fiona, Pavetta's great-great-grandmother, was the daughter of

Falka, that monster in human form. Damn it, I don't believe in all those insane predictions, prophecies and other poppycock, but when I now recall the Ithlinne forecasts . . .'

'Tainted blood?'

'Tainted, contaminated, accursed; it can be understood in various ways. And according to legend, if you recall, it was Falka who was accursed – because Lara Dorren aep Shiadhal had put a curse on her mother—'

'Those are just stories, Codringher.'

'You're right: stories. But do you know when stories stop being stories? The moment someone begins to believe in them. And someone believes in the story of the Elder Blood. In particular, in the part that says *from Falka's blood will be born an avenger who will destroy the old world and build a new one on its ruins*.'

'And Cirilla is supposed to be that avenger?'

'No. Not Cirilla. Her son.'

'And Cirilla is being hunted by –'

'– Emhyr var Emreis, Emperor of Nilfgaard,' finished Codringher coldly. 'Now do you understand? Cirilla, irrespective of her will, is to become the mother of the heir to the throne. Mother to an arch-prince; the Arch-Prince of Darkness, the descendant and avenger of that she-devil Falka. The destruction and the subsequent rebuilding of the world is meant – it seems to me – to proceed in a guided and controlled way.'

The cripple said nothing for a long time.

'Don't you think,' he finally asked, 'we should tell Geralt about this?'

'Geralt?' sneered Codringher. 'Who? You mean that simpleton who, not so long ago, tried to persuade me he doesn't work for gain? Oh, I believe that; he doesn't work for his own gain. But for someone else's. And unwittingly, as a matter of fact. Geralt is hunting Rience; Rience may be on a leash but Geralt doesn't even know there's a collar around his neck. Should I inform him? And so help the people planning to capture this golden-egg laying hen, in order to blackmail Emhyr or ingratiate themselves with him? No, Fenn. I'm not that stupid.'

'The Witcher's on a leash? But who's holding it?'

'Think.'

‘Bitch!’

‘You said it. The only person who can influence him. Whom he trusts. But I don’t trust her and never have. So I’m going to join the game myself.’

‘It’s a dangerous one, Codringher.’

‘There aren’t any safe games. Games are either worth a candle or they aren’t. Fenn, old man, don’t you understand what has fallen into our hands? A golden hen, which will lay for us – and no one else – and it’ll be huge egg, with a rich, yellow yolk . . .’

Codringher coughed violently. When he removed the handkerchief from his mouth there were flecks of blood on it.

‘Gold won’t cure that,’ said Fenn, looking at the handkerchief in his partner’s hand. ‘Nor give me back my legs . . .’

‘Who knows?’

Somebody knocked at the door. Fenn fidgeted nervously in his wheeled chair.

‘Are you expecting anyone, Codringher?’

‘I am. The men I’m sending to Thanedd. To fetch our golden hen.’

‘Don’t open it,’ Ciri screamed. ‘Don’t open the door! Death stands behind it! Don’t open the door!’

‘All right, all right, I’m just coming,’ called Codringher, pulling back the bolts, then turning to his meowing cat. ‘And you’ll sit quietly, you accursed little beast . . .’

He broke off. The men in the doorway were not the ones he had been expecting. Instead, three characters he did not know were standing there.

‘The Honourable Mr Codringher?’

‘The master’s away on business,’ said the lawyer, assuming the expression of a halfwit and speaking with a slightly squeaky voice. ‘I am the master’s butler. The name is Dullord, Mikael Dullord. How may I serve your honourable selves?’

‘You cannot,’ said one of the individuals, a tall half-elf. ‘Since your master is not here, we’ll just leave a letter and a message. Here is the letter.’

‘I will pass it on without fail,’ said Codringher, playing the role of a simple lackey perfectly; bowing subserviently and holding out a hand to take a scroll of parchment tied up with a red cord. ‘And the

message?'

The cord binding the scroll unwound like a striking snake, lashing and curling itself tightly around his wrist. The tall man jerked hard. Codringher lost his balance and lurched forward, instinctively thrusting his left hand towards the half-elf's chest to stop himself from falling against him. As he fell he was unable to avoid the dagger which was rammed into his belly. He cried out breathlessly and jerked backwards, but the magic cord around his wrist held fast. The half-elf pulled Codringher towards him and stabbed again. This time the whole of Codringher's weight bore down on the blade.

'That's the message and greetings from Rience,' hissed the tall half-elf, pulling the dagger upwards powerfully and gutting the lawyer like a fish. 'Go to hell, Codringher. Straight to hell.'

Codringher's breath rasped. He felt the dagger blade grate and crunch against his ribs and sternum. He slumped onto the floor, curling up into a ball. He wanted to shout, to warn Fenn, but was only able to screech, and the screech was immediately drowned in a gush of blood.

The tall half-elf stepped over the body and was followed inside by the other two. They were humans.

Fenn was ready for them.

The bowstring thwacked, and one of the thugs crashed onto his back, struck directly in the forehead by a steel ball. Fenn shoved himself backwards in his chair, trying desperately to reload the arbalest with his shaking hands.

The tall man leapt towards him, knocking over the chair with a powerful kick. The midget rolled among the papers strewn over the floor. Waving his small hands and the stumps of his legs helplessly, he resembled a mutilated spider.

The half-elf kicked the arbalest out of Fenn's reach. Paying no attention to the cripple's attempts to struggle away, he hurriedly looked through the documents lying on the lectern. His attention was caught by a miniature in a horn and brass frame, showing a fair-haired girl. He picked it up with the scrap of paper attached to it.

The second thug ignored the one who had been hit by the arbalest ball and came closer. The half-elf raised his eyebrows questioningly. The thug shook his head.

The half-elf picked up several documents from the lectern,

tucking them away in his coat, along with the miniature. He then took a handful of quills from the inkwell and set light to them with one of the candlesticks. He turned them around slowly, allowing the fire take good hold and then threw them onto the lectern among the scrolls of parchment, which immediately burst into flames.

Fenn screamed.

The tall half-elf took a bottle of ink remover from the burning table, stood over the midget thrashing around on the floor and emptied the contents over him. Fenn gave a tormented howl. The other thug swept an armful of scrolls from a bookshelf and threw them over the cripple.

The fire on the lectern had just reached the ceiling. A second, smaller bottle of solvent exploded with a roar, the flames licking the bookshelves. The scrolls, rolls and files began to blacken, curl up and catch fire. Fenn wailed. The tall half-elf stepped back from the burning pulpit, twisted up a second piece of paper and lit it. The second thug threw another armful of vellum scrolls on the cripple.

Fenn screamed.

The half-elf stood over him, holding the burning brand.

Codringher's black and white cat alighted on a nearby wall. In its yellow eyes danced the reflection of the fire, which had transformed the pleasant night into this horrific parody of day. People were screaming. *Fire! Fire! Water!* People ran towards the building. The cat froze, watching them with astonishment and contempt. Those idiots were clearly heading towards the fiery abyss, from which it had only just managed to extricate itself.

Turning away, unconcerned, Codringher's cat went back to licking its bloodstained paws.

Ciri awoke covered in sweat, with her hands painfully gripping the sheets. Everything was quiet, and the soft darkness was pierced by a dagger-like shaft of moonlight.

A fire. An inferno. Blood. A nightmare . . . I don't remember, I don't remember anything . . .

She took a deep breath of the crisp night air. The sense of stuffiness had vanished. She knew why.

The protective charms had stopped working.

Something's happened, thought Ciri. She jumped out of bed and quickly dressed. She belted on her dagger. She didn't have a sword any more; Yennefer had taken it from her, giving it to Dandelion for

safekeeping. The poet must have gone to sleep, and it was silent in Loxia. Ciri was already wondering whether to go and wake him when she felt a strong pulse and a rush of blood in her ears.

The shaft of moonlight coming through the window became a road. At the end of the road, far away, was a door. The door opened and Yennefer stood there.

'Come with me.'

Other doors opened behind the sorceress's back. One after the other. An endless succession. The black shapes of columns crystallised from the darkness. *Not columns – perhaps they're statues . . . I'm dreaming*, thought Ciri, *I don't believe my eyes. I'm dreaming. That isn't a road. It's light, a shaft of light. I can't go along that . . .*

'Come with me.'

She obeyed.

Had it not been for the foolish scruples of the Witcher, and his impractical principles, many subsequent events would have run their course quite differently. Many events would probably have not taken place at all. And the history of the world would have unfolded in an alternative way.

But the history of the world unfolded as it unfolded, the sole cause of which was that the Witcher had scruples. When he awoke in the morning with the need to relieve himself, he didn't do what any other man would have done; he didn't go out onto the balcony and piss into a flowerpot of nasturtiums. He had scruples. He dressed quietly without waking Yennefer, who was sleeping deeply, motion less and barely breathing. He left the chamber and went out to the garden.

The banquet was still in progress but, as the sounds indicated, only in a fragmentary form. The lights were still burning in the ball room windows, illuminating the atrium and beds of peonies. The Witcher went a little further in, among some dense bushes, where he stared at the lightening sky. The horizon was already burning with the purple streaks of dawn.

As he slowly returned, pondering important matters, his medallion vibrated powerfully. He held it in his hand, feeling the vibrations penetrate his entire body. There was no doubt; someone in Aretuza had cast a spell. Geralt listened carefully and heard some muffled shouts, and a clattering and pounding coming from the cloister in the palace's left wing.

Anyone else would have turned on their heels at once and walked briskly back to where they'd come from, pretending they hadn't heard anything. And then perhaps the history of the world would have unfolded differently. But the Witcher had scruples and was accustomed to acting according to foolish, impractical principles.

When he ran into the cloister and the corridor, he saw that a fight was in progress. Several tough-looking men in grey jerkins were in the act of overpowering a short sorcerer who had been thrown to the ground. The fight was being directed by Dijkstra, chief of Vizimir, King of Redania's intelligence service. Before Geralt was able to take any action he was overpowered himself; two other heavies in grey pinned him to a wall, and a third held the three-pronged blade of a partisan against his chest.

All the heavies had breastplates emblazoned with the Redanian eagle.

'That's called "being in the shit",' explained Dijkstra quietly, approaching him. 'And you, Witcher, seem to have an inborn talent for falling into it. Stand there nice and peacefully and try not to attract anyone's attention.'

The Redanians finally overpowered the short sorcerer and lifted him up, holding him by his arms. It was Artaud Terranova, a member of the Chapter.

The light which made the details visible emanated from an orb suspended above Keira Metz's head – a sorceress with whom Geralt had been chatting at the banquet the previous evening. He barely recognised her; she had exchanged her flowing tulle for severe male clothing, and she had a dagger at her side.

'Handcuff him,' she ordered curtly. A set of handcuffs made of a bluish metal clinked in her hand.

'Don't you dare put those on me!' yelled Terranova. 'Don't you dare, Metz! I am a member of the Chapter!'

'You were. Now you're a common traitor. And you will be treated as such.'

'And you're a lousy whore, who—'

Keira took a step back, swayed her hips and punched him in the face with all her strength. The sorcerer's head jerked backwards so hard that for a moment Geralt thought it would be torn from his trunk. Terranova lolled in the arms of the men holding him, blood streaming from his nose and mouth. The sorceress didn't strike him

a second time, though her fist was raised. The Witcher saw the flash of brass knuckles on her fingers. He wasn't surprised. Keira was very lightly built, and a blow like that couldn't have been dealt with a bare fist.

He didn't move. The thugs were holding him tightly, and the point of the partisan was pressing against his chest. Geralt wasn't sure if he would have moved, had he been free, or whether he would have known what to do.

The Redanians snapped the handcuffs around the sorcerer's wrists, which were twisted behind his back. Terranova cried out, struggled, bent over and retched and Geralt realised what the handcuffs were made of. It was an alloy of iron and dimeritium, a rare metal characterised by its inhibition of magical powers. The inhibition was accompanied by a set of rather unpleasant side effects for sorcerers.

Keira Metz raised her head, pulling her hair back from her forehead. And then she saw him.

'What the bloody hell is he doing here? How did he get here?'

'He just stepped in,' answered Dijkstra unemotionally. 'He's got a talent for putting his foot in it. What shall I do with him?'

Keira's face darkened and she stamped several times with the high heel of her boot.

'Guard him. I don't have time now.'

She walked quickly away, followed by the Redanians who were dragging Terranova behind them. The shining orb floated behind the sorceress, although it was already dawn and quickly becoming light. On a signal from Dijkstra, the thugs released Geralt. The spy came closer and looked the Witcher in the eyes.

'Don't try anything.'

'What's happening here? What—?'

'And don't utter a word.'

Keira Metz returned a short time later; but not alone. She was accompanied by a flaxen-haired sorcerer, introduced to Geralt on the previous day as Detmold of Ban Ard. At the sight of the Witcher, he cursed and smacked his fist into his palm.

'Shit! Is he the one Yennefer's taken a liking to?'

'Yes, that's him,' said Keira. 'Geralt of Rivia. The problem is, I don't know about Yennefer . . .'

‘I don’t know either,’ said Detmold, shrugging his shoulders. ‘In any case, he’s mixed up in this now. He’s seen too much. Take him to Philippa; she’ll decide. Put him in handcuffs.’

‘There’s no need,’ said Dijkstra with a languid air. ‘I’ll answer for him. I’ll take him to where he ought to be.’

‘Excellent,’ nodded Detmold, ‘because we have no time for him. Come on, Keira, it’s a mess up there . . .’

‘Oh, but aren’t they anxious?’ muttered the Redanian spy, watching them walk away. ‘It’s lack of experience, nothing more. And coups d’état and putsches are like green beet soup. They’re best served cold. Let’s go, Geralt. And remember: peacefully and with dignity. Don’t make a scene. And don’t make me regret not having you handcuffed or tied up.’

‘What’s happening, Dijkstra?’

‘Haven’t you guessed yet?’ said the spy, walking beside him, with the three Redanian heavies bringing up the rear. ‘Tell me straight, Witcher. How did you wind up here?’

‘I was worried about the nasturtiums wilting.’

‘Geralt,’ said Dijkstra, frowning at him. ‘You’ve fallen head first into the shit. You’ve swum upwards, and you’re holding your head above the surface, but your feet still aren’t touching the bottom. Someone’s offering you a helping hand, at the risk of falling in and getting covered in it himself. So drop the foolish jokes. Yennefer made you come here, did she?’

‘No. Yennefer’s still asleep in a warm bed. Does that reassure you?’

The huge spy turned suddenly, seized the Witcher by the arms and shoved him against the wall of the corridor.

‘No, it doesn’t reassure me, you bloody fool,’ he hissed. ‘Haven’t you got it yet, you idiot, that decent sorcerers who are faithful to kings aren’t asleep tonight? That they didn’t go to bed at all? Only traitors who have sold out to Nilfgaard are asleep in their warm beds. Traitors, who were preparing a putsch of their own, but for a later date. They didn’t know their plans had been rumbled and their intentions second-guessed. And as you can see, they’re being dragged out of those warm beds, getting smacked in the teeth with knuckledusters, and having dimeritium bracelets wrapped around their wrists. The traitors are finished. Get it? If you don’t want to go down with them, stop playing the fool! Did Vilgefortz manage to

recruit you yesterday evening? Or perhaps Yennefer already did. Talk! And fast, before your mouth is flooded with shit!'

'Green beet soup, Dijkstra,' reminded Geralt. 'Take me to Philippa. Peacefully and with dignity. And without causing a scene.'

The spy released him and took a step back.

'Let's go,' he said coldly. 'Up these stairs. But this conversation isn't over yet. I promise you.'

It was bright from the light of lanterns and magical orbs floating beneath the column which supported the vaulting, at the point where four corridors joined. The place was heaving with Redanians and sorcerers. Among the latter were two members of the Council: Radcliffe and Sabrina Glevissig. Sabrina, like Keira Metz, was dressed in grey men's apparel. Geralt realised it was possible to identify the different factions within the putsch by their uniforms.

Triss Merigold crouched on the floor, hunched over a body which was lying in a pool of blood. Geralt recognised the body as that of Lydia van Bredevoort. He knew her by her hair and silk dress. He couldn't have recognised her by her face because it was no longer a face. It was a horrifying, macabre skull, with shining teeth exposed halfway up the cheeks, and a distorted, sunken jaw, the bones badly knitted together.[2]

'Cover her up,' said Sabrina Glevissig softly. 'When she died, the illusion vanished . . . I said bloody cover her up with something!'

'How did it happen, Radcliffe?' asked Triss, withdrawing her hand from the gilded haft of the dagger which was embedded beneath Lydia's sternum. 'How could it have happened? This was supposed to be bloodless!'

'She attacked us,' muttered the sorcerer and lowered his head. 'She attacked us as Vilgefortz was being escorted out. There was a scuffle . . . I have no idea . . . It's her own dagger.'

'Cover her face!' said Sabrina, suddenly turning away. She saw Geralt, and her predatory eyes shone like anthracite.

'How did he get here?'

Triss leapt to her feet and sprang towards the Witcher. Geralt saw her hand right in front of his face. Then he saw a flash, and everything faded into darkness. He couldn't see. He felt a hand on his collar and a sharp tug.

'Hold him up or he'll fall,' said Triss, her voice unnatural, feigning anger. She jerked him again, pulling him towards her for a

moment.

‘Forgive me,’ she whispered hurriedly. ‘I had to do that.’

Dijkstra’s men held him fast.

He moved his head around, activating his other senses. There were movements in the corridors and the air rippled, carrying scents with it. And voices. Sabrina Glevissig swore; Triss mollified her. The Redanians, reeking of an army barracks, dragged the limp body across the floor, rustling the silk of the dress. Blood. The smell of blood. And the smell of ozone; the scent of magic. Raised voices. Footsteps. The nervous clattering of heels.

‘Hurry up! It’s all taking too long! We ought to be in Garstang by now!’

That was Philippa Eilhart. Sounding anxious.

‘Sabrina, find Marti Södergren quickly. Drag her out of bed, if necessary. Gedymdeith’s in a bad way. I think it’s a heart attack. Have Marti see to him but don’t say anything to her or to whoever she’s sleeping with. Triss, find Dorregaray, Drithelm and Carduin and bring them to Garstang.’

‘What for?’

‘They represent the kings. Ethain and Esterad are to be informed about our operation and its consequences. You’ll be taking them . . . Triss, you have blood on your hand! Whose is it?’

‘Lydia’s.’

‘Damn it. When? How?’

‘Is it important how?’ said a cold, calm voice. The voice of Tissaia de Vries. The rustle of a dress. Tissaia was in a ball gown, not a rebel uniform. Geralt listened carefully but could not hear the jingling of dimeritium handcuffs.

‘Are you pretending to be worried?’ repeated Tissaia. ‘Concerned? When revolts are organised, when armed thugs are deployed at night, you have to expect casualties. Lydia is dead. Hen Gedymdeith is dying. A moment ago I saw Artaud with his face carved up. How many more casualties will there be, Philippa Eilhart?’

‘I don’t know,’ answered Philippa resolutely. ‘But I’m not backing down.’

‘Of course not. You don’t back down from anything.’

The air vibrated, and heels thudded on the floor in a familiar

rhythm. Philippa walked towards him. He remembered the nervous rhythm of her footsteps when they were walking through the hall at Aretuza together, to feast on caviar. He recalled the scent of cinnamon and muskroot. Now, that scent was mixed with the smell of baking soda. Geralt had no intention of participating in any kind of coup or putsch, but wondered whether – had he decided to – he would have thought about cleaning his teeth beforehand.

'He can't see you, Phil,' said Dijkstra nonchalantly. 'He can't see anything and didn't see anything. The one with the beautiful hair blinded him.'

He heard Philippa's breath and sensed every one of her movements but moved his head around awkwardly, simulating helplessness. The enchantress was not to be fooled.

'Don't bother pretending, Geralt. Triss may have darkened your eyes but she didn't take away your mind. How the hell did you end up here?'

'I dropped in. Where's Yennefer?'

'Blessed are they who do not know,' said Philippa, in a voice devoid of mockery. 'For they will live longer. Be grateful to Triss. It was a soft spell; the blindness will soon pass. And you didn't see anything you weren't meant to. Guard him, Dijkstra. I'll be right back.'

There was a disturbance again. And voices. Keira Metz's resonant soprano, Radcliffe's nasal bass. The clatter of heavy Redanian boots. And Tissaia de Vries's raised voice.

'Let her go! How could you? How could you do that to her?'

'She's a traitress!' responded Radcliffe's nasal voice.

'I will never believe that!'

'Blood's thicker than water,' said Philippa Eilhart, coldly. 'And Emperor Emhyr has promised the elves freedom. As well as their own, independent state. Here, in these lands. After the humans have been slaughtered, naturally. And that was sufficient for her to betray us without a second thought.'

'Answer!' said Tissaia de Vries forcefully. 'Answer her, Enid!'

'Answer, Francesca.'

The clinking of dimeritium handcuffs. The singsong, elven lilt of Francesca Findabair, the Daisy of the Valleys, the most beautiful woman in the world.

‘Va vort a me, Dh’oine. N’aen te a dice’n.’

‘Will that suffice, Tissaia?’ barked Philippa. ‘Will you believe me now? You, me, all of us, are – and always were – Dh’oine, humans, to her. And she, Aen Seidhe, has nothing to say to humans. And you, Fercart? What did Vilgefortz and Emhyr promise you, that made you choose treachery?’

‘Go to hell, you debauched slut.’

Geralt held his breath, but this time didn’t hear the sound of brass knuckles hitting bone. Philippa was more composed than Keira. Or she didn’t have any brass knuckles.

‘Radcliffe, take the traitors to Garstang! Detmold, give your arm to Arch-Mistress de Vries. Go. I’ll join you soon.’

Footsteps. The scent of cinnamon and muskroot.

‘Dijkstra.’

‘I’m here, Phil.’

‘Your men are no longer needed here. They may return to Loxia.’

‘Are you absolutely sure—’

‘To Loxia, Dijkstra!’

‘Yes, Your Grace.’ There was scorn in the spy’s voice. ‘The lackeys can leave. They’ve done their bidding. Now it is a private matter for the mages. And thus I, without further ado, will leave Your Grace’s beautiful presence. I didn’t expect gratitude for my help or my contribution to your putsch, but I am certain that Your Grace will keep me in her gracious memory.’

‘Forgive me, Sigismund. Thank you for your help.’

‘Not at all. It was my pleasure. Hey, Voymir, get your men. I want five to stay with me. Take the others downstairs and board *The Spada*. But do it quietly, on tiptoe, without any fuss, commotion or fireworks. Use side corridors. Don’t breathe a word of this in Loxia or in the harbour. That’s an order!’

‘You didn’t see anything, Geralt,’ said Philippa Eilhart in a whisper, wafting cinnamon, muskroot and baking soda onto the Witcher. ‘You didn’t hear anything. You never spoke to Vilgefortz. Dijkstra will take you to Loxia now. I’ll try to find you when . . . when it’s all over. I promised you as much yesterday and I’ll keep my word.’

‘What about Yennefer?’

‘I’d say he’s obsessed,’ said Dijkstra, returning and shuffling his feet. ‘Yennefer, Yennefer . . . It’s getting tedious. Don’t bother yourself with him, Phil. There are more important things to do. Was the expected item found on Vilgefortz?’

‘Indeed. Here, this is for you.’

‘Oh!’ The rustle of paper being unwrapped. ‘Oh my, oh my! Excellent! Duke Nitert. Splendid! Baron—’

‘Discreetly; no names. And please don’t start the executions immediately after your return to Tretogor. Don’t incite a premature scandal.’

‘Don’t worry. The lads on this list – so greedy for Nilfgaardian gold – are safe. At least for the moment. They’ll become my sweet little puppets. I’ll be able to pull their strings, and later we’ll put those strings around their sweet little necks . . . Just out of curiosity, were there any other lists? Any traitors from Kaedwen, from Temeria, from Aedirn? I’d be delighted to take a look. Just a glimpse . . .’

‘I know you would. But it’s not your business. Radcliffe and Sabrina Glevissig were given those lists, and they’ll know what to do with them. And now I must go. I’m in a hurry.’

‘Phil?’

‘Yes.’

‘Restore the Witcher’s sight so he doesn’t trip on the stairs.’

The banquet in the Aretuza ballroom was still in progress, but it had become more traditional and relaxed. The tables had been pushed aside, and the sorcerers and enchantresses had brought in armchairs, chairs and stools they’d found in other rooms and were lounging in them and amusing themselves in various ways. Most of their amusements were vulgar. A large group, crowded around a bulky cask of rotgut, were carousing, talking and erupting into laughter from time to time. Those who not long before had been delicately spearing exquisite morsels with little silver forks were now unceremoniously chewing mutton ribs held in both hands. Several of them were playing cards, ignoring the rest. Others were asleep. A couple were kissing passionately in the corner, and the ardour they were displaying indicated it wouldn’t stop there.

‘Just look at them, Witcher,’ said Dijkstra, leaning over the banisters of the cloister and looking down at the sorcerers. ‘How merrily they play. Just like children. And meanwhile, their Council

has just nicked almost their entire Chapter and are trying them for treason, for cuddling up to Nilfgaard. Look at that couple. They'll be soon looking for a secluded corner, and before they've finish bonking, Vilgefortz will have hanged. Oh, what a strange world it is . . .'

'Be quiet, Dijkstra.'

The path leading to Loxia was cut into the slopes of the mountain in a zigzag of steps. The steps connected terraces, which were decorated with neglected hedges, flowerbeds and yellowing agaves in flowerpots. Dijkstra stopped at one of the terraces they passed and walked over to a wall with a row of stone chimeras' heads. Water was trickling from their jaws. The spy leaned over and took a long drink.

The Witcher approached the balustrade. The sea glimmered gold, and the sky was even more kitsch in colour than it was in the paintings filling the Gallery of Glory. Below, he could see the squad of Redanians who had been ordered to leave Aretuza. They were heading for the harbour in well-ordered formation, just crossing a bridge linking the two sides of a rocky cleft.

His attention was suddenly caught by a colourful, lone figure, conspicuous because it was moving quickly. And moving in the opposite direction to the Redanians. Uphill, towards Aretuza.

'Right,' said Dijkstra, urging him on with a cough. 'It's time we were going.'

'Go yourself, if you're in such a hurry.'

'Yeah, right,' scowled the spy. 'And you'll go back up there to rescue your beloved Yennefer. And stir up trouble like a tipsy gnome. We're heading for Loxia, Witcher. Are you kidding yourself or something? Do you think I got you out of Aretuza because of some long-hidden love for you? Well I didn't. I got you out of there because I need you.'

'For what?'

'Are you having me on? Twelve young ladies from Redania's finest families are pupils at Aretuza. I can't risk a conflict with the honourable rectoress, Margarita Laux-Antille. But the rectoress won't give me Cirilla, the Princess of Cintra, the girl Yennefer brought to Thanedd. She'll give her to *you*, however. When you ask her.'

'What gave you the ridiculous idea that I'll ask for her?'

‘The ridiculous assumption that you want to make sure Cirilla will be safe. She’ll be safe in my care, in King Vizimir’s care. In Tretogor. She isn’t safe on Thanedd. Refrain from making any sarcastic comments. Yes, I know the kings didn’t have the most wonderful plans for her at the beginning. But that has changed. Now it’s become clear that Cirilla – alive, safe and in good health – may be worth more in the coming war than ten regiments of heavy horse. Dead, she’s not worth a brass farthing.’

‘Does Philippa Eilhart know what you’re planning?’

‘No, she doesn’t. She doesn’t even know I know the girl’s in Loxia. My erstwhile beloved Phil may put on airs and graces, but Vizimir is still the King of Redania. I carry out his orders, and I don’t give a shit what the sorcerers are plotting. Cirilla will board *The Spada* and sail to Novigrad, from where she’ll travel to Tretogor. And she’ll be safe. Do you believe me?’

The Witcher leaned over towards one of the chimera heads and drank some of the water trickling from its monstrous maw.

‘Do you believe me?’ repeated Dijkstra, standing over him.

Geralt stood up, wiped his mouth, and punched him in the jaw with all his strength. The spy staggered but didn’t go down. The nearest Redanian leapt forward, intending to seize the Witcher, but grabbed thin air, and immediately sat down, spitting blood and one of his teeth. Then all the others jumped him. There was a chaotic confusion and crush, which was exactly what the Witcher had been hoping for.

One of the Redanians slammed head first into the gargoyle, and the water trickling from its jaws turned red. Another caught the heel of the Witcher’s fist in the windpipe and doubled up as though his genitals had been ripped out. A third, smacked in the eye, fell back with a groan. Dijkstra seized the Witcher in a bearlike grip, and Geralt kicked him hard in the ankle with his heel. The spy howled and cavorted hilariously on one leg.

Another heavy tried to strike the Witcher with his short sword but slashed only the air. Geralt caught hold of his elbow in one hand and his wrist in the other. He spun him around, knocking over two others who were trying to get up. The thug he was holding was strong and had no intention of releasing his sword. So Geralt tightened his grip and the man’s arm broke with a crack.

Dijkstra, still hopping on one leg, seized a partisan from the ground, hoping to pin the Witcher to the wall with its three-

pronged blade. Geralt dodged, seized the shaft in both hands and used the principle – well known to scholars – of the lever. The spy, seeing the bricks and mortar of the wall looming, dropped the partisan but was too late to prevent his crotch slamming into the chimera's head.

Geralt used the partisan to knock another thug off his feet and then held the shaft against the ground and broke it with a kick, shortening it to the length of a sword. He tried out the makeshift club, first by hitting Dijkstra – who was sitting astride the chimera – and then by quietening the moans of the bruiser with the broken arm. The seams of his doublet had burst under both arms some time before, and the Witcher was feeling considerably better.

The last brute on his feet also attacked with a partisan, expecting its length to offer him an advantage. Geralt hit him between the eyebrows, and the bruiser sat down hard on the pot holding the agave. Another of the Redanians – who was unusually stubborn – clung to the Witcher's thigh and bit him painfully. This angered the Witcher, who deprived the rodent of his ability to bite with a powerful kick.

Dandelion arrived on the steps out of breath, saw what was happening and went as white as a ghost.

'Geralt!' he yelled a moment later. 'Ciri's disappeared! She isn't here!'

'I expected as much,' answered the Witcher, bashing the next Redanian, who was refusing to lie down quietly, with his club. 'But you really make a body wait, Dandelion. I told you yesterday that you were to leg it to Aretuza if anything happened! Have you brought my sword?'

'Both of them!'

'The other one is Ciri's, you idiot.' Geralt whacked the heavy trying to get up from the agave pot.

'I don't know much about swords,' panted the poet. 'Stop hitting them, by the gods! Can't you see the Redanian eagle? They're King Vizimir's men! This is treachery and rebellion. You could end up in a dungeon for that . . .'

'On the scaffold,' mumbled Dijkstra, drawing a dagger and staggering closer. 'You'll both be for the scaffold . . .'

He wasn't able to say anything else because he collapsed on all fours, struck on the side of the head with the stump of the partisan's

shaft.

‘Broken on the wheel,’ pictured Dandelion gloomily. ‘After being rent with red-hot pincers . . .’

The Witcher kicked the spy in the ribs. Dijkstra flopped over on one side like a felled elk.

‘. . . then our bodies quartered,’ continued the poet.

‘Stop that, Dandelion. Give me both swords and get away from here as quickly as possible. Flee from the island. As far away as you can!’

‘What about you?’

‘I’m going back up. I have to save Ciri . . . And Yennefer. Dijkstra, lie there nicely and get your hands off that dagger!’

‘You won’t get away with this,’ panted the spy. ‘I’ll send my men after you . . . I’ll get you . . .’

‘No you won’t.’

‘Oh, I will. I’ve got fifty men on *The Spada* . . .’

‘And is there a barber surgeon among them?’

‘Eh?’

Geralt came up behind the spy, bent down, seized him by the foot and jerked it, twisting the foot quickly and very powerfully. There was a cracking sound. Dijkstra howled and fainted. Dandelion screamed as if it had been his own ankle.

‘I don’t much care what they do to me after I’ve been quartered,’ muttered the Witcher.

It was quiet in Aretuza. Only a few diehards remained in the ballroom, but now they had too little energy to make a racket. Geralt avoided it, not wanting to be noticed.

He had some difficulty finding the chamber where he’d spent the night with Yennefer. The palace corridors were a veritable labyrinth and all looked alike.

The ragdoll looked at him with its button eyes.

He sat down on the bed, clutching his head. There was no blood on the chamber floor. But a black dress was draped over the back of a chair. Yennefer had changed. Into men’s clothes, the uniform of the conspirators?

Or they’d dragged her out in her underwear. In dimeritium

handcuffs.

Marti Södergren, the healer, was sitting in the window alcove. Hearing his footsteps, she raised her head. Her cheeks were wet with tears.

'Hen Gedymdeith is dead,' she said in a faltering voice. 'It was his heart. I couldn't do a thing . . . Why did they call me so late? Sabrina hit me. She hit me in the face. Why? What has happened?'

'Have you seen Yennefer?'

'No, I haven't. Leave me. I want to be alone.'

'Show me the shortest way to Garstang. Please.'

Above Aretuza were three terraces covered with shrubs. Beyond them, the mountain slopes became sheer and inaccessible. Garstang loomed up above the precipice. At its foot the palace was a dark, uniformly smooth block of stone growing out of the rocks. Only the marble and stained-glass windows of its upper storey sparkled and the metal roofs of its domes shone like gold in the sun.

The paved road leading to Garstang and on to the summit wound around the mountain like a snake. There was another, shorter, route: a stairway linking the terraces, which vanished into the black maw of a tunnel just beneath Garstang. It was this stairway that Marti Södergren pointed out to the Witcher.

Immediately beyond the tunnel was a bridge joining the two sides of the precipice. Beyond the bridge, the stairway climbed steeply upwards and curved, vanishing around a bend. The Witcher quickened his pace.

The balustrade was decorated with small statues of fauns and nymphs which gave the impression of being alive. They were moving. The Witcher's medallion began to vibrate intensively.

He rubbed his eyes. The statues were not in fact moving but metamorphosing, transforming from smooth-surfaced carvings to porous, shapeless masses of stone, eroded by strong winds and salt. And an instant later they renewed themselves once more.

He knew what that meant. The illusion disguising Thanedd was becoming unstable and weakening. The bridge was also partly illusory. A chasm with a waterfall roaring at its foot was visible through the hole-riddled camouflage.

There were no dark slabs to indicate a safe way across. He crossed the bridge tentatively, careful of every step, cursing to himself at the time he was wasting. When he reached the far side of

the chasm, he heard running footsteps.

He knew who it was at once. Running down the steps towards him was Dorregaray, the sorcerer in the service of King Ethain of Cidaris. He recalled the words of Philippa Eilhart. The sorcerers who represented neutral kings had been invited to Garstang as observers. But Dorregaray was hurtling down the steps at such a speed that it appeared his invitation had suddenly been revoked.

'Dorregaray!'

'Geralt?' panted the sorcerer. 'What are you doing here? Don't stay here. Run away! Get down to Aretuza quickly!'

'What has happened?'

'Treachery!'

'What?'

Dorregaray suddenly shuddered and coughed strangely, then toppled forwards and fell onto the Witcher. Before Geralt could catch hold of him he spotted the grey fletching of an arrow sticking out of his back. He and the sorcerer swayed in an embrace. That movement saved the Witcher's life as a second, identical, arrow, rather than piercing his throat, slammed into the grotesquely grinning face of a stone faun, knocking off its nose and part of its cheek. The Witcher released Dorregaray and ducked down behind the balustrade. The sorcerer collapsed onto him.

There were two archers, and both had squirrels' tails in their hats. One remained at the top of the staircase, pulling his bowstring back, while the other drew his sword and hurtled down the stairway, several steps at a time. Geralt pushed Dorregaray aside and leapt to his feet, drawing his sword. An arrow sang, but the Witcher interrupted the song, deflecting the arrowhead with a quick blow of his sword. The other elf, already close, hesitated for a moment on seeing the arrow deflected. But only for a moment. He came at the Witcher, swinging his blade and ready to strike. Geralt made a short parry, obliquely, so that the elf's sword slid across his. The elf lost his balance, the Witcher spun around smoothly and slashed him across the side of the neck below his ear. Just once. Once was enough.

The archer at the top of the stairway bent his bow again but did not have time to release the string. Geralt saw a flash. The elf screamed, spread out his arms and fell forwards, tumbling down the steps. The back of his jerkin was on fire.

Another sorcerer ran down the steps. On seeing the Witcher, he stopped and raised a hand. Geralt didn't waste time with explanations but flattened himself on the ground as a fiery lightning bolt flew over him with a hiss, pulverising a statue of a faun.

'Stop!' he yelled. 'It's me, the Witcher!'

'Damn it,' the sorcerer panted, running over to Geralt, who could not remember him from the banquet. 'I took you for one of those elven thugs . . . How is Dorregaray? Is he still alive?'

'I think so . . .'

'Quickly, to the other side of the bridge!'

They dragged Dorregaray across. And luck was on their side, because in their haste they paid no attention to the wavering and vanishing illusion. No one was pursuing them, but the sorcerer nonetheless extended a hand, chanting a spell, and sent a lightning bolt to destroy the bridge. The stones crashed down the walls of the abyss.

'That ought to hold them back,' he said.

The Witcher wiped away the blood pouring from Dorregaray's mouth.

'He has a punctured lung. Can you help him?'

'*I* can,' said Marti Södergren, hauling herself up the steps from the tunnel leading from Aretuza. 'What's happening, Carduin? Who shot him?'

'Scoia'tael,' said the sorcerer, wiping his forehead with a sleeve. 'There's a battle raging in Garstang. Bloody rabble. They're all as bad as each other! Philippa handcuffed Vilgefortz during the night, and Vilgefortz and Francesca Findabair brought Squirrels to the island! And Tissaia de Vries . . . She's stirred everything up!'

'Be clearer, Carduin!'

'I'm not hanging around here talking! I'm fleeing to Loxia, and from there I'm going to teleport to Kovir. Everyone in Garstang can go ahead and slaughter each other! It's all meaningless now! It's war! This mayhem was concocted by Philippa to allow the kings to start a war with Nilfgaard! Meanwhile Meve of Lyria and Demavend of Aedirn have provoked Nilfgaard! Do you understand that?'

'No,' said Geralt. 'And we don't want to understand it. Where's Yennefer?'

'Stop it, you two!' screamed Marti Södergren, attending to

Dorregaray. ‘Help me! Hold him! I can’t pull the arrow out!’

They helped her. Dorregaray groaned and trembled, and then the steps shook. At first Geralt thought it was the magic of Marti’s healing spells. But it was Garstang. The stained-glass windows suddenly exploded and flames could be seen flickering inside the palace. Smoke was billowing out.

‘They’re still fighting,’ said Carduin, grinding his teeth. ‘It’s hot down there, one spell after another . . .’

‘Spells? In Garstang? But there’s an anti-magic aura there!’

‘It was Tissaia’s doing. She suddenly decided whose side she was on. She took down the blockade, removed the aura and neutralised the dimeritium. Then everyone went for each other! Vilgefortz and Terranova on one side, Philippa and Sabrina on the other . . . The columns cracked and the vaulting collapsed . . . And then Francesca opened the entrance to the cellars, and those elven devils suddenly leapt out . . . We told them that we were neutral, but Vilgefortz only laughed. Before we had time to build a shield, Drithelm had been shot in the eye, and Rejean had been spitted like a hedgehog . . . I didn’t wait to see what happened after that. Marti, are you going to be much longer? We have to get out of here!’

‘Dorregaray won’t be able to walk,’ said the healer, wiping her bloody hands on her white ball gown. ‘Teleport us, Carduin.’

‘From here? You must be insane. It’s too close to Tor Lara. The Lara portal gives out emanations which warp any attempts at teleportation. You can’t teleport from here!’

‘He can’t walk! I have to stay with him—’

‘Well stay, then!’ Carduin stood up. ‘And enjoy yourself! Life is dear to me! I’m going back to Kovir! Kovir is neutral!’

‘Splendid,’ said the Witcher, spitting and watching the sorcerer disappear into the tunnel. ‘Friendship and solidarity! But I can’t stay with you either, Marti. I have to go to Garstang. Your neutral comrade smashed up the bridge. Is there another way?’

Marti Södergren sniffed. Then she raised her head and nodded.

He was at the foot of the wall in Garstang when Keira Metz landed on his head.

The way he’d been shown by the healer led through some hanging gardens linked by winding steps. The steps were covered in dense ivy and vines and the vegetation made climbing difficult but it also gave cover. He managed to get to the foot of the palace wall

undetected and had been looking for a way in when Keira had fallen on him, and the two of them tumbled into some blackthorn bushes.

'I've lost a tooth,' said the sorceress, gloomily, lisping slightly. She was dishevelled, dirty and covered in plaster and soot. There was a large bruise on her cheek.

'And I think I've broken my leg,' she added, spitting blood. 'Is that you, Witcher? Did I land on you? How come?'

'I was wondering the same thing myself.'

'Terranova threw me out of a window.'

'Can you stand?'

'No, I can't.'

'I want to get inside. Unnoticed. Which way is it?'

'Are all witchers,' said Keira, spitting blood again, groaning, and trying to prop herself up on an elbow, 'insane? There's a battle going on in Garstang! It's kicking off so badly the plaster's falling off the ceiling! Are you looking for trouble?'

'No. I'm looking for Yennefer.'

'Oh!' said Keira, giving up her struggles and lying on her back. 'I wish someone would love me like that. Carry me.'

'Another time, perhaps. I'm in a bit of a hurry.'

'Carry me, I said! I'll show you the way into Garstang. I have to get that son of a bitch Terranova. Well, what are you waiting for? You won't find the way yourself, and even if you did, those fucking elves would finish you off . . . I can't walk, but I'm still capable of casting a few spells. If anyone gets in our way they'll regret it.'

She cried out when he picked her up.

'Sorry.'

'Don't worry,' she said, wrapping her arms around his neck. 'It's that leg. Did you know you still smell of her perfume? No, not that way. Turn back and go uphill. It's the second entrance on the Tor Lara side. There may not be any elves there . . . Ouch! Gently, damn it!'

'Sorry. How did the Scoia'tael get here?'

'They were hidden in the cellars. Thanedd is as hollow as a nutshell and there's a huge cavern under it; you could sail a ship in if you knew how. Someone must have told them the way— Ouuuch!

Be careful! Stop jolting me!'

'Sorry. So the Squirrels came here by sea? When?'

'God knows when. It might have been yesterday, or a week ago. We were preparing to strike at Vilgefortz, and Vilgefortz at us. Vilgefortz, Francesca, Terranova and Fercart . . . They conned us good and proper. Philippa thought they were planning a slow seizure of power in the Chapter, and to put pressure on the kings . . . But they were planning to finish us off during the Conclave . . . Geralt, it's too painful . . . It's my leg . . . Put me down for a second. Ouuuch!'

'Keira, it's an open fracture. The blood's seeping through your trousers.'

'Shut up and listen. Because it's about your Yennefer. We entered Garstang and went into the debating chamber. There's an anti-magic blockade there, but it doesn't affect dimeritium, so we felt safe. There was an argument. Tissaia and the neutrals yelled at us and we yelled at them. And Vilgefortz just said nothing and smiled . . .'

'I repeat: Vilgefortz is a traitor! He's in cahoots with Emhyr of Nilfgaard, and he's inveigled others into the plot! He broke the Law, he betrayed us and the kings . . .'

'Slow down, Philippa. I know the grace and favour Vizimir surrounds you with mean more to you than the solidarity of the Brotherhood. The same applies to you, Sabrina, for you play an identical role in Kaedwen. Keira Metz and Triss Merigold represent the interests of Foltest of Temeria, and Radcliffe is a tool of Demavend of Aedirn—'

'What does that have to do with it, Tissaia?'

'The kings' interests don't have to correspond to ours. I know perfectly well what it's all about. The kings have begun the extermination of elves and other non-humans. Perhaps you, Philippa, regard that as legitimate. Perhaps you, Radcliffe, think it appropriate to help Demavend's forces in their hunt for the Scoia'tael. But I am opposed to it. And it doesn't surprise me that Enid Findabair is also against it. But that is not sufficient to call it treachery. Let me finish! I know perfectly well what your kings were planning. I know they want to unleash a war. The measures which were meant to prevent that war may be seen as treachery by Vizimir, but not by me. If you wish to judge Vilgefortz and Francesca; do the same to me!'

‘What war do you speak of? My king, Esterad of Kovir, will not support any acts of aggression against the Nilfgaardian Empire! Kovir is, and will remain, neutral!’

‘You are a member of the Council, Carduin! Not Kovir’s ambassador!’

‘Look who’s talking, Sabrina.’

‘Enough!’ Philippa slammed her fist down on the table. ‘I shall satisfy your curiosity, Carduin. You ask who is preparing a war? Nilfgaard. They intend to attack and destroy us. But Emhyr var Emreis remembers Sodden Hill and has decided to protect himself by removing the mages from the game first. With this in mind, he made contact with Vilgefortz of Roggeveen. He bought him with promises of power and honour. Yes, Tissaia. Vilgefortz, hero of Sodden, sold us out to become the governor and ruler of all the conquered territories of the north. Vilgefortz, helped by Terranova and Fercart, shall rule the provinces which will be established in place of the conquered kingdoms. It is he who will wield the Nilfgaardian scourge over the people who inhabit those lands and will begin toiling as the Empire’s slaves. And Francesca Findabair, Enid an Gleanna, will become queen of the land of the free elves. It will, of course, be a Nilfgaardian protectorate, but it will suffice for the elves so long as Emperor Emhyr will give them a free hand to murder humans. The elves desire nothing so much as to murder Dh’oine.’

‘That is a serious accusation. Which means the proof will also have to be as weighty. But before you throw your proof onto the scale, Philippa Eilhart, be aware of my stance. Proof may be fabricated. Actions and their motives may be misinterpreted. But nothing can change existing facts. You have broken the unity and solidarity of the Brotherhood, Philippa Eilhart. You have handcuffed members of the Chapter like criminals. So do not dare to offer me a position in the new Chapter which your gang of traitors – who have sold out to the kings, rather than to Nilfgaaard – intend to create. We are separated by death and blood. The death of Hen Gedymdeith. And the blood of Lydia van Bredevoort. You spilled that blood with contempt. You were my best pupil, Philippa Eilhart. I was always proud of you. But now I have nothing but contempt for you.’

Keira Metz was as pale as parchment.

‘It’s been quieter in Garstang for some time now,’ she whispered. ‘It’s coming to an end . . . They are chasing each other through the

palace. There are five floors and seventy-six chambers and halls. That's plenty of room for a chase . . .'

'You were going to tell me about Yennefer. Be quick. I'm worried you'll faint.'

'Yennefer? Oh, yes . . . Everything was going according to plan until Yennefer suddenly appeared. And brought that medium into the hall . . .'

'Who?'

'A girl, aged perhaps fourteen. Very fair hair and huge, green eyes . . . She began to prophesy before we'd had time to look at her properly. She talked of the events in Dol Angra. No one had any doubt she was speaking the truth. She was in a trance, and in a trance no one lies.'

'Last night,' said the medium, 'armed forces in Lyrian livery and carrying Aedirnian standards committed acts of aggression against the Empire of Nilfgaard. Glevitzingen, a border outpost in Dol Angra, was attacked. King Demavend's heralds informed the people of the surrounding villages that Aedirn is taking control of the entire country from today. The entire population was incited to rise up against Nilfgaard—'

'That is impossible! It's nothing but vile provocation!'

'You utter that word easily, Philippa Eilhart,' said Tissaia de Vries calmly. 'But do not deceive yourself; your cries will not break her trance. Speak on, child.'

'Emperor Emhyr var Emreis has given the order to answer blows with blows. Nilfgaardian forces entered Lyria and Aedirn at dawn today.'

'And thus,' laughed Tissaia, 'our kings have shown what judicious, enlightened and peace-loving rulers they are. And some of our mages have proved which cause they really serve. Those who might have prevented this imperialist war have been prudently clamped in dimeritium handcuffs and are facing trumped-up charges—'

'That is nothing but a pack of lies!'

'Fuck the lot of you!' roared Sabrina Glevissig suddenly. 'Philippa! What is this all about? What was the purpose of that brawl in Dol Angra? Hadn't we agreed not to begin too soon? Why couldn't that fucking Demavend restrain himself? Why did that slut Meve . . .'

‘Silence, Sabrina!’

‘No, no. Let her speak,’ said Tissaia de Vries, raising her head. ‘Let her speak of Henselt of Kaedwen’s army, which is concentrated on the border. Let her speak of Foltest of Temeria’s forces, which no doubt are already launching the boats which have been hidden in undergrowth by the Jaruga. Let her speak of the expeditionary force under the command of Vizimir of Redania, standing ready on the Pontar. Philippa, did you think we were both blind and deaf?’

‘It’s nothing but an enormous bloody provocation! King Vizimir —’

‘King Vizimir,’ interrupted the fair-haired medium in an unemotional voice, ‘was murdered yesterday evening. Stabbed by an assassin. Redania no longer has a king.’

‘Redania has not had a king for a very long time,’ said Tissaia de Vries, rising to her feet. ‘The Most Honourable Philippa Eilhart, the worthy successor of Raffard the White, ruled in Redania. A person prepared to sacrifice tens of thousands of beings in order to gain absolute power.’

‘Do not listen to her!’ yelled Philippa. ‘Do not listen to that medium! She’s a tool, an unthinking tool . . . Who do you serve, Yennefer? Who instructed you to bring that monster here?’

‘I did,’ said Tissaia de Vries.

‘What happened next? What happened to the girl? To Yennefer?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Keira, closing her eyes. ‘Tissaia suddenly lifted the blockade. With one spell. I’d never seen anything like it in my life. She stunned and blocked us, then freed Vilgefortz and the others . . . And then Francesca opened the entrance to the cellars and suddenly Garstang was swarming with Scoia’tael. They were being led by a freak in armour wearing a winged, Nilfgaardian helmet. Helped by that character with the mark on his face. He knew how to cast spells. And shield himself with magic . . .’

‘Rience.’

‘Perhaps. I don’t know. It was hot . . . The ceiling caved in. Spells and arrows were flying everywhere; it was a massacre . . . Fercart was among their dead, Drithelm and Radcliffe among ours. Marquard, Rejean and Bianca d’Este were killed . . . Triss Merigold was hurt. Sabrina was wounded . . . When Tissaia saw their bodies she understood her mistake, tried to protect us, tried to calm Vilgefortz and Terranova . . . But Vilgefortz ridiculed and laughed

at her. Then she lost her head and fled. Oh, Tissaia . . . So many dead . . .'

'What happened to the girl and to Yennefer?'

'I don't know,' said the sorceress, coughing and spitting blood. She was breathing very shallowly and with obvious difficulty. 'I passed out after one of the explosions. The one with the scar and his elves overpowered me. Terranova beat me black and blue and then threw me out of a window.'

'It isn't just your leg, Keira. You've got some broken ribs.'

'Don't leave me.'

'I have to. I'll come back for you.'

'Yeah, right.'

At first, there was only shimmering chaos, the pulsing of shadows, a confusion of dark and light, and a choir of incoherent voices emerging from the abyss. Suddenly the voices became stronger and, from all around, the screaming and the roaring exploded. The brightness amongst the darkness became a fire consuming the tapestries, seeming to shoot streams of sparks from the walls, the balustrades and the columns supporting the ceiling.

Ciri choked on the smoke and realised it was no longer a dream.

She tried to stand, propping herself up on her arms. Her hand came to rest on something wet, and she looked down. She was kneeling in a pool of blood. Beside her lay a motionless body. The body of an elf. She knew at once.

'Get up.'

Yennefer was standing beside her. She was holding a dagger.

'Mistress Yennefer . . . Where are we? I don't remember . . .'

The enchantress seized her by the hand.

'I'm with you, Ciri.'

'Where are we? Why is everything on fire? Who's that . . . lying there?'

'I told you once, a long time ago, that chaos is reaching out to seize you. Do you remember? No, you probably don't. That elf reached out to get you. I had to kill him using a knife, as his paymasters are just waiting for one of us to reveal ourselves by using magic. And it will happen, but not yet . . . Are you totally conscious?'

‘Those sorcerers . . .’ whispered Ciri. ‘The ones in the great hall . . . What did I say to them? And why did I say it? I didn’t want to at all . . . But I couldn’t stop myself! Why? Why, Mistress Yennefer?’

‘Be quiet, my ugly little duckling. I made a mistake. No one’s perfect.’

A roar and a terrifying scream resounded from below.

‘Come on. Quickly. There’s no time.’

They ran along the corridor. The smoke became thicker and thicker. It choked them, blinded them. The walls shook from the explosion.

‘Ciri.’ Yennefer stopped at a junction in the corridors and squeezed the girl’s hand tightly. ‘Listen to me now. Listen carefully. I have to stay here. Do you see those stairs? Go down them . . .’

‘No! Don’t leave me all alone!’

‘I have to. I repeat: go down those stairs. To the very bottom. There’ll be a door and, beyond it a long corridor. At the end of the corridor is a stable and a single, saddled horse. Only one. Lead it out and mount it. It’s a trained horse; it serves messengers riding to Loxia. It knows the way; just spur it on. When you get to Loxia find Margarita. She will look after you. Don’t let her out of your sight—’

‘Mistress Yennefer! No! I don’t want to be alone!’

‘Ciri,’ said the enchantress softly. ‘I once told you that everything I do is for your own good. Trust me. Trust me, I beg you. Now run for it.’

Ciri was already on the steps when she heard Yennefer’s voice once more. The enchantress was standing beside a column, resting her forehead against it.

‘I love you, my daughter,’ she said indistinctly. ‘Run.’

They trapped her halfway down the stairs. At the bottom there were two elves with squirrels’ tails in their hats and, at the top, a man dressed in black. Without thinking, Ciri jumped over the banisters and fled down a side corridor. They ran after her. She was quicker and would have escaped them with ease had the corridor not ended in a window.

She looked through the window. A stone ledge – about two spans wide – ran along the wall. Ciri swung a leg over the windowsill and climbed out. She moved away from the window and pressed her back to the wall. The sea glistened in the distance.

One of the elves leaned out through the window. He had very fair hair and green eyes and wore a silk kerchief around his neck. Ciri moved quickly along the ledge towards the next window. But the man dressed in black was looking out of it. His eyes were dark and intense, and he had a reddish mark on his cheek.

'We've got you, wench!'

She looked down. She could see a courtyard far below her. There was a narrow bridge linking two cloisters above the courtyard, about ten feet below the ledge she was standing on. Except it was not a bridge. It was the remains of a bridge. A narrow, stone footbridge with the remains of a shattered balustrade.

'What are you waiting for?' shouted the one with the scar. 'Get out there and grab her!'

The fair-haired elf stepped gingerly out onto the ledge, pressing his back against the wall. He reached out to grab her. He was getting closer.

Ciri swallowed. The stone footbridge – the remains of the footbridge – was no narrower than the seesaw at Kaer Morhen, and she had landed on that dozens of times. She knew how to cushion her fall and keep her balance. The witchers' seesaw was only four feet off the ground, however, while the stone footbridge spanned such a long drop that the slabs of the courtyard looked smaller than the palm of her hand.

She jumped, landed, tottered and kept her balance by catching hold of the shattered balustrade. With sure steps, she reached the cloister. She couldn't resist it; she turned around and showed her pursuers her middle finger, a gesture she had been taught by the dwarf Yarpen Zigrin. The man with the scar swore loudly.

'Jump!' he shouted at the fair-haired elf standing on the ledge. 'After her!'

'You're insane, Rience,' said the elf coldly. 'Jump yourself.'

As usual, her luck didn't last. She was caught as she ran down from the cloister and slipped behind a wall into a blackthorn bush. She was caught and held fast in an extremely strong grip by a short, podgy man with a swollen nose and a scarred lip.

'Got you,' he hissed. 'Got you, poppet!'

Ciri struggled and howled because the hands gripping her shoulders transfixed her with a sudden paroxysm of overwhelming pain. The man chuckled.

‘Don’t flap your wings, little bird, or I’ll singe your feathers. Let’s have a good look at you. Let’s have a look at this chick that’s worth so much to Emhyr var Emreis, Imperator of Nilfgaard. And to Vilgefortz.’

Ciri stopped trying to escape. The short man licked his scarred lip.

‘Interesting,’ he hissed again, leaning over towards her. ‘They say you’re so precious, but I wouldn’t even give a brass farthing for you. How appearances deceive. Ha! My treasure! What if, not Vilgefortz, not Rience, not that gallant in the feathered helmet, but old Terranova gave you to Emhyr as a present? Would Emhyr look kindly on old Terranova? What do you say to that, little clairvoyant? You can see the future, after all!’

His breath stank unbearably. Ciri turned her head away, grimacing. He misread the movement.

‘Don’t snap your beak at me, little bird! I’m not afraid of little birds. But should I be, perhaps? Well, false soothsayer? Bogus oracle? Should I be afraid of little birds?’

‘You ought to be,’ whispered Ciri, feeling giddy, a sudden cold sensation overcoming her.

Terranova laughed, throwing his head back. His laugh became a howl of pain. A huge, grey owl had swooped down noiselessly and sunk its talons into his eyes. The sorcerer released Ciri, tore the owl off with a desperate movement and then fell to his knees, clutching his face. Blood poured between his fingers. Ciri screamed and stepped back. Terranova removed his bloodied, mucus-covered fingers from his face and began to chant a spell in a wild, cracked voice. He was not quick enough. A vague shape appeared behind his back, and a witcher’s blade whistled in the air and severed his neck at the base of his skull.

‘Geralt!’

‘Ciri.’

‘This isn’t the time for tenderness,’ said the owl from the top of the wall, transforming into a dark-haired woman. ‘Flee! The squirrels will be here soon!’

Ciri freed herself from Geralt’s arms and looked up in astonishment. The owl-woman sitting on top of the wall looked ghastly. She was blackened, ragged and smeared in ash and blood.

‘You little monster,’ said the owl-woman, looking down at her.

‘For your inopportune augury I ought to . . . But I made your Witcher a promise, and I always keep my promises. I couldn’t give you Rience, Geralt. In exchange I’m giving you her. Alive. Flee, both of you!’

Cahir Mawr Dyffryn aep Ceallach was furious. He had seen the girl he had been ordered to capture, but only for a moment. Then, before he had been able to act, the insane sorcerers unleashed such an inferno in Garstang that no action was possible. Cahir lost his bearings among the smoke and flames, blindly stumbling along corridors, running up and down stairs and through cloisters, and cursing Vilgefortz, Rience, himself and the entire world.

He happened upon an elf who told him the girl had been seen outside the palace, fleeing along the road to Aretuza. And then fortune smiled upon Cahir. The Scoia’tael found a saddled horse in the stable.

‘Run, Ciri, run. They’re close. I’ll stop them, you run. Fast as you can! Just like you used to on the assault course!’

‘Are you abandoning me too?’

‘I’ll be right behind you. But don’t look back!’

‘Give me my sword, Geralt.’

He looked at her. Ciri stepped back involuntarily. She had never seen him with an expression like that before.

‘If you had a sword, you might have to kill with it. Can you do it?’

‘I don’t know. Give me my sword.’

‘Run. And don’t look back.’

Horses’ hooves thudded on the road. Ciri looked back. And she froze, paralysed with fear.

She was being pursued by a black knight in a helmet decorated with raptor wings. The wings whooshed, and the black cloak streamed behind him. Horseshoes sent up sparks from the cobblestones.

She was unable to move.

The black horse burst through the roadside bushes, and the knight shouted loudly. Cintra was in that cry. The night, slaughter, blood and conflagration were in that cry. Ciri overcame her overwhelming fear and darted away. She leapt over a hedge and plunged into a small courtyard with a fountain. There was no way

out; it was encircled by smooth, high walls. She could hear the horse snorting behind her. She turned, stumbled backwards and shuddered as she felt a hard, unyielding wall behind her. She was trapped.

The bird of prey flapped its wings, taking flight. The black knight urged his horse on and jumped the hedge separating him from the courtyard. Hooves thudded on the slabs, and the horse slipped, skidded and sat back on its haunches. The knight swayed in the saddle and toppled over. The horse regained its footing but the knight fell off, his armour clattering on the stones. He was on his feet immediately, though, and quickly trapped Ciri, who was pinned into a corner.

'You will not touch me!' she screamed, drawing her sword. 'You will never touch me again!'

The knight moved slowly towards her, rising up like a huge, black tower. The wings on his helmet moved to and fro and whispered.

'You will not escape me now, o Lion Cub of Cintra,' he said, and his cruel eyes burned in the slit of his helmet. 'Not this time. This time you have nowhere to run, o reckless maiden.'

'You will not touch me,' she repeated in a voice of stifled horror, her back pressed against the stone wall.

'I have to. I am carrying out orders.'

As he held out his hand to seize her, Ciri's fear subsided, to be replaced by savage fury. Her tense muscles, previously frozen in terror, began to work like springs. All the moves she had learned in Kaer Morhen performed themselves, smoothly and fluidly. Ciri jumped; the knight lunged towards her but was unprepared for the pirouette which spun her effortlessly out of reach of his hands. Her sword whined and stung, striking unerringly between the plates of his armour. The knight staggered and dropped to one knee as a stream of scarlet blood spurted from beneath his spaulder. Screaming fiercely, Ciri whirled around him with another pirouette and struck the knight again, this time directly on the bell of his helmet, knocking him down onto his other knee. Fury and madness had utterly blinded her, and she saw nothing except the loathsome wings. The black feathers were strewn in all directions. One wing fell off, and the other was resting on the bloodied spaulder. The knight, still vainly trying to get up from his knees, tried to seize her sword in his armoured glove and grunted painfully as the witcher blade slashed through the chainmail sleeve into his hand. The next

blow knocked off his helmet, and Ciri jumped back to gather momentum for the last, mortal blow.

She did not strike.

There was no black helmet, no raptor's wings, whose whistling had tormented her in her nightmares. There was no black knight of Cintra. There was a pale, dark-haired young man with stupefyingly blue eyes and a mouth distorted in a grimace of fear, kneeling in a pool of blood. The black knight of Cintra had fallen beneath the blows of her sword, had ceased to exist. Only hacked-up feathers remained of the forbidding wings. The terrified, cowering young man bleeding profusely was no one. She did not know him; she had never seen him before. He meant nothing to her. She wasn't afraid of him, nor did she hate him. And neither did she want to kill him.

She threw her sword onto the ground.

She turned around, hearing the cries of the Scoia'tael approaching fast from Garstang. She knew that in a moment they would trap her in the courtyard. She knew they would catch up with her on the road. She had to be quicker than them. She ran over to the black horse, which was clattering its horseshoes on the paved ground, and urged it into a gallop with a cry, leaping into the saddle in full flight.

'Leave me . . .' groaned Cahir Mawr Dyffryn aep Ceallach, pushing away the elves who were trying to lift him up with his good hand. 'I'm fine. It's just a scratch . . . After her. Get the girl . . .'

One of the elves screamed, and blood spurted into Cahir's face. Another Scoia'tael reeled and fell to his knees, his fingers clutching his mutilated belly. The remaining elves leapt back and scattered all around the courtyard, swords flashing.

They had been attacked by a white-haired fiend, who had fallen on them from a wall, from a height that would have broken a normal man's legs. It ought to have been impossible to land gently, whirl in an impossibly fast pirouette, and a split second later begin killing. But the white-haired fiend had done it. And the killing had begun.

The Scoia'tael fought fiercely. They had the advantage, but they had no chance. A massacre was played out before Cahir's eyes, wide with terror. The fair-haired girl, who had wounded him a moment earlier, had been fast, had been unbelievably lithe, had been like a mother cat defending her kittens. But the white-haired fiend who had fallen amongst the Scoia'tael was like a Zerrikan tiger. The fair-

haired maid of Cintra, who for some unknown reason had not killed him, seemed insane. The white-haired fiend was not insane. He was calm and cold. And killed calmly and coldly.

The Scoia'tael had no chance. Their corpses piled up on the slabs of the courtyard. But they did not yield. Even when only two of them remained, they did not run away, but attacked the white-haired fiend once more. The fiend hacked off the arm of one of them above the elbow as Cahir watched. He hit the other elf with an apparently light, casual blow, which nonetheless threw him backwards. It tipped him over the lip of the fountain and hurled him into the water. The water brimmed over the edge of the basin in ripples of crimson.

The elf with the severed arm knelt by the fountain, staring vacantly at the blood gushing from the stump. The white-haired fiend seized him by the hair and cut his throat with a rapid slash of his sword.

When Cahir opened his eyes the fiend was standing over him.

'Don't kill me . . .' he whispered, giving up his efforts to rise from the ground, now slippery with blood. His hand, slashed by the fair-haired girl, had gone numb and did not hurt.

'I know who you are, Nilfgaardian,' said the white-haired fiend, kicking the helmet with the hacked-up wings. 'You have been pursuing her doggedly and long. But now you will harm her no more.'

'Don't kill me . . .'

'Give me one reason. Just one. Make haste.'

'It was I . . .' whispered Cahir. 'It was I who got her out of Cintra. From the fire . . . I rescued her. I saved her life . . .'

When he opened his eyes, the fiend was no longer there. Cahir was alone in the courtyard with the bodies of the elves. The water in the fountain soughed, spilling over the edge of the basin, washing away the blood on the ground. Cahir fainted.

At the foot of the tower stood a building which seemed to be a single, large hall, or perhaps some kind of peristyle. The roof over the peristyle, probably illusory, was full of holes. It was supported by columns and pilasters carved in the shape of scantily clad caryatids with generous breasts. The same kinds of caryatids supported the arch of the entrance through which Ciri had vanished. Beyond the doorway, Geralt noticed some steps leading

upwards. Towards the tower.

The Witcher cursed under his breath. He did not understand why she had fled there. He had seen her horse fall as he rushed after her along the tops of the walls. He saw her leap nimbly to her feet, but instead of running along the winding road encircling the peak, she had suddenly rushed uphill, towards the solitary tower. Only later did he notice the elves on the road. Those elves – busy shooting arrows at some men running uphill – saw neither Ciri nor himself. Reinforcements were arriving from Aretuza.

He intended to follow Ciri up the steps when he heard a sound. From above. He quickly turned around. It was not a bird.

Vilgefortz flew down through a hole in the roof, his wide sleeves swishing, and slowly alighted on the floor.

Geralt stood in front of the entrance to the tower, drew his sword and heaved a sigh. He had sincerely hoped that the dramatic, concluding fight would be played out between Vilgefortz and Philippa Eilhart. He didn't have the least bit of interest in this kind of drama.

Vilgefortz brushed down his jerkin, straightened his cuffs, looked at the Witcher and read his mind.

'Infernal drama,' he sighed. Geralt made no comment.

'Did she go into the tower?'

He made no answer. The sorcerer nodded his head.

'So we have an epilogue then,' he said coldly. 'The denouement that draws the play to a close. Or is it perhaps fate? Do you know where those steps lead? To Tor Lara. To the Tower of Gulls. There is no way out of there. It's all over.'

Geralt stepped back between two of the caryatids holding up the doorway, in order to protect his flanks.

'Yes indeed,' he drawled, keeping his eyes on the sorcerer's hands. 'It's all over. Half of your accomplices are dead. The bodies of the elves who were brought to Thanedd are piled up all the way to Garstang. The others ran away. Sorcerers and Dijkstra's men are arriving from Aretuza. The Nilfgaardian who was supposed to take Ciri has probably bled to death already. And Ciri is up there in the tower. No way out of there? I'm glad to hear it. That means there's only one way in. The one I'm blocking.'

Vilgefortz bridled.

‘You’re incorrigible. You are still incapable of assessing the situation correctly. The Chapter and Council have ceased to exist. The forces of Emperor Emhyr are marching north. Deprived of the mages’ assistance and advice, the kings are as helpless as children. In the face of Nilfgaard, their kingdoms are tumbling like sandcastles. I proposed this to you yesterday and repeat it today: join the victors. Spit on the losers.’

‘It is you who’s lost. You were only a tool to Emhyr. He wanted Ciri, which is why he sent that character with the wings on his helmet. I wonder what Emhyr will do to you when you report this fiasco.’

‘You’re shooting wildly, Witcher. And you’re wide of the mark, naturally. What if I told you that Emhyr is my tool?’

‘I wouldn’t believe you.’

‘Geralt, be sensible. Do you really want to play at theatrics, play out the banal final battle between good and evil? I repeat my proposition of yesterday. It is by no means too late. You can still make a choice. You can join the right side—’

‘Join the side I thinned out a little today?’

‘Don’t grin. Your demonic smiles make no impression on me. Those few elves you hacked down? Artaud Terranova? Trifles, meaningless details. They can be waved aside.’

‘But of course. I know your philosophy. Death has no meaning, right? Particularly other people’s?’

‘Don’t be trite. It’s a pity about Artaud but, well, too bad. Let’s call it . . . settling old scores. After all, I tried to kill you twice. Emhyr grew impatient, so I sent some assassins after you. Each time I did it with genuine reluctance. You see, I still hope they’ll paint a picture of us one day.’

‘Abandon that hope, Vilgefortz.’

‘Put away your sword. Let’s go up into Tor Lara together. We’ll reassure the Child of the Elder Blood, who is sure to be dying of fright up there somewhere. And then let’s leave. Together. You’ll be by her side. You will see her destiny fulfilled. And Emperor Emhyr? Emperor Emhyr will get what he wanted. Because I forgot to tell you that although Codringher and Fenn are dead, their work and ideas are still alive and doing very well, thank you.’

‘You are lying. Leave this place before I spit on *you*.’

‘I really have no desire to kill you. I kill with reluctance.’

‘Indeed? What about Lydia van Bredevoort?’

The sorcerer sneered.

‘Speak not that name, Witcher.’

Geralt gripped the hilt of his sword tightly and smiled scornfully.

‘Why did Lydia have to die, Vilgefortz? Why did you order her death? She was meant to distract attention from you, wasn’t she? She was meant to give you time to become resistant to dimeritium, to send a telepathic signal to Rience, wasn’t she? Poor Lydia, the artist with the damaged face. Everyone knew she was expendable. Everyone knew that except her.’

‘Be silent.’

‘You murdered Lydia, wizard. You used her. And now you want to use Ciri? With my help? No. You will not enter Tor Lara.’

The sorcerer took a step back. Geralt tensed up, ready to jump and strike. Vilgefortz did not raise his hand, however, but simply held it out to one side. A stout, two-yard staff suddenly materialised in his hand.

‘I know,’ he said, ‘what hinders you from making a sensible assessment of the situation. I know what complicates and obstructs your attempts at making a correct prediction of the future. Your arrogance, Geralt. I will disabuse you of arrogance. And I will do so with the help of this magic staff here.’

The Witcher squinted and raised his blade a little.

‘I’m trembling with impatience.’

A few weeks later, having been healed by the dryads and the waters of Brokilon, Geralt wondered what mistakes he had made during the fight. And came to the conclusion he hadn’t made any. His only mistake was made before the fight. He ought to have fled before it even began.

The sorcerer was fast, his staff flickering in his hands like lightning. Geralt’s astonishment was even greater when, during a parry, the staff and sword clanged metallically. But there was no time for astonishment. Vilgefortz attacked, and the Witcher had to contort himself using body-swerves and pirouettes. He was afraid to parry. The bloody staff was made of iron; and magical to boot.

Four times, he found himself in a position from which he was able to counterattack and deliver a blow. Four times, he struck. To the temple, to the neck, under the arm, to the thigh. Each blow

ought to have been fatal. But each one was parried.

No human could have parried blows like that. Geralt slowly began to understand. But it was already too late.

He didn't see the blow that finally caught him. The impact drove him against the wall. He rebounded from it but was unable to jump aside or dodge. The blow had knocked the breath out of him. He was caught by a second blow, this time on the shoulder, and once again flew backwards, smashing his head against a protruding caryatid's breast on one of the pilasters. Vilgefortz leapt closer, swung the staff and thumped him in the belly, below the ribs. Very hard. Geralt doubled up and was then hit on the side of the head. His knees suddenly went weak and crumpled beneath him. And the fight was over. In principle.

He feebly tried to protect himself with his sword. The blade, caught between the wall and the pilaster, broke under a blow with a shrill, vibrating whine. He tried to protect his head with his left hand, but the staff fell with enough force to break his forearm. The pain utterly blinded him.

'I could smash your brain out through your ears,' said Vilgefortz from far away. 'But this was supposed to be a lesson. You were mistaken, Witcher. You mistook the stars reflected in a pond at night for the sky. Oh, are you vomiting? Good. Concussion. Bleeding from the nose? Excellent. Well, I shall see you later. One day. Perhaps.'

Now Geralt could see nothing and hear nothing. He was sinking, submerging into something warm. He thought Vilgefortz had gone. He was astonished, then, when a fierce blow from the iron staff struck his thigh, smashing the shaft of his femur.

If anything occurred after that, he did not remember it.

'Hang in there, Geralt. Don't give up,' repeated Triss Merigold endlessly. 'Hang in there. Don't die . . . Please don't die . . .'

'Ciri . . .'

'Don't talk. I'll soon get you out of here. Hold on . . . Damn I'm too weak, by the gods . . .'

'Yennefer . . . I have to—'

'You don't have to do anything! You can't do anything! Hang in there. Don't give up . . . Don't faint . . . Don't die, please . . .'

She dragged him across the floor, which was littered with bodies. He saw his chest and belly covered in blood, which was streaming

from his nose. He saw his leg. It was twisted at a strange angle and seemed much shorter than the intact one. He didn't feel any pain. He felt cold. His entire body was cold, numb and foreign. He wanted to puke.

'Hold on, Geralt. Help is coming from Aretuza. It'll soon be here . . .'

'Dijkstra . . . If Dijkstra gets his hands on me . . . I'm finished . . .'

Triss swore. Desperately.

She dragged him down the steps, his broken leg and arm bouncing down them. The pain returned. It bored into his guts and his temples, and it radiated all the way to his eyes, to his ears, to the top of his head. He didn't scream. He knew screaming would bring him relief, but he didn't scream. He just opened his mouth, which also brought him relief.

He heard a roar.

At the top of the stair stood Tissaia de Vries. Her hair was dishevelled, her face covered in dust. She raised both her hands, and her palms flamed. She screamed a spell and the flames dancing on her fingers hurtled downwards in the form of a blinding sphere, roaring with fire. The Witcher heard the clatter of walls crashing down below and the dreadful cries of people being burnt.

'No, Tissaia!' screamed Triss in desperation. 'Don't do it!'

'They will not enter here,' said the arch-mistress, without turning her head. 'This is Garstang, on the Isle of Thanedd. No one invited those royalist lackeys, who carry out the orders of their short-sighted kings!'

'You're killing them!'

'Be silent, Triss Merigold! The attack on the unity of the Brotherhood has failed. The island is still ruled by the Chapter! The kings should keep their hands off the Chapter's business! This is our conflict and we shall resolve it ourselves! We will resolve our business and then put an end to this senseless war, for it is we, sorcerers, who bear the responsibility for the fate of the world!'

A ball of lightning shot from her hands, and the redoubled echo of the explosion roared among the columns and stone walls.

'Begone!' she screamed again. 'You will not enter this place! Begone!'

The screaming from below subsided. Geralt understood that the

attackers had withdrawn from the stairway, had beaten a retreat. Tissaia's outline blurred in front of his eyes. It wasn't magic. He was losing consciousness.

'Run, Triss Merigold,' the enchantress's words came from far away, as if from behind a wall. 'Philippa Eilhart has already fled; she flew away on owl's wings. You were her accomplice in this wicked conspiracy and I ought to punish you. But there has been enough blood, death and misfortune! Begone! Go to Aretuza and join your allies! Teleport away. The portal in the Tower of Gulls no longer exists. It was destroyed along with the tower. You can teleport without fear. Wherever you wish. To your King Foltest, for instance, for whom you betrayed the Brotherhood!'

'I will not leave Geralt . . .' groaned Triss. 'He cannot fall into the hands of the Redanians . . . He's gravely injured . . . He has internal bleeding, and I have no more strength! I don't have the strength to open the portal! Tissaia! Help me please!'

Darkness. Bitter cold. From far away, from behind a stone wall, the voice of Tissaia de Vries:

'I shall help you.'

CHAPTER FIVE

Evertsen *Peter, b. 1234, confidant of Emperor Emhyr Deithwen and one of the true authors of the Empire's might. The chief chamberlain of the army during the time of the Northern Wars (q.v.), from 1290 imperial treasurer of the crown. In the final period of Emhyr's rule, he was raised to the rank of coadjutor of the Empire. During the rule of Emperor Morvran Voor he was falsely accused of misappropriation of funds, found guilty, imprisoned and died in 1301 in Winneburg Castle. Posthumously rehabilitated by Emperor Jan Calveit in 1328.*

Effenberg and Talbot, *Encyclopaedia Maxima Mundi,*

Volume V

May Ye All Wail, for the Destroyer of Nations is upon us. Your lands shall they trample and divide with rope. Your cities razed shall be, their dwellers expelled. The bat, owl and raven your homes shall infest, and the serpent will therein make its nest . . .

Aen Ithlinnespeath

The captain of the squad reined back his mount, removed his helmet and used his fingers to comb his thinning hair, which was matted with sweat.

'Journey's over,' he repeated, seeing the troubadour's questioning gaze.

‘What? How d’you mean?’ said Dandelion, astonished. ‘Why?’

‘We aren’t going any further. Do you see? The river you see glinting down there is the Ribbon. We were only told to escort you to the Ribbon. That means it’s time we were off.’

The rest of the troops stopped behind them, but none of the soldiers dismounted. They were all looking around nervously. Dandelion shielded his eyes with a hand and stood up in the stirrups.

‘Where can you see that river?’

‘I said it’s down there. Ride down the ravine and you’ll be there in no time.’

‘You could at least escort me to the bank,’ protested Dandelion, ‘and show me the ford . . .’

‘There’s nothing much to show. Since May the weather’s been baking hot, so the water level’s dropped. There isn’t much water in the Ribbon. Your horse won’t have any problem crossing it . . .’

‘I showed your commander the letter from King Venzlav,’ said the troubadour, puffing up. ‘He read the contents and I heard him order you to escort me to the very edge of Brokilon. And you’re going to abandon me here in this thicket? What’ll happen if I get lost?’

‘You won’t get lost,’ muttered another soldier gloomily, who had come closer but had not so far spoken. ‘You won’t have time to get lost. A dryad’s arrow will find you first.’

‘What cowardly simpletons,’ Dandelion sneered. ‘I see you’re afraid of the dryads. But Brokilon only begins on the far bank of the Ribbon. The river is the border. We haven’t crossed it yet.’

‘Their border,’ explained the leader, looking around, ‘extends as far as their arrows do. A powerful bow shot from that bank will send an arrow right to the edge of the forest and still have enough impetus to pierce a hauberk. You insisted on going there. That’s your business, it’s your hide. But life is dear to me. I’m not going any further. I’d rather shove my head in a hornets’ nest!’

‘I’ve explained to you,’ said Dandelion, pushing his hat back and sitting up in the saddle, ‘that I’m riding to Brokilon on a mission. I am, it may be said, an ambassador. I do not fear dryads. But I would like you to escort me to the bank of the Ribbon. What’ll happen if brigands rob me in that thicket?’

The gloomy soldier laughed affectedly.

‘Brigands? Here? In daylight? You won’t meet a soul here during the day. Latterly, the dryads have been letting arrows fly at anyone who appears on the bank of the Ribbon, and they’re not above venturing deeper into our territory either. No, no need to be afraid of brigands.’

‘That’s true,’ agreed the captain. ‘A brigand would have to be pretty stupid to be riding along the Ribbon during the day. And we’re not idiots. You’re riding alone, without armour or weapons, and you don’t look, forgive me, anything like a fighting man. You can see that a mile off. That may favour you. But if those dryads see us, on horseback and armed, you won’t be able to see the sun for arrows.’

‘Ah, well. There’s nothing else for it.’ Dandelion patted his horse’s neck and looked down towards the ravine. ‘I shall have to ride alone. Farewell, soldiers. Thank you for the escort.’

‘Don’t be in such a rush,’ said the gloomy soldier, looking up at the sky. ‘It’ll be evening soon. Set off when the haze starts rising from the water. Because, you know . . .’

‘What?’

‘An arrow’s not so sure in the fog. If fate smiles on you, the dryads might miss. But they seldom miss . . .’

‘I told you—’

‘All right, all right. I’ve got it. You’re going to them on some kind of mission. But I’ll tell you something else. They don’t care whether it’s a mission or a church procession. They’ll let fly at you, and that’s that.’

‘You insist on frightening me, do you?’ said the poet snootily. ‘What do you take me for, a court scribbler? I, my good men, have seen more battlegrounds than the lot of you. And I know more about dryads than you. If only that they never fire without warning.’

‘It once was thus, you’re right,’ said the leader quietly. ‘Once they gave warnings. They shot an arrow into a tree trunk or into the road, and that marked the border that you couldn’t cross. If a fellow turned back right then, he could get out in one piece. But now it’s different. Now they shoot to kill at once.’

‘Why such cruelty?’

‘Well,’ muttered the soldier, ‘it’s like this. When the kings made a truce with Nilfgaard, they went after the elven gangs with a will.

You can tell they're putting the screws on, for there isn't a night that survivors don't flee through Brugge, seeking shelter in Brokilon. And when our boys hunt the elves, they sometimes mix it with the dryads too, those who come to the elves' aid from the far side of the Ribbon. And our army has also been known to go too far . . . Get my drift?'

'Yes,' said Dandelion, looking at the soldier intently and shaking his head. 'When you were hunting the Scoia'tael you crossed the Ribbon. And you killed some dryads. And now the dryads are taking their revenge in the same way. It's war.'

'That it is. You took the words right out of my mouth. War. It was always a fight to kill – never to let live – but now it's worse than ever. There's a fierce hatred between them and us. I'll say it one more time: if you don't have to, don't go there.'

Dandelion swallowed.

'The whole point,' he said, sitting tall in the saddle and working hard to assume a resolute expression and strike a dashing pose, 'is that I *do* have to. And I'm going. Right now. Evening or no evening, fog or no fog. Duty calls.'

The years of practice paid off. The troubadour's voice sounded beautiful and menacing, austere and cold. It rang with iron and valour. The soldiers looked at him in unfeigned admiration.

'Before you set off,' said the leader, unfastening a flat, wooden canteen from his saddle, 'neck down some vodka, minstrel, sir. Have a good old swig . . .'

'It'll make the dying easier,' added the gloomy one, morosely.

The poet sipped from the canteen.

'A coward,' he declared with dignity, when he'd stopped coughing and had got his breath back, 'dies a hundred times. A brave man dies but once. But Dame Fortune favours the brave and holds cowards in contempt.'

The soldiers looked at him in even greater admiration. They didn't know and couldn't have known that Dandelion was quoting from a heroic epic poem. Moreover, from one written by someone else.

'I shall repay you for the escort with this,' said the poet, removing a jingling, leather pouch from his bosom. 'Before you return to the fort, before you're once again embraced by strict mother-duty, stop by at a tavern and drink my health.'

‘Thank you, sir,’ said the leader, blushing somewhat. ‘You are generous, although we— Forgive us for leaving you alone, but . . .’

‘It’s nothing. Farewell.’

The bard adjusted his hat to a jaunty angle over his left ear, prodded his horse with his heels and headed into the ravine, whistling ‘The Wedding Party at Bullerlyn’, a well-known and extremely indecent cavalry song.

‘The cornet in the fort said he was a freeloader, a coward and a knobhead. But he’s a valiant, military gentleman, even if he is a poe-taster.’ The voice of the gloomy soldier was carried to Dandelion’s ears.

‘Truly spoken,’ responded the captain. ‘He isn’t faint-hearted, you couldn’t say that. He didn’t even bat an eyelid, I noticed. And on top of that, he’s whistling, can you hear? Ho, ho . . . Heard what he said? That he’s an embarrassador. You can be sure they don’t make any old bugger an embarrassador. You’ve got to have your head screwed on to be made an embarrassador . . .’

Dandelion quickened his pace in order to get away as quickly as possible. He didn’t want to sabotage the reputation he’d just earned himself. And he knew, with his mouth drying up in terror, that he wouldn’t be able to whistle for much longer.

The ravine was sombre and damp, and the wet clay and carpet of rotten leaves lying on it muffled the thudding of his dark bay gelding’s hooves. He’d called the horse ‘Pegasus’. Pegasus walked slowly, head hanging down. He was one of those rare specimens of horse who could never care less.

The forest had come to an end, but a wide, reedy meadow still separated Dandelion from the banks of the river, which was marked by a belt of alders. The poet reined Pegasus in. He looked around carefully but didn’t see anything. He listened out intently but only heard the singing of frogs.

‘Well, boy,’ he croaked. ‘It’s do or die. Gee up.’

Pegasus lifted his head a little and stuck up his ears, which normally hung down, questioningly.

‘You heard right. Off you go.’

The gelding set off reluctantly, the boggy ground squelching beneath his hooves. Frogs fled with long hops. A duck took flight a few paces in front of them, fluttering and quacking, briefly stopping the troubadour’s heart, after which it began pounding very hard

and very rapidly. Pegasus showed no interest in the duck whatsoever.

'The hero rode . . .' mumbled Dandelion, wiping the cold sweat from the nape of his neck with a handkerchief taken from inside his jerkin, 'rode fearlessly through the wilderness, heedless of the leaping lizards and flying dragons . . . He rode and rode . . . Until he reached a vast expanse of water . . .'

Pegasus snorted and stopped. They were by the river, among reeds and bulrushes, which stood taller than his stirrups. Dandelion wiped his sweaty forehead and tied the handkerchief around his neck. He had been staring at the alder thicket on the far bank until his eyes watered. He saw nothing and no one. The surface of the water rippled from waterweed being swayed by the current, while overhead turquoise and orange kingfishers flitted past. The air twinkled with swarming insects. Fish gulped down mayflies, leaving huge rings on the surface of the water.

Everywhere, as far as the eye could see, there were beaver lodges – piles of cut branches, and felled and gnawed tree trunks – being washed by the lazy current.

There's an astonishing abundance of beavers here, thought the poet. *And no small wonder. No one bothers those bloody tree-chewers. Neither robbers, hunters nor forest beekeepers venture into this region; not even those interfering fur trappers would dare set their snares here. The ones who tried would have got an arrow through the throat, and the crayfish would have nibbled on them in the ooze by the riverbank. And I, the idiot, am forcing my way out here of my own free will; here, by the Ribbon, over which hangs a cadaverous stench, a stench which even the scent of sweet flag and mint cannot mask . . .*

He sighed heavily.

Pegasus slowly planted his forelegs into the water, lowered his muzzle towards the surface, drank long, and then turned his head and looked at Dandelion. The water dripped from his muzzle and nostrils. The poet nodded, sighed once more and sniffed loudly.

'The hero gazed on the maelstrom,' he quietly declaimed, trying not to let his teeth chatter. 'He gazed on it and travelled on, for his heart knew not trepidation.'

Pegasus lowered his head and ears.

'*Knew not trepidation*, I said.'

Pegasus shook his head, jingling the rings on his reins and bit.

Dandelion dug a heel into his side. The gelding entered the water with pompous resignation.

The Ribbon was shallow but very overgrown. Before they had reached the centre of the current, Pegasus was dragging long plaits of waterweed. The horse walked slowly and with effort, trying to shake the annoying pondweed off with every step.

The rushes and alders of the far bank were close. So close that Dandelion felt his stomach sinking low, very low, right down to the saddle itself. He knew that in the centre of the river, entangled in the waterweed, he was an excellent target; a sitting duck. In his mind's eye he could already see bows bending, bowstrings being pulled back and sharp arrowheads being aimed at him.

He squeezed the horse's sides with his calves, but Pegasus was having none of it. Instead of picking up speed, he stopped and lifted his tail. Balls of dung splashed into the water. Dandelion gave a long groan.

'The hero,' he muttered, closing his eyes, 'was unable to cross the raging rapids. He fell in action, pierced by many missiles. He was hidden for ages long in the azure depths, rocked by jade-green algae. All traces of him vanished. Only horse shit remained, borne by the current to the distant sea . . .'

Pegasus, clearly relieved, headed jauntily towards the bank without any encouragement, and when he reached the bank, and was finally free of waterweed, even took the liberty of breaking into a canter, utterly soaking Dandelion's trousers and boots. The poet didn't notice it, though, since the vision of arrows aimed at his belly hadn't left him for a moment, and dread crept down his neck and back like a huge, cold, slimy leech. For beyond the alders, less than a hundred paces away, beyond the vivid green band of riverside grass, rose up a vertical, black, menacing wall of trees.

It was Brokilon.

On the bank, a few steps downstream, lay the white skeleton of a horse. Nettles and bulrushes had grown through its ribcage. Some other – smaller – bones, which didn't come from a horse, were also lying there. Dandelion shuddered and looked away.

Squelching and splashing, the gelding, urged on by Dandelion, hauled himself out of the riverside swamp, the mud smelling unpleasantly. The frogs stopped croaking for a moment. It all went very quiet. Dandelion closed his eyes. He stopped declaiming and improvising. His inspiration and daring had evaporated. Only cold,

revolting fear remained; an intense sensation, but one utterly bereft of creative impulses.

Pegasus perked up his floppy ears and dispassionately shambled towards the Forest of the Dryads. Called by many the Forest of Death.

I've crossed the border, thought the poet. *Now it will all be settled. While I was by the river and in the water, they could be magnanimous. But not now. Now I'm an intruder. Just like that one . . . I might end up a skeleton, too; a warning for people to heed . . . If there are dryads here at all. If they're watching me . . .*

He recalled watching shooting tournaments, competitions and archery displays at country markets. Straw targets and mannequins, studded or torn apart by arrowheads. *What does a man feel when he's hit by an arrow? The impact? Pain? Or perhaps . . . nothing?*

There were either no dryads nearby, or they hadn't made up their minds what to do with this lone rider, because the poet rode up to the forest petrified with fear but in one piece. Entry to the trees was barred by a dense tangle of scrub and fallen trunks, bristling with roots and branches, but in any case Dandelion didn't have the slightest intention of riding up to the very edge, much less of heading deeper into the forest. He was capable of making himself take risks – but not of committing suicide.

He dismounted very slowly and fastened the reins to a protruding root. He didn't usually do that; Pegasus wasn't inclined to wander away from his master. Dandelion was not certain, however, how the horse would react to the whistle and whir of arrows. Up until now he had tried not to expose either Pegasus or himself to sounds of that kind.

He removed a lute from the saddle's pommel. It was a unique, magnificent instrument with a slender neck. *This was a present from a she-elf*, he recalled, stroking the inlaid wood. *It might end up returning to the Elder Folk . . . Unless the dryads leave it by my dead body . . .*

Close by lay an old tree, blown down in a gale. The poet sat down on the trunk, rested the lute on his knee, licked his lips and wiped his sweaty hands on his trousers.

The day was drawing to a close. A haze rose from the Ribbon, forming a grey-white shroud enveloping the meadows. It was cooler now. The honking of cranes sounded and died away, leaving only the croaking of frogs.

Dandelion plucked the strings. Once, then twice, then a third time. He twisted the pegs, tuned the lute and began to play. And a moment later, to sing.

Yviss, m'evelienn vente cáelm en tell

Elaine Ettariel Aep cór me lode deith ess'viell

Yn blath que me darienn

Aen minne vain tegen a me

Yn toin av muirednn que dis eveigh e aep llea . . .

The sun vanished behind the trees. It immediately became dark in the shade of Brokilon's mighty trees.

Ueassan Lamm feainne renn, ess'ell,

Elaine Ettariel,

Aep cor . . .

He didn't hear – but he felt – somebody's presence.

'N'te mirę daetre. Sh'aente vort.'

'Don't shoot . . .' he whispered, obediently not looking around. 'N'aen aespar a me . . . I come in peace . . .'

'N'ess a tearth. Sh'aente.'

He obeyed, although his fingers had turned cold and numb on the strings, and he had difficulty making any sound whatsoever emerge from his throat. But there was no hostility in the dryad's voice and he was a professional, dammit.

Ueassan Lamm feainne renn, ess'ell,

Elaine Ettariel,

Aep cor aen tedd teviel e gwen

Yn blath que me darienn

Ess yn e evellien a me

Que shaent te cáelm a'vean minne me striscea . . .

This time he took the liberty of glancing over his shoulder. Whatever was crouching by the tree trunk, very near, resembled a bush entwined in ivy. But it wasn't a bush. Bushes didn't have such large, shining eyes.

Pegasus snorted softly, and Dandelion knew that behind him in the darkness someone was stroking his horse's muzzle.

'Sh'aente vort,' requested the dryad squatting behind him once again. Her voice was like the pattering of rain on leaves.

'I . . .' he began. 'I am . . . The comrade of the witcher Geralt . . . I

know that Geralt— That Gwynbleidd is among you in Brokilon. I have come . . .'

'N'te dice'en. Sh'aente, va.'

'Sh'aent,' gently asked a second dryad from behind him, virtually in unison with a third. And maybe a fourth. He couldn't be certain.

'Yea, sh'aente, taedh,' said the thing that a moment earlier the poet had taken to be a birch sapling standing a few paces in front of him, in a silvery, girlish voice. 'Ess'laine . . . Taedh . . . Sing . . . Sing some more about Ettariel . . . Yes?'

He did as she asked.

To adore you, is all my life
Fair Ettariel
Let me keep, then, the treasure of memories
And the magical flower;
A pledge and sign of your love.
Silvered by drops of dew as if by tears . . .

This time he heard steps approaching.

'Dandelion.'

'Geralt!'

'Yes, it's me. You can stop that racket now.'

'How did you find me? How did you know I was in Brokilon?'

'Triss Merigold . . . Bloody hell . . .' said Dandelion. He tripped again and would have fallen, had a passing dryad not seized him in a dextrous and astonishingly powerful grip for one so slight.

'Gar'ean, táedh,' she warned in silver tones. 'Va cáelm.'

'Thank you. It's awfully dark here . . . Geralt? Where are you?'

'Here. Don't lag behind.'

Dandelion quickened his pace, stumbled once more and almost fell on the Witcher, who had stopped in the dark in front of him. The dryads passed by them silently.

'It's hellishly dark . . . Is it much further?'

'No. We'll soon be at the camp. Who, apart from Triss, knows I'm hiding here? Did you let it slip to anyone?'

'I had to tell King Venzlav. I needed safe conduct through Brugge. You wouldn't believe the times we live in . . . I also had to have permission for the expedition to Brokilon. But anyway, Venzlav

knows you and likes you . . . He appointed me an envoy. Just imagine. I'm sure he'll keep it secret, I asked him to. Don't get annoyed now, Geralt . . .'

The Witcher came closer. Dandelion couldn't see the expression on his face, only the white hair and bristles of several days' beard growth, which was visible even in the dark.

'I'm not annoyed,' said the Witcher, placing his hand on Dandelion's shoulder. It seemed as though his voice, which up until then had been cold, was somewhat changed. 'I'm glad you're here, you whoreson.'

'It's so cold here,' said Dandelion, shuddering and making the branches they were sitting on creak under him. 'We could get a fire going—'

'Don't even think about it,' muttered the Witcher. 'Have you forgotten where you are?'

'Are you serious . . . ?' The troubadour glanced around timidly. 'Oh. No fire, right?'

'Trees hate fire. And they do too.'

'Dammit. Are we going to sit here and freeze? And in the bloody dark? I can't see my hand in front of my face . . .'

'Keep it by your side then.'

Dandelion sighed, hunched forward and rubbed his arms. He heard the Witcher beside him breaking some thin twigs in his fingers.

A small green light suddenly flared up in the dark, first of all dim and faint, then quickly becoming brighter. After the first one, many others began to glimmer around them, moving and dancing like fireflies or will-o'-the-wisps above a marsh. The forest suddenly came to life with a shimmering of shadows, and Dandelion began to see the silhouettes of the dryads surrounding them. One of them approached and put something on the ground near them, which looked like a hot, glowing tangle of plants. The poet reached a hand out carefully and took hold of it. The green glow was totally cold.

'What is it, Geralt?'

'Rotten wood and a special kind of moss. It only grows here in Brokilon. And only they know how to weave it all together to make it give off light. Thank you, Fauve.'

The dryad did not answer, but neither did she go away,

remaining squatting alongside the pair. She had a garland on her brow, and her long hair fell to her shoulders. Her hair looked green in the light and may actually have been green. Dandelion knew that dryads' hair could be of the weirdest colours.

'Taedh,' she said melodically, raising her flashing eyes to the troubadour. Her fine-featured face was crossed diagonally by two parallel dark stripes of painted camouflage. 'Ess've vort shaente aen Ettariel? Shaente a'vean vort?'

'No . . . Later perhaps,' he answered politely, carefully searching for words in the Elder Speech. The dryad sighed and leaned over, gently stroking the neck of the lute, which was lying nearby. She rose nimbly to her feet. Dandelion watched her as she disappeared into the forest towards the others, whose shadows showed faintly in the dim light of the small green lanterns.

'I trust I didn't offend her, did I?' he asked softly. 'They have their own dialect, and I don't know polite expressions . . .'

'Check whether you've got a knife in your guts,' said the Witcher, with neither mockery nor humour in his voice. 'Dryads react to insults by sticking a knife in your belly. Don't worry, Dandelion. I'd say they're willing to forgive you a good deal more than slips of the tongue. The concert you gave at the edge of the forest was clearly to their liking. Now you're ard táedh, "the great bard". They're waiting for the next part of 'The Flower of Ettariel'. Do you know the rest? It's not your ballad, after all.'

'It's my translation. I also embellished it somewhat with elven music. Didn't you notice?'

'No.'

'As I thought. Fortunately, dryads are more receptive to art. I read somewhere that they're exceptionally musical. Which is why I came up with my cunning plan. For which, incidentally, you haven't yet praised me.'

'My congratulations,' said the Witcher after a moment's silence. 'It was indeed cunning. And fortune smiled on you, as usual. They shoot accurately at two hundred paces. They don't usually wait until someone crosses onto their bank of the river and begins to sing. They are very sensitive to unpleasant smells. So when the corpse falls into the Ribbon and gets carried away by the current, they don't have to put up with the stench.'

'Oh, whatever,' said the poet, clearing his throat and swallowing. 'The most important thing is I pulled it off and found you. Geralt,

how did you . . .’

‘Do you have a razor?’

‘Eh? Of course I do.’

‘Lend it to me tomorrow morning. This beard of mine is driving me insane.’

‘Didn’t the dryads have any? Hmm . . . I guess not, they don’t have much need for them, do they? Of course, I’ll lend it to you. Geralt?’

‘What?’

‘I don’t have any grub with me. Should ard táedh, the great bard, hold out any hopes of supper when visiting dryads?’

‘They don’t eat supper. Never. And the guards on Brokilon’s border don’t eat breakfast either. You’ll have to survive until noon. I’ve already got used to it.’

‘But when we get to their capital, the famous, Duen Canell, concealed in the very heart of the forest . . .’

‘We’ll never get there, Dandelion.’

‘What? I thought . . . But you— I mean they’ve given you sanctuary. After all . . . they tolerate . . .’

‘You’ve chosen the right word.’

They both said nothing for a long time.

‘War,’ said the poet finally. ‘War, hatred and contempt. Everywhere. In everyone’s hearts.’

‘You’re being poetic.’

‘But that’s what it’s like.’

‘Precisely. Right, tell me your news. Tell me what’s been happening in the world while they’ve been tending to me here.’

‘First,’ said Dandelion, coughing softly, ‘tell me what really happened in Garstang.’

‘Didn’t Triss tell you?’

‘Yes, she did. But I’d like to hear your version.’

‘If you know Triss’s version, you know a more complete and probably more faithful version already. Tell me what’s happened since I’ve been here.’

‘Geralt,’ whispered Dandelion. ‘I don’t know what happened to

Yennefer and Ciri . . . No one does. Triss doesn't either . . .'

The Witcher shifted suddenly, making the branches creak.

'Did I ask you about Ciri or Yennefer?' he said in a different voice. 'Tell me about the war.'

'Don't you know anything? Hasn't any news reached you here?'

'Yes, it has. But I want to hear everything from you. Speak, please.'

'The Nilfgaardians,' began the bard after a moment's silence, 'attacked Lyria and Aedirn. Without declaring war. The reason was supposedly an attack by Demavend's forces on some border fort in Dol Angra, which happened during the mages' conclave on Thanedd. Some people say it was a setup. That they were Nilfgaardians disguised as Demavend's soldiers. We'll probably never find out what really happened. In any case, Nilfgaard's retaliation was swift and overwhelming; the border was crossed by a powerful army, which must have been concentrated in Dol Angra for weeks, if not months. Spalla and Scala, the two Lyrian border strongholds, were captured right away, in just three days. Rivia was prepared for a siege lasting months but capitulated after two days under the pressure of the guilds and the merchants who were promised that, should the town open its gates and pay a ransom, it wouldn't be sacked . . .'

'Was the promise kept?'

'Yes.'

'Interesting.' The Witcher's voice changed again a little. 'Promises being kept in these times? I won't mention that, in the past, no one would have dreamed of making promises like that, because no one would have expected them. Craftsmen and merchants never opened the gates of strongholds, they defended them; each guild had its own tower or machicolations.'

'Money has no fatherland, Geralt. The merchants don't care whose rule they make their money under. And the Nilfgaardian palatine doesn't care who he levies taxes on. Dead merchants don't make money or pay taxes.'

'Go on.'

'After the capitulation of Rivia the Nilfgaardian Army headed northwards at great speed, almost without encountering any resistance. The armies of Demavend and Meve withdrew, unable to form a front in the deciding battle. The Nilfgaardians reached

Aldersberg. In order to prevent the stronghold being blockaded, Demavend and Meve decided to join battle. The positions of their armies could have been better . . . Bugger it, if there were more light here I'd draw you—'

'Don't draw anything. And keep it brief. Who won?'

'Have you heard, sir?' said a reeve, out of breath and sweating, pushing through the group gathered around the table. 'A messenger has arrived from the field! We have triumphed! The battle is won! Victory! It is our day, our day! We have vanquished our foe, we have beaten him into the ground!'

'Silence,' scowled Evertsen. 'My head is splitting from your cries. Yes, I've heard, I've heard. We've vanquished the foe. It is our day, it is our field and it is also our victory. What a sensation.'

The bailiffs and reeves fell silent and looked at their superior in astonishment.

'Do you not rejoice, Chamberlain, sir?'

'That I do. But I'm able to do it quietly.'

The reeves were silent and looked at one another. *Young pups*, thought Evertsen. *Overexcited young whippersnappers. Actually, I'm not surprised at them. But for heaven's sake, there, on the hill, even Menno Coehoorn and Elan Trahe, forsooth, even the grizzly bearded General Braibant, are yelling, jumping for joy and slapping each other's backs in congratulation. Victory! It is our day! But who else's day could it have been? The kingdoms of Aedirn and Lyria only managed to mobilise three thousand horse and ten thousand foot, of which one-fifth had already been blockaded in the first days of the invasion, cut off in its forts and strongholds. Part of the remaining army had to withdraw to protect its flanks, threatened by far-reaching raids by light horse and diversionary strikes by units of Scoia'tael. The remaining five or six thousand – including no more than twelve hundred knights – joined battle on the fields outside Aldersberg. Coehoorn sent an army of thirteen thousand to attack them, including ten armoured companies, the flower of the Nilfgaard knighthood. And now he's overjoyed, he's yelling, he's thwacking his mace against his thigh and calling for beer . . . Victory! What a sensation.*

With a sudden movement, he gathered together the maps and papers lying on the table, lifted his head and looked around.

'Listen carefully,' he said brusquely to the reeves. 'I shall be issuing instructions.'

His subordinates froze in anticipation.

‘Each one of you,’ he began, ‘heard Field Marshal Coehoorn’s speech yesterday, to his officers. I would like to point out, gentlemen, that what the marshal said to his men does not apply to you. You are to execute other assignments and orders. My orders.’

Evertsen pondered for a moment and wiped his forehead.

‘“War to the castles, peace to the villages,” Coehoorn said to his commanders yesterday. You know that principle,’ he added at once. ‘You learned it in officer training. That principle applied until today; from tomorrow you’re to forget it. From tomorrow a different principle applies, which will now be the battle cry of the war we are waging. The battle cry and my orders run: War on everything alive. War on everything that can burn. You are to leave scorched earth behind you. From tomorrow, we take war beyond the line we will withdraw behind after signing the treaty. We are withdrawing, but there is to be nothing but scorched earth beyond that line. The kingdoms of Rivia and Aedirn are to be reduced to ashes! Remember Sodden! The time of revenge is with us!’

Evertsen cleared his throat loudly.

‘Before the soldiers leave the earth scorched behind them,’ he said to the listening reeves, ‘your task will be to remove from that earth and that land everything you can, anything that may increase the riches of our fatherland. You, Audegast, will be responsible for loading and transporting all harvested and stored crops. Whatever is still in the fields and what Coehoorn’s gallant knights don’t destroy is to be taken.’

‘I have too few men, Chamberlain, sir—’

‘There will be enough slaves. Put them to work. Marder and you . . . I’ve forgotten your name . . . ?’

‘Helvet. Evan Helvet, Chamberlain, sir.’

‘You’ll be responsible for livestock. Gather it into herds and drive it to the designated points for quarantine. Beware of rot-foot and other diseases. Slaughter any sick or suspect specimens and burn the carcasses. Drive the rest south along the designated routes.’

‘Yes, sir.’

And now a special task, thought Evertsen, scrutinising his subordinates. *To whom shall I entrust it? They’re all striplings, milk still wet on their cheeks, they’ve seen little, they’ve experienced nothing . . . Oh, I miss those old, hardened bailiffs of mine. Wars, wars, always wars*

. . . Soldiers are always falling, and in great numbers, but the losses among bailiffs, even though much fewer in number, are more telling. You don't see the deficit among the active troops, because fresh recruits always keep replacing them, for every man wants to be a soldier. But who wants to be a bailiff or a reeve? Who, when asked by their sons on returning home what they did during the war, wants to say he measured bushels of grain, counted stinking pelts and weighed wax as he led a convoy of carts laden with spoils along rutted roads, covered in ox shit, and drove herds of lowing and bleating beasts, swallowing dust and flies and breathing in the stench . . . ?

A special mission. The foundry in Gulet, with its huge furnaces. The puddling furnaces, the zinc ore foundry and the huge ironworks in Eysenlaan, annual production of five hundred hundredweight. The foundries and wool manufactories in Aldersberg. The maltings, distilleries, weaving mills and dyeworks in Vengerberg . . .

Dismantle and remove. Thus ordered Emperor Emhyr, the White Flame Dancing on the Barrows of his Enemies. As simple as that. Dismantle and remove, Evertsen.

An order's an order. It must be carried out.

That leaves the most important things. The ore mines and their yield. Coinage. Valuables. Works of art. But I'll take care of that myself. In person.

Alongside the black columns of smoke which were visible on the horizon rose other plumes. And yet others. The army was implementing Coehoorn's orders. The Kingdom of Aedirn had become a land of fires.

A long column of siege engines trundled along the road, rumbling and throwing up clouds of dust. Towards Aldersberg, which was still holding out. And towards Vengerberg, King Demavend's capital.

Peter Evertsen looked and counted and calculated. And added up the money. Peter Evertsen was the grand chamberlain of the Empire; during the war the army's chief bailiff. He had held that position for twenty-five years. Figures and calculations; they were his life.

A mangonel costs five hundred florins, a trebuchet two hundred, an onager at least a hundred and fifty, the simplest ballista eighty. A trained crew requires nine and a half florins of monthly pay. The column heading for Vengerberg, including horses, oxen and minor tackle, is worth at least three hundred marks. Sixty florins can be

struck from a mark of pure ore weighing half a pound. The annual yield of a mine is five or six thousand marks . . .

The siege column was overtaken by some light cavalry. Evertsen recognised them as the Duke of Winneburg's tactical company, one of those redeployed from Cintra, by the designs on its pennants. *Yes*, he thought, *they have something to be pleased about. The battle won, the army from Aedirn routed. Reserves will not be deployed in a heavy battle against the regular army. They will be pursuing forces in retreat, wiping out scattered, leaderless groups. They will murder, pillage and burn. They're pleased because it promises to be a pleasant, jolly little war. A little war that isn't exhausting. And doesn't leave you dead.*

Evertsen was calculating.

The tactical company combines ten ordinary companies and numbers two thousand horse. Although the Winneburgians will probably not take part in any large battles now, no fewer than a sixth of their number will fall in skirmishes. Then there will be camps and bivouacs, rotten victuals, filth, lice, mosquitoes, contaminated water. Then the inevitable will come: typhus, dysentery and malaria, which will kill no fewer than a quarter. To that you should include an estimate for unpredictable occurrences, usually around one-fifth of the total. Eight hundred will return home. No more. And probably far fewer.

Cavalry companies continued to pass along the road; and infantry corps followed the cavalry. These, in turn, were followed by marching longbowmen in yellow jerkins and round helmets, crossbowmen in flat kettle hats, pavisiers and pikemen. Beyond them marched shield bearers, veterans from Vicovaro and Etolia armoured like crabs, then a colourful hodgepodge: hirelings from Metinna, mercenaries from Thurn, Maecht, Gheso and Ebbing . . .

The troops marched briskly in spite of the intense heat, and the dust stirred up by their heavy boots billowed above the road. Drums pounded, pennants fluttered, and the blades of pikes, lances, halberds and guisarmes swayed and glittered. The soldiers marched jauntily and cheerfully. This was a victorious army. An undefeated army. *Onward, lads, forward, into battle! On Vengerberg! Destroy our foe! Avenge Sodden! Enjoy this merry little war, stuff our money bags with loot and then home. And then home!*

Evertsen watched. And calculated.

'Vengerberg fell after a week-long siege,' finished Dandelion. 'It may surprise you, but the guilds courageously defended their towers and the sections of wall assigned to them until the very end. So the entire garrison and all the townspeople were slaughtered; it

must have been around six thousand people. When news of it got out, a great flight began. Defeated regiments and civilians began to flee to Temeria and Redania en masse. Crowds of fugitives headed along the Pontar Valley and the passes of Mahakam. But not all of them managed to escape. Mounted Nilfgaardian troops followed them and cut off their escape . . . You know what I'm driving at?'

'No, I don't. I don't know much about . . . I don't know much about war, Dandelion.'

'I'm talking about captives. About slaves. They wanted to take as many prisoners as possible. It's the cheapest form of labour for Nilfgaard. That's why they pursued the fugitives so doggedly. It was a huge manhunt, Geralt. Easy pickings. Because the army had run away, and no one was left to defend the fleeing civilians.'

'No one?'

'Almost no one.'

'We won't make it in time . . .' Villis wheezed, looking around. 'We won't get away . . . Damn it, the border is so close . . . So close . . .'

Rayla stood up in her stirrups, and looked at the road winding among the forested hills. The road, as far as the eye could see, was strewn with people's abandoned belongings, dead horses, and with wagons and handcarts pushed to the side of the road. Behind them, beyond the forests, black columns of smoke rose into the sky. Screams and the intensifying sounds of battle could be heard ever closer.

'They're wiping out the rearguard . . .' Villis wiped the soot and sweat from his face. 'Can you hear it, Rayla? They've caught up with the rearguard, and they're putting them to the sword! We'll never make it!'

'We're the rearguard now,' said the mercenary drily. 'Now it's our turn.'

Villis blenched, and one of the soldiers standing close by gave a loud sigh. Rayla tugged at the reins, and turned around her mount, which was snorting loudly and barely able to lift its head.

'There's no chance of our getting away,' she said calmly. 'The horses are ready to drop. They'll catch up with us and slaughter us before we make it to the pass.'

'Let's dump everything and hide among the trees,' said Villis, not looking at her. 'Individually, every man for himself. Maybe some of us will manage to . . . survive.'

Rayla didn't answer, but indicated the mountain pass with a glance and a wave of her head, then the road and the rearmost ranks of the long column of refugees trudging towards the border. Villis understood. He cursed bitterly, leapt from his saddle, staggered and leaned on his sword.

'Dismount!' he yelled to the soldiers hoarsely. 'Block the road with anything you can! What are you staring at? Your mother bore you once and you only die once! We're the army! We're the rearguard! We have to hold back our pursuers, delay them . . .'

He fell silent.

'Should we delay the pursuers, the people will manage to cross into Temeria, to cross the mountains,' ended Rayla, also dismounting. 'There are women and children among them. What are you gawping at? It's our trade. This is what we're paid for, remember?'

The soldiers looked at one another. For a moment Rayla thought they would actually run away, that they would rouse their wet and exhausted horses for a last, desperate effort, that they would race past the column of fugitives, towards the pass – and safety. She was wrong. She had misjudged them.

They upset a cart on the road. They quickly built a barricade. A makeshift barricade. Not very high. And absolutely ineffectual.

They didn't have to wait long. Two horses, snorting and stumbling, lurched into the ravine, strewing flecks of froth around. Only one of them bore a rider.

'Blaise!'

'Ready yourselves . . .' The mercenary slid from the saddle into a soldier's arms. 'Ready yourselves, dammit . . . They're right behind me . . .'

The horse snorted, skittered a few paces sideways, fell back on its haunches, collapsed heavily on its side, kicked, stretched its neck out, and uttered a long neigh.

'Rayla . . .' wheezed Blaise, looking away. 'Give me . . . Give me something. I've lost my sword . . .'

Rayla, looking at the smoke from fires rising into the sky, gestured with her head to an axe leaning against the overturned cart. Blaise seized the weapon and staggered. The left leg of his trousers was soaked in blood.

'What about the others, Blaise?'

‘They were slaughtered,’ the mercenary groaned. ‘Every last man. The entire troop . . . Rayla, it’s not Nilfgaard . . . It’s the Squirrels . . . It was the elves who overhauled us. The Scoia’tael are in front, ahead of the Nilfgaardians.’

One of the soldiers wailed piercingly, and another sat down heavily on the ground, burying his face in his hands. Villis cursed, tightening the strap of his cuirass.

‘To your positions!’ yelled Rayla. ‘Behind the barricade! They won’t take us alive! I swear to you!’

Villis spat, then tore the three-coloured, black, gold and red rosette of King Demavend’s special forces from his spaulder, throwing it into the bushes. Rayla, cleaning and polishing her own badge, smiled wryly.

‘I don’t know if that’ll help, Villis. I don’t know.’

‘You promised, Rayla.’

‘I did. And I’ll keep my promise. To your positions, boys! Grab your crossbows and longbows!’

They didn’t have to wait long.

After they had repelled the first wave, there were only six of them left alive. The battle was short but fierce. The soldiers mobilised from Vengerberg fought like devils and were every bit as savage as the mercenaries. Not one of them fell into the hands of the Scoia’tael alive. They chose to die fighting. And they died shot through by arrows; died from the blows of lance and sword. Blaise died lying down, stabbed by the daggers of two elves who pounced on him, dragging him from the barricade. Neither of the elves got up again. Blaise had a dagger too.

The Scoia’tael gave them no respite. A second group charged. Villis, stabbed with a lance for the third time, fell to the ground.

‘Rayla!’ he screamed indistinctly. ‘You promised!’

The mercenary, dispatching another elf, swung around.

‘Farewell, Villis,’ she said, placing the point of her sword beneath his sternum and pushing hard. ‘See you in hell!’

A moment later, she stood alone. The Scoia’tael encircled her from all sides. The soldier, smeared with blood from head to foot, raised her sword, whirled around and shook her black plait. She stood among the elves, terrible and hunched like a demon. The elves retreated.

‘Come on!’ she screamed savagely. ‘What are you waiting for? You will not take me alive! I am Black Rayla!’

‘Glaeddyv vort, beanna,’ responded a beautiful, fair-haired elf in a calm voice. He had the face of a cherub and the large, cornflower-blue eyes of a child. He had emerged from the surrounding group of Scoia’tael, who were still hanging back hesitantly. His snow-white horse snorted, tossed its head powerfully up and down and energetically pawed at the bloodstained sand of the road.

‘Glaeddyv vort, beanna,’ repeated the rider. ‘Throw down your sword, woman.’

The mercenary laughed horribly and wiped her face with her cuff, smearing sweat mixed with dust and blood.

‘My sword cost too much to be thrown away, elf!’ she cried. ‘If you want to take it you will have to break my fingers! I am Black Rayla! What are you waiting for?’

She did not have to wait long.

‘Did no one come to relieve Aedirn?’ asked the Witcher after a long pause. ‘I understood there were alliances. Agreements about mutual aid . . . Treaties . . .’

‘Redania,’ said Dandelion, clearing his throat, ‘is in disarray after Vizimir’s death. Did you know King Vizimir was murdered?’

‘Yes, I did.’

‘Queen Hedwig has assumed power, but bedlam has broken out across the land. And terror. Scoia’tael and Nilfgaardian spies are being hunted. Dijkstra raged through the entire country; the scaffolds were running with blood. Dijkstra is still unable to walk so he’s being carried in a sedan chair.’

‘I can imagine it. Did he come after you?’

‘No. He could have, but he didn’t. Oh, but never mind. In any case, Redania – plunged into chaos itself – was incapable of raising an army to support Aedirn.’

‘And Temeria? Why didn’t King Foltest of Temeria help Demavend?’

‘When the fighting began in Dol Angra,’ said Dandelion softly, ‘Emhyr var Emreis sent an envoy to Vizima . . .’

‘Blast!’ hissed Bronibor, staring at the closed doors. ‘What are they spending so long debating? Why did Foltest abase himself so, to enter negotiations? Why did he give an audience to that

Nilfgaardian dog at all? He ought to have been executed and his head sent back to Emhyr! In a sack!'

'By the gods, voivode,' choked the priest Willemer. 'He is an envoy, don't forget! An envoy's person is sacrosanct and inviolable! It is unfitting—'

'Unfitting? I'll tell you what's unfitting! It is unfitting to stand idly by and watch as the invader wreaks havoc in countries we are allied to! Lyria has already fallen and Aedirn is falling! Demavend will not hold Nilfgaard off by himself! We ought to dispatch an expeditionary force to Aedirn immediately. We ought to relieve Demavend with an assault on the Jaruga's left bank! There are few forces there. Most of the regiments have been redeployed to Dol Angra! And we're standing here debating! We're yapping instead of fighting! And on top of that we are playing host to a Nilfgaardian envoy!'

'Quite, voivode,' said Duke Hereward of Ellander, giving the old warrior a scolding look. 'This is politics. You have to be able to look a little further than a horse's muzzle and a lance. The envoy must be heard. Emperor Emhyr had reason to send him here.'

'Of course he had reason,' snarled Bronibor. 'Right now, Emhyr is crushing Aedirn and knows that if we cross the border, bringing Redania and Kaedwen with us, we'll defeat him and throw him back beyond Dol Angra, to Ebbing. He knows that were we to attack Cintra, we'd strike him in his soft underbelly and force him to fight on two fronts! That is what he fears! So he's trying to intimidate us, to stop us from intervening. That is the mission the Nilfgaardian envoy came here with. And no other!'

'Then we ought to hear out the envoy,' repeated the duke, 'and take a decision in keeping with the interests of our kingdom. Demavend unwisely provoked Nilfgaard and has suffered the consequences. And I'm in no hurry to die for Vengerberg. What is happening in Aedirn is no concern of ours.'

'Not our concern? What, by a hundred devils, are you drivelling on about? You consider it other people's business that the Nilfgaardians are in Aedirn and Lyria, on the right bank of the Jaruga, when only Mahakam separates us from them? You don't have an ounce of common sense . . .'

'Enough of this feuding,' warned Willemer. 'Not another word. The king is coming out.'

The chamber doors opened. The members of the Royal Council

rose, scraping their chairs. Many of the seats were vacant. The crown hetman and most of the commanders were with their regiments: in the Pontar Valley, in Mahakam and by the Jaruga. The chairs which were usually occupied by sorcerers were also vacant. Sorcerers . . . *Yes*, thought Willemer, the priest, *the places occupied by sorcerers here, at the royal court in Vizima, will remain vacant for a long time. Who knows, perhaps for ever?*

King Foltest crossed the hall quickly and stood by his throne but did not sit down. He simply leaned over, resting his fists on the table. He was very pale.

'Vengerberg is under siege,' said the King of Temeria softly, 'and will fall any day now. Nilfgaard is pushing northwards relentlessly. The surrounded troops continue to fight, but that will change nothing. Aedirn is lost. King Demavend has fled to Redania. The fate of Queen Meve is unknown.'

The Council was silent.

'In a few days, the Nilfgaardians will take our eastern border, by which I mean the mouth of the Pontar Valley,' Foltest went on, still very softly. 'Hagge, Aedirn's last fortress, will not withstand them for long, and Hagge is on our eastern border. And on our southern border . . . something very unfortunate has occurred. King Ervyll of Verden has sworn fealty to Emperor Emhyr. He has surrendered and opened the strongholds at the mouth of the Jaruga. Nilfgaardian garrisons are already installed in Nastrog, Rozrog and Bodrog, which were supposed to have protected our flank.'

The Council was silent.

'Owing to that,' continued Foltest, 'Ervyll has retained his royal title, but Emhyr is his sovereign. Verden remains a kingdom but, de facto, is now a Nilfgaardian province. Do you understand what that means? The situation has turned about face. The Verdenian strongholds and the mouth of the Jaruga are in Nilfgaard's hands. I cannot attempt to cross the river. And I cannot weaken the army stationed there by forming a corps which could enter Aedirn and support Demavend's forces. I cannot do that. Responsibility for my country and my subjects rests on me.'

The Council was silent.

'Emperor Emhyr var Emreis, the imperator of Nilfgaard,' said the king, 'has offered me a proposition . . . an agreement. I have accepted that proposition. I shall now present this proposition to you. And you, when you have heard me out, will understand . . .

Will agree that— Will say . . .'

The Council was silent.

'You will say . . .' concluded Foltest. 'You will say I am bringing you peace.'

'So Foltest crumbled,' muttered the Witcher, breaking another twig in his fingers. 'He struck a deal with Nilfgaard. He left Aedirn to its fate . . .'

'Yes,' agreed the poet. 'However, he sent his army to the Pontar Valley and occupied and manned the stronghold at Hagge. And the Nilfgaardians didn't march into the Mahakam pass or cross the Jaruga in Sodden. They didn't attack Brugge, which, after its capitulation and Ervyll's fealty, they have in their clutches. That was without doubt the price of Temeria's neutrality.'

'Ciri was right,' whispered the Witcher. 'Neutrality . . . Neutrality is always contemptible.'

'What?'

'Nothing. But what about Kaedwen, Dandelion? Why didn't Henselt of Kaedwen come to Demavend and Meve's aid? They had a pact, after all; they were bound by an alliance. But even if Henselt, following Foltest's example, pisses on the signatures and seals on documents, and the royal word means nothing to him, he cannot be stupid, can he? Doesn't he understand that after the fall of Aedim and the deal with Temeria, it will be his turn; that he's next on the Nilfgaardian list? Kaedwen ought to support Demavend out of good sense. There may no longer be faith nor truth in the world, but surely good sense still exists. What say you, Dandelion? Is there still good sense in the world? Or do only contemptibility and contempt remain?'

Dandelion turned his head away. The green lanterns were close. They were surrounding them in a tight ring. He hadn't noticed it earlier, but now he understood. All the dryads had been listening in to his story.

'You say nothing,' said Geralt, 'which means that Ciri was right. That Codringher was right. You were all right. Only I, the naive, anachronistic and stupid witcher, was wrong.'

Centurion Digod, known by the nickname Half-Gallon, opened the tent flap and entered, panting heavily and snarling angrily. The decurions jumped to their feet, assuming military poses and expressions. Zyvik dextrously threw a sheepskin over the small

barrel of vodka standing among the saddles, before the eyes of the centurion had time to adjust to the gloom. Not to save themselves from punishment, because Digod wasn't actually a fervent opponent of drinking on duty or in the camp, but more in order to save the barrel. The centurion's nickname had not come about by accident; the story went that, in favourable conditions, he was capable of knocking back half a gallon of hooch, vigorously and with impressive speed. The centurion could polish off a standard soldier's quart mug as if it were a gill, in one draught, and seldom got his ears wet doing it.

'Well, Centurion, sir?' asked Bode, the bowmen's decurion. 'What have the top brass decided? What are our orders? Are we crossing the border? Tell us!'

'Just a moment,' grunted Half-Gallon. 'What bloody heat . . . I'll tell you everything in a moment. But first, give me something to drink because my throat's bone dry. And don't tell me you haven't got any; I can smell the vodka in this tent a mile off. And I know where it's coming from. From under that there sheepskin.'

Zyvik, muttering an oath, took out the barrel. The decurions crowded together in a tight group and clinked cups and tin mugs.

'Aaaah,' said the centurion, wiping his whiskers and eyes. 'Ooooh, that's foul stuff. Keep pouring, Zyvik.'

'Come on, tell us quickly,' said Bode, becoming impatient. 'What orders? Are we marching on the Nilfgaardians or are we going to hang around on the border like a bunch of spare pricks at a wedding?'

'Itching for a scrap?' Half-Gallon wheezed lengthily, spat, and sat down hard on a saddle. 'In a hurry to get over the border, towards Aedirn? You can't wait, eh? What fierce wolf cubs you are, doing nothing but standing there growling, baring your fangs.'

'That's right,' said old Stahler coldly, shuffling from one foot to the other. His legs were as crooked as a spider's, which befitted an old cavalryman. 'That's right, Centurion, sir. This is the fifth night we've slept in our boots, at the ready. And we want to know what's happening. Is it a scrap or back to the fort?'

'We're crossing the border,' announced Half-Gallon brusquely. 'Tomorrow at dawn. Five brigades, with the Dun Banner leading the way. And now pay attention, because I'm going to tell you what was told to us centurions and warrant officers by the voivode and the Honourable Margrave Mansfeld of Ard Carraigh, who'd come

straight from the king. Prick up your ears, because I won't tell you twice. And they're unusual orders.'

The tent fell silent.

'The Nilfgaardians have passed through Dol Angra,' said the centurion. 'They crushed Lyria, and reached Aldersberg in four days, where they routed Demavend's army in a decisive battle. Right away, after only six days' siege, they took Vengerberg by means of treachery. Now they're heading swiftly northwards, driving the armies back from Aedirn towards the Pontar Valley and Dol Blathanna. They're heading towards us, towards Kaedwen. So the orders for the Dun Banner are as follows: cross the border and march hard south, straight for the Valley of the Flowers. We have three days to get to the River Dyfne. I repeat, three days, which means we'll be marching at a trot. And, when we get there, not a step across the Dyfne. Not a single step. Shortly after, the Nilfgaardians will show up on the far bank. We do not, heed my words well, engage them. In no way, understood? Even if they try to cross the river, we're only to show them . . . show them our colours. That it's us, the Kaedwen Army.'

Although it seemed impossible, the silence in the tent grew even more palpable.

'What?' mumbled Bode finally. 'We aren't to fight the Nilfgaardians? Are we going to war or not? What's this all about, Centurion, sir?'

'That's our orders. We aren't going to war, but . . .' Half-Gallon scratched his neck ' . . . but to give fraternal help. We're crossing the border to give protection to the people of Upper Aedirn . . . Wait, what am I saying . . . Not from Aedirn, but from Lormark. That's what the Honourable Margrave Mansfeld said. Yes, and he said that Demavend has suffered a defeat. He's tripped up and is lying flat on his face, because he governed poorly and his politics were crap. So that's the end of him and the end of the whole of Aedirn with him. Our king lent Demavend a pretty penny because he gave him help. One cannot allow wealth like that to be lost, so now it's time to get that money back with interest. Neither can we let our compatriots and brothers from Lormark be taken prisoner by Nilfgaard. We have to, you know, liberate them. For those are our ancient lands: Lormark. They were once under Kaedwen rule and now they shall return to its rule. All the way to the River Dyfne. That's the agreement Our Grace, King Henselt, has concluded with Emhyr of Nilfgaard. Agreements or no agreements, the Dun Banner is to station itself by the river. Do you understand?'

No one answered. Half-Gallon grimaced and waved a hand.

‘Ah, sod the lot of you. You don’t understood shit, I see. But don’t worry yourselves, because I didn’t either. For His Majesty the King, the margraves, the voivodes and nobles are there to think. And we’re the army! We have to follow orders: get to the River Dyfne in three days, stop there and stand like a wall. And that’s it. Pour, Zyvik.’

‘Centurion, sir . . .’ stammered Zyvik. ‘And what will happen . . . What will happen if the army of Aedirn resists? Or bars the road? After all, we’re passing through their country armed. What then?’

‘Should our compatriots and brothers,’ continued Stahler spitefully, ‘the ones we’re supposedly liberating . . . Should they begin to shoot arrows at us or throw stones? Eh?’

‘We are to be on the banks of the Dyfne in three days,’ said Half-Gallon forcefully. ‘And no later. Whoever tries to delay or stop us is clearly an enemy. And our enemies can be cut to ribbons. But heed my words well! Listen to the orders! Burn no villages, nor cottages. Take no goods from anyone. Do not plunder. Rape no women! Make sure you and your men remember this, for should anyone break this order, they will hang. The voivode must have repeated this ten times: we aren’t fucking invading, we’re coming to give a helping hand! Why are you grinning, Stahler? It’s a bloody order! And now get to your units on the double. Get ’em all on their feet. The horses and tack are to shine like the full moon! In the afternoon, all companies are to fall in for inspection; the voivode himself will be drilling them. If I have to be ashamed of one of the platoons, the decurion will remember me. Oh yes, he’ll remember! You have your orders!’

Zyvik was the last to leave the tent. Squinting in the bright sunlight, he watched the commotion which had taken over the camp. Decurions were rushing to their units, centurions were running about and cursing, and noblemen, cornets and pages were getting under each other’s feet. The heavy cavalry from Ban Ard was trotting around the field, stirring up clouds of dust. The heat was horrendous.

Zyvik quickened his pace. He passed four bards from Ard Carraigh who had arrived the previous day and were sitting in the shadow cast by the margrave’s richly decorated tent. The bards were just composing a ballad about the victorious military operation, about the prowess of the king, the prudence of the commanders and the bravery of the humble foot soldier. As usual,

to save time, they were doing it before the operation.

'*Our brothers greeted us, they greeted us with breaaad and salt . . .*' sang one of the bards, trying out his lyrics. '*They greeted their saviours and liberators, they greeted them with breaaad and salt . . .* Hey, Hrafhir, think up a clever rhyme for "salt".'

The second bard suggested a rhyme. Zyvik did not hear what it was.

The platoon, camped among some willows by a pond, leapt up on seeing him.

'Make ready!' roared Zyvik, standing a good way back, so that the smell of his breath would not influence the morale of his subordinates. 'Before the sun rises another four fingers there'll be a full inspection! Everything's to be shining like the sun. Arms, tack, trappings and your mounts. There will be an inspection, and if I have to be ashamed of one of you before the centurion, I'll tear that soldier's legs off. Look lively!'

'We're going into battle,' guessed cavalryman Kraska, tucking his shirt quickly into his trousers. 'Are we going into battle, Decurion, sir?'

'What do you think? Or maybe we're off to a dance, to a Lammas party? We're crossing the frontier. The entire Dun Banner sets off tomorrow at dawn. The centurion didn't say in what array, but we know our platoon will be leading as usual. Now look lively, move your arses! Hold on, come back. I'll say this right now, because there'll be no time later. It won't be a typical little war, lads. The honourable gentlemen have thought up some modern idiocy. Some kind of liberation, or some such. We aren't going to fight the enemy, but we're heading towards our, what was it, eternal lands, to bring, you know, fraternal help. Now pay attention to what I say: you're not to touch the folk of Aedirn, not to loot—'

'What?' said Kraska, mouth agape. 'What do you mean, don't loot? And what are we going to feed our horses on, Decurion, sir?'

'You can loot fodder for the horses, but nothing else. Don't cut anyone up, don't burn any cottages down, don't destroy any crops . . . Shut your trap, Kraska! This isn't a village gathering. It's the fucking army! Carry out the orders or you hang! I said: don't kill, don't murder, and don't—'

Zyvik broke off and pondered.

'And if you rape any women, do it on the quiet. Out of sight,' he

finished a moment later.

*

‘They shook hands,’ finished Dandelion, ‘on the bridge on the River Dyfne. Margrave Mansfeld of Ard Carraigh and Menno Coehoorn, the commander-in-chief of the Nilfgaardian armies from Dol Angra. They shook hands over the bleeding, dying Kingdom of Aedirn, sealing a criminal division of the spoils. The most despicable gesture history has ever known.’

Geralt remained silent.

‘On the subject of despicableness,’ he said, surprisingly calmly, a moment later, ‘what about the sorcerers, Dandelion? The ones from the Chapter and the Council.’

‘Not one of them remained with Demavend,’ began the poet, soon after, ‘while Foltest drove all those who had served him out of Temeria. Philippa is in Tretogor, helping Queen Hedwig to bring the chaos reigning in Redania under control. With her is Triss and three others, whose names I can’t recall. Several of them are in Kaedwen. Many of them escaped to Kovir and Hengfors. They chose neutrality, because Esterad Thyssen and Niedamir, as you know, were, and are, neutral.’

‘I know. What about Vilgefortz? And the people who stuck by him?’

‘Vilgefortz has disappeared. It was expected he would surface in Aedirn after its capture, as Emhyr’s viceroy . . . But there’s no trace of him. Neither of him nor any of his accomplices. Apart from . . .’

‘Go on, Dandelion.’

‘Apart from one sorceress, who has become a queen.’

Filavandrel aep Fidhail waited for the answer in silence. The queen, who was staring out of the window, was also silent. The window looked out onto the gardens which, not so long ago, had been the pride and delight of the previous ruler of Dol Blathanna, the governor of the despot from Vengerberg. Fleeing before the arrival of the Free Elves, who were coming in the vanguard of Emperor Emhyr’s army, the human governor had managed to take most of the valuables from the ancient elven palace, and even some of the furniture. But he could not take the gardens. So he destroyed them.

‘No, Filavandrel,’ said the queen finally. ‘It is too early for that, much too early. Let us not think about extending our borders, for at present we are not even certain of their exact positions. Henselt of

Kaedwen has no intention of abiding by the agreement and withdrawing from the Dyfne. Our spies inform us he has by no means abandoned his thoughts of aggression. He may attack us any day.'

'So we have achieved nothing.'

The queen slowly held out a hand. An Apollo butterfly, which had flown in through the window, alighted on her lace cuff, folding and unfolding its pointed wings.

'We've achieved more,' said the queen softly, in order not to frighten away the butterfly, 'than we could have hoped for. We have finally recovered our Valley of the Flowers after a hundred years—'

'I would not name it thus.' Filavandrel smiled sadly. 'Now, after the armies have passed through, it should be called the Valley of the Ashes.'

'We have our own country once more,' finished the queen, looking at the butterfly. 'We are a people again, no longer outcasts. And the ash will nourish the soil. In spring the valley will blossom anew.'

'That is too little, Daisy. It is ever too little. We've come down a station or two. Not long ago we boasted we would push the humans back to the sea, whence they came. And now we have narrowed our borders and ambitions to Dol Blathann . . .'

'Emhyr Deithwen gave us Dol Blathanna as a gift. What do you expect from me, Filavandrel? Am I to demand more? Do not forget that even in receiving gifts there should be moderation. Particularly when it concerns gifts from Emhyr, because he gives nothing for nothing. We must keep the lands he gave us. And the powers at our disposal are barely sufficient to retain Dol Blathanna.'

'Let us then withdraw our commandos from Temeria, Redania and Kaedwen,' suggested the white-haired elf. 'Let us withdraw all Scoia'tael forces who are fighting the humans. You are now queen, Enid, and they will obey your orders. Now that we have our own small scrap of land, there is no sense in their continuing to fight. Their duty is to return and defend the Valley of the Flowers. Let them fight as a free people in defence of their own borders. Right now they are falling like bandits in the forests!'

The elf bowed her head.

'Emhyr has not permitted that,' she whispered. 'The commandos

are to fight on.'

'Why? To what end?' said Filavandrel aep Fidhail, sitting up abruptly.

'I will say more. We are not to support nor to help the Scoia'tael. This was the condition set by Foltest and Henselt. Temeria and Kaedwen will respect our rule in Dol Blathanna, but only if we officially condemn the Squirrels' aggression and distance ourselves from them.'

'Those children are dying, Daisy. They are dying every day, perishing in an unequal contest. As a direct result of these secret pacts with Emhyr, humans will attack the commandos and crush them. They are our children, our future! Our blood! And you tell me we should dissociate ourselves from them? Que'ss aen me dicette, Enid? Vorsaeke'llan? Aen vaine?'

The butterfly took flight, flapping its wings, and flew towards the window, then spun around, caught by currents of hot summer air. Francesca Findabair, known as Enid an Gleanna, once a sorceress and presently the Queen of Aen Seidhe, the Free Elves, raised her head. Tears glistened in her beautiful blue eyes.

'The commandos,' she repeated softly, 'must continue to fight. They must disrupt the human kingdoms and hinder their preparations for war. That is the order of Emhyr and I may not oppose Emhyr. Forgive me, Filavandrel.'

Filavandrel aep Fidhail looked at her and bowed low.

'I forgive you, Enid. But I do not know if they will.'

'Did not one sorcerer think the matter over a second time? Even when Nilfgaard was slaughtering and burning in Aedirn, did none of them abandon Vilgefortz or join Philippa?'

'Not one.'

Geralt was silent for a long time.

'I can't believe,' he said finally, very softly, 'I can't believe none of them left Vilgefortz when the real causes and effects of his treachery came to light. I am – as is generally known – a naive, stupid and anachronistic witcher. But I still cannot believe that the conscience of not one sorcerer was pricked.'

Tissaia de Vries penned her practised, decorative signature beneath the final sentence of the letter. After lengthy reflection, she also added an ideogram signifying her true name alongside. A name no one knew. A name she had not used for a very long time. Not since

she became an enchantress.

Skylark.

She put her pen down, very carefully, very precisely, across the sheet of parchment. For a long while she sat motionless, staring at the red orb of the setting sun. Then she stood up and walked over to the window. For some time she looked at the roofs of houses. Houses in which ordinary people were at that moment going to bed, tired by their ordinary, human lives and hardship; full of ordinary human anxiety about their fates, about tomorrow. The enchantress glanced at the letter lying on the table. At the letter addressed to ordinary people. The fact that most ordinary people couldn't read was of no significance.

She stood in front of the looking glass. She straightened her hair. She smoothed her dress. She brushed a nonexistent speck from her puffed sleeve. She straightened the ruby necklace on her breast.

The candlesticks beneath the looking glass stood unevenly. Her servant must have moved them while she was cleaning.

Her servant. An ordinary woman. An ordinary human with eyes full of fear about what was happening. An ordinary human, adrift in these times of contempt. An ordinary human, searching in her – in an enchantress – for hope and certainty about tomorrow . . .

An ordinary human whose trust she had betrayed.

The sound of steps, the pounding of heavy soldiers' boots, drifted up from the street. Tissaia de Vries did not even twitch, did not even turn to face the window. It was unimportant to her whose steps they were. Royal soldiers? A provost with orders to arrest the traitress? Hired assassins? Vilgefortz's hit men? She could not care less.

The steps faded into the distance.

The candlesticks beneath the looking glass stood out of kilter. The enchantress straightened them and corrected the position of a tablecloth, so that its corner was exactly in the centre, symmetrically aligned with the candlesticks' quadrangular bases. She unfastened the gold bracelets from her wrists and placed them perfectly evenly on the smoothed cloth. She examined the tablecloth critically but could not find the tiniest fault. Everything was lying evenly and neatly. As it should have lain before.

She opened the drawer in the dresser and took out a short knife with a bone handle.

Her face was proud and fixed. Expressionless.

It was quiet in the house. So quiet, the sound of a wilted petal falling on the tabletop could be heard.

The sun, as red as blood, slowly sank below the roofs of the houses.

Tissaia de Vries sat down on the chair by the table, blew out a candle, straightened the quill lying across the letter one more time and severed the arteries in both wrists.

The fatigue caused by the daylong journey had made itself felt. Dandelion awoke and realised he had probably fallen asleep during the story, dropping off in mid-sentence. He shifted and almost rolled off the pile of branches. Geralt was no longer lying alongside him to balance the makeshift bed.

'Where did I . . .' he said, coughing. He sat up. 'Where did I get to? Ah, the sorcerers . . . Geralt? Where are you?'

'Here,' said the Witcher, barely visible in the gloom. 'Go on, please. You were just going to tell me about Yennefer.'

'Listen,' said the poet, knowing perfectly well he'd had absolutely no intention of even mentioning the person in question. 'I really know nothing . . .'

'Don't lie. I know you.'

'If you know me so well,' said the troubadour, beginning to bristle, 'why the bloody hell are you making me speak? Since you know me through and through, you ought to know why I'm keeping my counsel, why I'm not repeating the gossip I've heard! You also ought to be able to guess what the gossip is and why I want to spare you it!'

'Que suecc's?' said one of the dryads sleeping nearby, on being woken by his raised voice.

'I beg your pardon,' said the Witcher softly.

Almost all of the green lanterns of Brokilon were out; only a few of them still glimmered gently.

'Geralt,' said Dandelion, interrupting the silence. 'You've always maintained that you don't get involved, that nothing matters to you . . . She may have believed that. She believed that when she began this game with Vilgefortz—'

'Enough,' said Geralt. 'Not another word. When I hear the word "game" I feel like killing someone. Oh, give me that razor. I want to

have that shave at last.'

'Now? It's still dark . . .'

'It's never too dark for me. I'm a freak.'

After the Witcher had snatched the pouch of toiletries from him and headed off towards the stream, Dandelion realised he had shaken off all drowsiness. The sky was already lightening with the promise of dawn. He got up and walked into the forest, carefully stepping over the dryads, who were sleeping cuddled together.

'Are you one of those who had a hand in this?'

He turned around suddenly. The dryad leaning against a pine tree had hair the colour of silver, visible even in the half-light of the dawn.

'A most deplorable sight,' she said, folding her arms across her chest. 'Someone who has lost everything. You know, minstrel, it is interesting. Once, I thought it was impossible to lose everything, that something always remains. Always. Even in times of contempt, when naivety is capable of backfiring in the cruellest way, one cannot lose everything. But he . . . he lost several pints of blood, the ability to walk properly, the partial use of his left hand, his witcher's sword, the woman he loves, the daughter he had gained by a miracle, his faith . . . Well, I thought, he must have been left with something. But I was wrong. He has nothing now. Not even a razor.'

Dandelion remained silent. The dryad did not move.

'I asked if you had a hand in this,' she began a moment later. 'But I think there was no need. It's obvious you had a hand in it. It's obvious you are his friend. And if someone has friends, and he loses everything in spite of that, it's obvious the friends are to blame. For what they did, or for what they didn't do.'

'What could I have done?' he whispered. 'What could I have done?'

'I don't know,' answered the dryad.

'I didn't tell him everything . . .'

'I know.'

'I'm not guilty of anything.'

'Yes, you are.'

'No! I am not . . .'

He jumped to his feet, making the branches of his makeshift bed creak. Geralt sat beside him, rubbing his face. He smelled of soap.

'Aren't you?' he asked coolly. 'I wonder what else you dreamed about. That you're a frog? Calm down. You aren't. Did you dream that you're a chump? Well, that dream might have been prophetic.'

Dandelion looked all around. They were completely alone in the clearing.

'Where is she? Where are they?'

'On the edge of the forest. Get ready, it's time you left.'

'Geralt, I spoke with a dryad a moment ago. She was talking in the Common Speech without an accent and told me . . .'

'None of the dryads in that group spoke the Common Speech without an accent. You dreamed it, Dandelion. This is Brokilon. Many things can be dreamed here.'

A lone dryad was waiting for them at the edge of the forest. Dandelion recognised her at once – it was the one with the greenish hair who had brought them light during the night and encouraged him to continue singing. The dryad raised a hand, instructing them to stop. In her other hand she was holding a bow with an arrow nocked. The Witcher put his hand on the troubadour's shoulder and squeezed it hard.

'Is something going on?' whispered Dandelion.

'Indeed. Be quiet and don't move.'

The dense fog hanging over the Ribbon valley stifled voices and sounds, but not so much that Dandelion was unable to hear the splash of water and the snorting of horses. Riders were crossing the river.

'Elves,' he guessed. 'Scoia'tael? They're fleeing to Brokilon, aren't they? An entire commando unit . . .'

'No,' muttered Geralt, staring into the fog. The poet knew the Witcher's eyesight and hearing were incredibly acute and sensitive, but he was unable to guess if his assessment was based on vision or hearing. 'It isn't a commando unit. It's what's left of one. Five or six riders, three riderless horses. Stay here, Dandelion. I'm going over there.'

'Gar'ean,' said the greenhaired dryad in warning, raising her bow. 'Nfe va, Gwynbleidd! Ki'rin!'

'Thaess aep, Fauve,' replied the Witcher unexpectedly brusquely.

‘M’aespar que va’en, ell’ea? Go ahead and shoot. If not, lock me up and don’t try to frighten me, because there’s nothing you can frighten me with. I must talk to Milva Barring, and I will do so whether you like it or not. Stay there, Dandelion.’

The dryad lowered her head. Her bow too.

Nine horses emerged from the fog, and Dandelion saw that indeed only six of them were bearing riders. He saw the shapes of dryads emerging from the undergrowth and heading to meet them. He noticed that three riders had to be helped to dismount and had to be supported in order to walk towards the trees of Brokilon and safety. The other dryads stole like wraiths across the hillside, which was covered with wind-fallen trees, and vanished into the fog hanging above the Ribbon. A shout, the neighing of horses and the splash of water came from the opposite bank. It also seemed to the poet that he could hear the whistle of arrows. But he was not certain.

‘They were being pursued . . .’ he muttered. Fauve turned around, gripping her bow.

‘You sing a song, taedh,’ she snapped. ‘N’te shaent a’minne, not about Ettariel. No, my darling. The time is not right. Now is time to kill, yes. Such a song, yes!’

‘I,’ he stammered, ‘am not to blame for what is happening . . .’

The dryad was silent for a moment and looked to one side.

‘Also not I,’ she said and quickly disappeared into the undergrowth.

The Witcher was back before an hour had passed. He was leading two saddled horses: Pegasus and a bay mare. The mare’s saddlecloth bore traces of blood.

‘She’s one of the elves’ horses, isn’t she? One of those who crossed the river?’

‘Yes,’ replied Geralt. His face and voice were changed and unfamiliar. ‘The mare belongs to the elves. But she will be serving me for the moment. And when I have the chance, I’ll exchange her for a horse that knows how to carry a wounded rider and, when its rider falls, remains by him. It’s clear this mare wasn’t taught to do that.’

‘Are we leaving?’

‘You’re leaving,’ said the Witcher, throwing the poet Pegasus’s reins. ‘Farewell, Dandelion. The dryads will escort you a couple of

miles upstream so you won't fall into the hands of the soldiers from Brugge, who are probably still hanging around on the far bank.'

'What about you? Are you staying here?'

'No. I'm not.'

'You've learned something. From the Squirrels. You know something about Ciri, don't you?'

'Farewell, Dandelion.'

'Geralt . . . Listen to me—'

'Listen to what?' shouted the Witcher, before his voice suddenly faltered. 'I can't leave— I can't just leave her to her fate. She's completely alone . . . She cannot be left alone, Dandelion. You'll never understand that. No one will ever understand that, but I know. If she remains alone, the same thing will happen to her as once happened to me . . . You'll never understand that . . .'

'I do understand. Which is why I'm coming with you.'

'You're insane. Do you know where I'm headed?'

'Yes, I do. Geralt, I— I haven't told you everything. I'm . . . I feel guilty. I didn't do anything; I didn't know what to do. But now I know. I want to go with you. I want to be by your side. I never told you . . . about Ciri and the rumours that are circulating. I met some acquaintances from Kovir, and they in turn had heard the reports of some envoys who had returned from Nilfgaard . . . I imagine those rumours may even have reached the Squirrels' ears. That you've already heard everything from those elves who crossed the Ribbon. But let . . . let me tell you . . .'

The Witcher stood thinking for a long time, his arms hanging limply at his sides.

'Get on your horse,' he finally said, his voice sounding different. 'You can tell me on the way.'

That morning there was an unusual commotion in Loc Grim Palace, the imperator's summer residence. All the more unusual since commotions, emotions or excitement were not at all customary for the Nilfgaardian nobility and demonstrating anxiety or excitement was regarded as a sign of immaturity. Behaviour of that kind was treated by the Nilfgaardian noblemen as highly reprehensible and contemptible, to such an extent that even callow youths, from whom few would have demanded greater maturity, were expected to refrain from any displays of animation.

That morning, though, there were no young men in Loc Grim. Young men wouldn't have had any reason to be in Loc Grim. Stern, austere aristocrats, knights and courtiers were filling the palace's enormous throne room, every one of them dressed in ceremonial courtly black, enlivened only by white ruffs and cuffs. The men were accompanied by a small number of equally stern, austere ladies, whom custom permitted to brighten the black of their costume with a little modest jewellery. They all pretended to be dignified, stern and austere. But they were all extremely excited.

'They say she's ugly. Skinny and ugly.'

'But she allegedly has royal blood.'

'Illegitimate?'

'Not a bit of it. Legitimate.'

'Will she ascend to the throne?'

'Should the imperator so decide . . .'

'By thunder, just look at Ardal aep Dahy and Count de Wett . . . Look at their faces; as though they'd drunk vinegar . . .'

'Be quiet, Your Excellency . . . Do their expressions surprise you? If the rumours are true, Emhyr will be giving the ancient houses a slap in the face. He will humiliate them—'

'The rumours won't be true. The imperator won't wed that foundling! He couldn't possibly . . .'

'Emhyr will do whatever he wants. Heed your words, Your Excellency. Be careful of what you say. There have been people who said Emhyr couldn't do this or that. And they all ended up on the scaffold.'

'They say he has already signed a decree concerning an endowment for her. Three hundred marks annually, can you imagine?'

'And the title of princess. Have any of you seen her yet?'

'She was placed under the care of Countess Liddertal on her arrival and her house was cordoned off by the guard.'

'They have entrusted her to the countess, in order that she may instil some idea of manners in the little chit. They say your princess behaves like a farm girl . . .'

'What's so strange about that? She comes from the north, from barbaric Cintra—'

‘Which makes the rumours about a marriage to Emhyr all the more unlikely. No, no, it’s utterly beyond the pale. The imperator is to marry de Wett’s youngest daughter, as planned. He will not marry that usurper!’

‘It is high time he finally married somebody. For the sake of the dynasty . . . It is high time we had a little archduke . . .’

‘Then let him be wed, but not to that stray!’

‘Quiet, don’t gush. I give you my word, noble lords, that that marriage will not happen. What purpose could such a match serve?’

‘It’s politics, Countess. We are waging a war. That bond would have political and strategic significance . . . The dynasty of which the princess is a member has legal titles and confirmed feudatory rights to the lands on the Lower Yarra. Were she to become the imperator’s spouse . . . Ha, it would be an excellent move. Just look over there, at King Esterad’s envoys; how they whisper . . .’

‘So you support this outlandish relationship, Duke? Or you’ve simply been counselling Emhyr, is that it?’

‘It’s my business, Margrave, what I do or don’t support. And I would advise you not to question the imperator’s decisions.’

‘Has he already made his decision then?’

‘I doubt it.’

‘You are in error then, to doubt it.’

‘What do you mean by that, madam?’

‘Emhyr has sent Baroness Tarnhann away from the court. He has ordered her to return to her husband.’

‘He’s broken off with Dervla Tryffin Broinne? It cannot be! Dervla has been his favourite for three years . . .’

‘Now she has been expelled from the court.’

‘It’s true. They say the golden-haired Dervla kicked up an awful fuss. Four royal guardsmen had to manhandle her into the carriage . . .’

‘Her husband will be overjoyed . . .’

‘I doubt that.’

‘By the Great Sun! Emhyr has broken off with Dervla? He’s broken off with her for that foundling? For that savage from the North?’

‘Quiet . . . Quiet, for heaven’s sake!’

‘Who supports this? Which faction supports this?’

‘Be quiet, I said. They’re looking at us—’

‘That wench – I mean princess – is said to be ugly . . . When the imperator sees her . . .’

‘Are you trying to say he hasn’t seen her yet?’

‘He hasn’t had time. He only returned from Darn Ruach an hour ago.’

‘Emhyr never had a liking for ugly women. Aine Dermott, Clara aep Gwydolyn Gor . . . And Dervla Tryffin Broinne was a true beauty.’

‘Perhaps the foundling will grow pretty with time . . .’

‘After she’s been given a good scrubbing? They say princesses from the north seldom wash—’

‘Heed your words. You may be speaking about the imperator’s spouse!’

‘She is still a child. She is no more than fourteen.’

‘I say again, it would be a political union . . . Purely formal . . .’

‘Were that the case, the golden-haired Dervla would remain at court. The foundling from Cintra would politically and formally ascend the throne beside Emhyr . . . But in the evening Emhyr would give her a tiara and the crown jewels to play with and would visit Dervla’s bedchamber . . . At least until the chit attained an age when she could safely bear him a child.’

‘Hmm . . . Yes, you may have something there. What is the name of the . . . princess?’

‘Xerella, or something of the kind.’

‘Not a bit of it. She is called . . . Zirilla. Yes, I think it’s Zirilla.’

‘A barbarous name.’

‘Be quiet, damn it . . .’

‘And show a little dignity. You’re squabbling like unruly children!’

‘Heed your words! Be careful that I do not treat them as an affront!’

‘If you’re demanding satisfaction, you know where to find me,

Margrave!'

'Silence! Be quiet! The imperator . . .'

The herald did not have to make a special effort. One blow of his staff on the floor was sufficient for the black-bereted heads of the aristocrats and knights to bow down like ears of corn blown in the wind. The silence in the throne room was so complete that the herald did not have to raise his voice especially, either.

'Emhyr var Emreis, Deithwen Addan yn Carn aep Monrudd!'

The White Flame Dancing on the Barrows of his Foes. He marched down the double file of noblemen with his usual brisk step, vigorously waving his right hand. His black costume was identical to that of the courtiers, aside from the lack of a ruff. The imperator's dark hair – largely unkempt as usual – was kept reasonably neat by a narrow gold band, and the imperial chain of office glistened on his neck.

The Emhyr sat down on the throne quite carelessly, placing an elbow on the armrest and his chin in his hand. He did not throw a leg over the other armrest, signifying that etiquette still applied. None of the bowed heads rose by even an inch.

The imperator cleared his throat loudly without changing his position. The courtiers breathed again and straightened up. The herald struck his staff on the floor once again.

'Cirilla Fiona Elen Riannon, the Queen of Cintra, the Princess of Brugge and Duchess of Sodden, heiress of Inis Ard Skellig and Inis An Skellig, and suzerain of Attre and Abb Yarra!'

All eyes turned towards the doors, where the tall and dignified Stella Congreve, Countess of Liddertal, was standing. Alongside the countess walked the holder of all those impressive titles. Skinny, fair-haired, extremely pale, somewhat stooped, in a long, blue dress. A dress in which she very clearly felt awkward and uncomfortable.

Emhyr Deithwen sat up on his throne, and the courtiers immediately bowed low again. Stella Congreve nudged the fair-haired girl very gently, and the two of them filed between the double row of bowing aristocrats, all members of the leading houses of Nilfgaard. The girl walked stiffly and hesitantly. *She'll stumble*, thought the countess.

Cirilla Fiona Elen Riannon stumbled.

Ugly, scrawny little thing, thought the countess, as she neared the throne. *Clumsy and, what's more, rather bovine. But I shall make her a*

beauty. I shall make her a queen, Emhyr, just as you ordered.

The White Flame of Nilfgaard watched them from his position on the throne. As usual, his eyes were somewhat narrowed and the hint of a sneer played on his lips.

The Queen of Cintra stumbled a second time. The imperator placed an elbow on the armrest of the throne and touched his cheek with his hand. He was smiling. Stella Congreve was close enough to recognise that smile. She froze in horror. *Something is not right,* she thought, *something is not right. Heads will fall. By the Great Sun, heads will fall . . .*

She regained her presence of mind and curtseyed, making the girl follow suit.

Emhyr var Emreis did not rise from the throne. But he bowed his head slightly. The courtiers held their breath.

'Your Majesty,' said Emhyr. The girl cowered. The imperator was not looking at her. He was looking at the noblemen gathered in the hall.

'Your Majesty,' he repeated. 'I'm glad to be able to welcome you to my palace and my country. I give you my imperial word that the day is close when all the titles belonging to you will return to you, along with the lands which are your legal inheritance, which legally and incontrovertibly belong to you. The usurpers, who lord it over your estates, have declared war on me. They attacked me, stating that they were defending your just rights. May the entire world know that you are turning to me – not to them – for help. May the entire world know that here, in my land, you enjoy the reverence and royal name deserving of a queen, while among my enemies you were merely an outcast. May the entire world know that in my country you are safe, while my enemies not only denied you your crown, but even made attempts on your life.'

The Emperor of Nilfgaard fixed his gaze on the envoys of Esterad Thyssen, the King of Kovir, and on the ambassador of Niedamir, the King of the Hengfors League.

'May the entire world know the truth, and among them also the kings who pretended not to know where rightness and justice lay. And may the entire world know that help will be given to you. Your enemies and mine will be defeated. Peace will reign once again in Cintra, in Sodden and Brugge, in Attre, on the Isles of Skellige and at the mouth of the Yarra Delta, and you will ascend the throne to the joy of your countrymen and every one to whom justice is dear.'

The girl in the blue dress lowered her head even further.

'Before that happens,' said Emhyr, 'you will be treated with the respect due to you, by me and by all of my subjects. And since the flame of war still blazes in your kingdom, as evidence of the honour, respect and friendship of Nilfgaard, I endow you with the title of Duchess of Rowan and Ymlac, lady of the castle of Darn Rowan, where you will now travel, in order to await the arrival of more peaceful, happier times.'

Stella Congreve struggled to control herself, not allowing even a trace of astonishment to appear on her face. *He's not going to keep her with him*, she thought, *but is sending her to Darn Rowan, to the end of the world; somewhere he never goes. He has no intention of courting this girl. He isn't considering a quick marriage. He doesn't even want to see her. Why, then, has he got rid of Dervla? What is this all about?*

She recovered and quickly took the princess by the hand. The audience was over. The emperor didn't look at them as they were leaving the hall. The courtiers bowed.

Once they had left Emhyr var Emreis slung a leg over the armrest of his throne.

'Ceallach,' he said. 'To me.'

The seneschal stopped in front of the emperor at the distance decreed by etiquette and bowed.

'Closer,' said Emhyr. 'Come closer, Ceallach. I shall speak quietly. And what I say is meant for your ears only.'

'Your Highness.'

'What else is planned for today?'

'Receiving accrediting letters and granting a formal exequatur to the envoy of King Esterad of Kovir,' recited the seneschal rapidly. 'Appointing viceroys, prefects and palatines in the new provinces and palatinates. Ratifying the title of Count and appanage of—'

'We shall grant the envoy his exequatur and receive him in a private audience. Postpone the other matters until tomorrow.'

'Yes, Your Royal Highness.'

'Inform the Viscount of Eiddon and Skellen that immediately after the audience with the ambassador they are to report to the library. In secret. You are also to be there. And bring that celebrated mage of yours, that soothsayer . . . What was his name?'

'Xarthisius, Your Highness. He lives in a tower outside the city—'

‘Where he lives is of no interest to me. Send for him. He is to be brought to my apartments. Quietly, with a minimum of fuss, clandestinely.’

‘Your Highness . . . Is it wise, for that astrologer—’

‘That is an order, Ceallach.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Before three hours had passed, all of those summoned were present in the imperial library. The summons didn’t surprise Vattier de Rideaux, the Viscount of Eiddon. Vattier was the chief of military intelligence. Vattier was often summoned by Emhyr; they were at war, after all. Neither did the summons surprise Stefan Skellen – also known as Tawny Owl – who served the imperator as coroner and as the authority on special services and operations. Nothing ever surprised Tawny Owl.

The third person summoned, however, was astonished to be asked to attend. Particularly since the emperor addressed him first.

‘Master Xarthisius.’

‘Your Imperial Highness.’

‘I must establish the whereabouts of a certain individual. An individual who has either gone missing or is being hidden. Or is perhaps imprisoned. The sorcerers I previously gave this task to failed me. Will you undertake it?’

‘At what distance is this individual – may this individual be – residing?’

‘If I knew that, I wouldn’t need your witchcraft.’

‘I beg your forgiveness, Your Imperial Highness . . .’ stammered the astrologer. ‘The point is that great distances hinder astromancy, they practically preclude it . . . Hum, hum . . . And should this individual be under magical protection . . . I can try, but—’

‘Keep it brief, master.’

‘I need time . . . And ingredients for the spells . . . If the alignment of stars is auspicious, then . . . Hum, hum . . . Your Imperial Highness, what you request is an exacting task . . . I need time—’

Much more of this and Emhyr will order him to be stuck on a spike, thought Tawny Owl. *If the wizard doesn’t stop jabbering . . .*

‘Master Xarthisius,’ interrupted the imperator surprisingly

politely, even gently. ‘You will have everything you need at your disposal. Including time. Within reason.’

‘I shall do everything in my power,’ declared the astrologer. ‘But I shall only be able to determine the approximate location . . . I mean the region or radius—’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Astromancy . . .’ stammered Xarthisius. ‘At great distances astromancy only permits approximate localisations . . . Very approximate, with considerable tolerance . . . With very considerable tolerance. I truly know not whether I will be able—’

‘You will be able, master,’ drawled the imperator and his dark eyes flashed balefully. ‘I am utterly confident in your abilities. And as far as tolerance is concerned, the less is yours, the greater will be mine.’

Xarthisius cowered.

‘I must know the precise birth date of this individual,’ he mumbled. ‘To the hour; if possible . . . An object which belonged to the individual would also be invaluable . . .’

‘Hair,’ said Emhyr quietly. ‘Would hair suffice?’

‘Oooh!’ said the astrologer, brightening up. ‘Hair! That would expedite things considerably . . . Ah, and if I could also have faeces or urine . . .’

Emhyr’s eyes narrowed menacingly and the wizard cowered and made a low bow.

‘I humbly apologise, Your Imperial Highness . . .’ he grunted. ‘Please forgive me . . . Of course . . . Indeed, hair will suffice . . . Will absolutely suffice . . . When might I be given it?’

‘It will be supplied to you today, along with the date and hour of birth. I won’t keep you any longer, master. Return to your tower and start examining the constellations.’

‘May the Great Sun keep you ever in its care, Your Imperial—’

‘Yes, yes. You may withdraw.’

Now for us, thought Tawny Owl. *I wonder what’s in store for us*.

‘Should anyone,’ said the imperator slowly, ‘breathe a word of what is about to be said, they will be quartered. Vattier!’

‘Yes, Your Highness.’

‘How did that . . . *princess* . . . end up here? Who was involved?’

‘She came from the stronghold in Nastrog,’ said the chief of intelligence. ‘She was escorted here by guardsmen commanded by . . .’

‘That’s not what I bloody mean! How did that girl end up in Nastrog, in Verden? Who had her brought to the stronghold? Who is currently the commandant there? Is it the man who sent the report? Godyvron something?’

‘Godyvron Pitcairn,’ said Vattier de Rideaux quickly, ‘was of course informed about Rience and Count Cahir aep Ceallach’s mission. Three days after the events on the Isle of Thanedd, two people showed up in Nastrog. To be precise: one human and the other a half-blood elf. It was they who, citing the names Rience and Count Cahir, handed the princess over to Godyvron.’

‘Aha,’ said the imperator, smiling, and Tawny Owl felt a shiver running down his back. ‘Vilgefortz vouched he would capture Cirilla on Thanedd. Rience assured me of the same. Cahir Mawr Dyffryn aep Ceallach received clear orders in this matter. And so, three days after the scandal on the island, Cirilla is brought to Nastrog on the River Yarra; not by Vilgefortz, nor Rience, nor Cahir, but by a human and a half-elf. Did it not occur to Godyvron to arrest them?’

‘No. Shall he be punished for it, Your Highness?’

‘No.’

Tawny Owl swallowed. Emhyr was silent, rubbing his forehead, and the huge diamond in his ring shone like a star. A moment later, the imperator looked up.

‘Vattier.’

‘Your Highness?’

‘Mobilise all your subordinates. Order them to arrest Rience and Count Cahir. I presume the two of them are residing in territories as yet unoccupied by our forces. You will use Scoia’tael or Queen Enid’s elves to achieve that end. Take the two captives to Darn Ruach and subject them to torture.’

‘What information is required, Your Highness?’ said Vattier de Rideaux, narrowing his eyes and pretending not notice the paleness on the face of Seneschal Ceallach.

‘None. Later, when they’re softened up a little, I shall ask them personally. Skellen!’

‘Yes, sire.’

‘That old fool Xarthisius; if that jabbering copromancer manages to determine what I’ve ordered him to, then you will organise a search for a certain individual in the area he indicates. You will receive a description. It’s possible that the astrologer will indicate a region under our control, and then you will mobilise everyone responsible for that region. The entire civilian and military apparatus. It is a matter of the highest priority. Is that understood?’

‘Yes, sire. May I . . . ?’

‘No, you may not. Sit down and listen, Tawny Owl. Xarthisius will probably not come up with anything. The individual I have ordered him to search for is probably in foreign territory and under magical protection. I’d give my head that the individual I’m looking for is in the same place as our good friend, the sorcerer Vilgefortz of Roggeveen, who has mysteriously vanished. That is also why, Skellen, you will assemble and prepare a special unit, which you will personally command. Use the best men you have. They are to be ready for everything . . . and not superstitious. I mean not afraid of magic.’

Tawny Owl raised his eyebrows.

‘Your unit,’ concluded Emhyr, ‘will be charged with attacking and capturing the hideout of Vilgefortz, former good friend and ally that he was, the whereabouts of which is currently unknown to me, and which is probably quite well camouflaged and defended.’

‘Yes, sire,’ said Tawny Owl emotionlessly. ‘I presume that the individual being sought, whom they will probably find there, is not to be harmed.’

‘You presume correctly.’

‘What about Vilgefortz?’

‘He can be . . .’ The emperor smiled cruelly. ‘In his case he *ought* to be harmed, once and for all. Terminally harmed. This also applies to any other sorcerers you happen to find in his hideout. Without exception.’

‘Yes, sire. Who is responsible for finding Vilgefortz’s hideout?’

‘You are, Tawny Owl.’

Stefan Skellen and Vattier de Rideaux exchanged glances. Emhyr leaned back in his chair.

‘Is everything clear? If so . . . What is it, Ceallach?’

‘Your Highness . . .’ whined the seneschal, to whom no one had

paid any attention up until that moment. ‘I beg you for mercy . . .’

‘There is no mercy for traitors. There is no mercy for those who oppose my will.’

‘Cahir . . . My son . . .’

‘Your son . . .’ said Emhyr, narrowing his eyes. ‘I don’t yet know what your son is guilty of. I would like to hope that he is only guilty of stupidity and ineptitude and not of treachery. If that is the case he will only be beheaded and not broken on the wheel.’

‘Your Highness! Cahir is not a traitor . . . Cahir could not have—’

‘Enough, Ceallach, not another word. The guilty will be punished. They attempted to deceive me and I will not forgive them for that. Vattier, Skellen, in one hour, report for your signed instructions, orders and authorisations. You will then set about executing your tasks at once. And one more thing: I trust I do not have to add that the poor girl you saw in the throne room a short while ago is to remain to everyone Cirilla, Queen of Cintra and Duchess of Rowan. To everyone. I order you to treat it as a state secret and a matter of the gravest national importance.’

All those present looked at the imperator in astonishment. Deithwen Addan yn Carn aep Morvudd smiled faintly.

‘Have you not understood? Instead of the real Cirilla of Cintra I’ve been sent some kind of dolt. Those traitors probably told themselves that I would not recognise her. But I will know the real Ciri. I would know her at the end of the world and in the darkness of hell.’

CHAPTER SIX

The behaviour of the unicorn is greatly mystifying. Although exceptionally timid and fearful of people, if it should chance upon a maiden who has not had carnal relations with a man it will at once run to her, kneel before her and,without any fear whatsoever, lay its head in her lap. It is said that in the dim and distant past there were maidens who made a veritable practice of this. They remained unmarried and in abstinence for many years in order to be employed by hunters as a lure for unicorns. It soon transpired, however, that the unicorn only approached youthful maidens, paying absolutely no attention to older ones. Being a wise creature, the unicorn indubitably knows that remaining too long in the state of maidenhood is suspicious and counter to the natural order.

Phaysiologus

The heat woke her. It burnt her skin like a torturer's glowing irons.

She could barely move her head, for something held it fast. She pulled away and howled in pain, feeling the skin over her temple tear and split. She opened her eyes. The boulder on which she had been resting her head was dark brown from dry, congealed blood. She touched her temple and felt the remains of a hard, cracked scab under her fingers. The scab, which had been stuck to the boulder and then torn from it when she moved her head, now dripped blood and plasma. Ciri cleared her throat, hawked and spat out sand

mixed with thick, sticky saliva. She raised herself on her elbows and then sat up, looking around.

She was completely surrounded by a greyish-red, stony plain, scored by ravines and faults, with mounds of stones and huge, strangely shaped rocks. High above the plain hung an enormous, golden, burning sun, turning the entire sky yellow, distorting visibility with its blinding glare and making the air shimmer.

Where am I?

She gingerly touched her gashed, swollen forehead. It hurt. It hurt intensely. *I must have taken quite a tumble*, she thought. *I must have slid a fair way along the ground*. Her attention turned to her torn clothing and she discovered other sources of pain: in her back, in her shoulder and in her hips. When she hit the ground she had become covered in dust, sharp sand and grit. It was in her hair, ears, mouth and even her eyes, which were smarting and watering. Her hands and elbows, grazed to the raw flesh, were also stinging.

She slowly and cautiously straightened her legs and groaned once more, for her left knee reacted to movement with an intense, dull ache. She examined it through her undamaged trousers but did not find any swelling. When she breathed in, she felt a worrying stabbing in her side, and her attempts to bend her trunk almost made her scream, shooting her through with a sharp spasm which she felt in her lower back. *I'm good and bruised*, she thought. *But I don't think I've broken anything. If I'd broken a bone, it would hurt much more. I'm in one piece, just a bit knocked about. I'll be able to get up. So I'll get up.*

Crouching forward awkwardly, making deliberate movements, she very slowly manoeuvred herself into a position which would protect her injured knee. Then she went onto all fours, groaning and hissing. Finally, after what seemed an eternity, she stood up. Only to fall heavily onto the rock, as the dizziness which blurred her vision instantly took her legs from under her. Sensing a sudden wave of nausea, she lay down on one side. The searing rock stung like red-hot coals.

'I'll never get up . . .' she sobbed. 'I can't . . . I'll burn up in this sun . . .'

A growing, loathsome, intractable pain throbbed in her head. Each movement made the pain more intense, so Ciri stopped moving for a moment. She covered her head with an arm, but the heat soon became unbearable. She knew she would have to hide from it. Fighting the overpowering resistance of her aching body.

Screwing her eyes up against the shooting pain in her temples, she crawled on all fours towards a large boulder, sculpted by the wind to resemble a strange mushroom, whose shapeless cap gave a little shade at its foot. She curled up in a ball, coughing and sniffing.

She lay there for a long time, until the sun assaulted her once again with its scorching heat as it wandered across the sky. She moved around to the other side of the boulder, only to find it made no difference. The sun was at its zenith and the stone mushroom gave practically no shade. She pressed her hands to her temples, which were exploding with pain.

She was woken by a shivering which gripped her entire body. The sun's fiery ball had lost its blinding golden glow. Now, hanging lower in the sky above the serrated, jagged rocks, it was orange. The heat had eased off.

Ciri sat up with difficulty and looked around. Her headache was less intense and was no longer blinding her. She touched her head and discovered that the heat had dried the blood on her temple, turning it into a hard, smooth crust. Her entire body still hurt, though, and it seemed to her there was not a single place free of pain. She hawked, sand grating between her teeth, and tried to spit. Unsuccessfully. She leaned back against the mushroom-shaped boulder, which was still hot from the sun. *At last the heat has broken,* she thought. *Now, with the sun sinking in the west, it's bearable, and soon . . .*

Soon, night will fall.

She shuddered. *Where the hell am I? How do I get out of here? And which way? Which way should I go? Or perhaps I should stay in one place and wait until they find me. They must be looking for me. Geralt. Yennefer. They won't just leave me here . . .*

She tried to spit again, and again she could not. And then she understood.

Thirst.

She remembered. Back then, during her escape, she had been tortured by thirst. There had been a wooden canteen tied to the saddle of the black horse she had been riding when she was escaping towards the Tower of Gulls; she remembered it distinctly. But she had been unable to unfasten it or take it with her; she'd had no time. And now it was gone. Now everything was gone. There was nothing save sharp, scalding stones, save a scab on her temple that pulled her skin tight, save the pain in her body and her

parched throat, which she couldn't even give relief to by swallowing.

I can't stay here. I have to go and find water. If I don't find water I'll die.

She tried to stand, cutting her fingers on the stone mushroom. She got up. She took a step. And with a howl she toppled over onto her hands and knees, her back arching as spasms of nausea gripped her. Cramps and dizziness seized her so intensively she had to lie down.

I'm helpless. And alone. Again. Everyone has betrayed me, abandoned me, left me all alone. Just like before . . .

Ciri felt invisible pincers squeezing her throat, felt the muscles in her jaw tensing to the point of pain, felt her cracked lips begin to quiver. *There is no more dreadful sight than a weeping enchantress*, rang Yennefer's words in her head.

But wait . . . No one will see me here . . . No one at all . . .

Curled up in a ball beneath the stone mushroom, Ciri sobbed uncontrollably in a dry, dreadful lament. Without tears.

When she opened her swollen, gummed-up eyelids, she realised the heat had diminished even more, and the sky – which a short time before had still been yellow – had taken on its characteristic cobalt colour and was astonishingly clear, shot with thin, white strips of cloud. The sun's disc had reddened and sunk lower but was still pouring its undulating, pulsating heat down on the desert. Or perhaps the heat was radiating upwards from the hot stones?

She sat up to find that the pain inside her skull and bruised body had stopped tormenting her. That right now it was nothing in comparison to the terrible suffering growing in her stomach and the cruel itch in her dry throat, which forced her to cough.

Don't give up, she thought. *I can't give up. Just like in Kaer Morhen, I have to get up, defeat the enemy, fight, suppress the pain and weakness inside me. I have to get up and walk. At least I know the direction now. The sun is setting in the west. I have to walk, I have to find water and something to eat. I have to. Or I'll die. This is a desert. I landed in a desert. The thing I entered in the Tower of Gulls was a magical portal, a magical device, which can transport people great distances . . .*

The portal in Tor Lara was a strange one. When she ran up to the top floor there was nothing, not even any windows, only bare, mould-covered walls. And on one of the walls burnt an irregular

oval filled with an iridescent gleam. She hesitated, but the portal drew her on, summoned her; literally invited her. And there was no other way out; only that shining oval. She'd closed her eyes and stepped inside.

Afterwards, there was a blinding light and a furious vortex, a blast which took her breath away and squeezed her ribs. She remembered the flight through silence, cold and emptiness, then a bright light and she was choking on air. Above her had been blue and down below a vague greyness . . .

The vortex spat her out in mid-flight, as a young eagle drops a fish which is too heavy for it. When she smashed against the rock, she lost consciousness. She didn't know for how long.

I read about portals in the temple, she recalled, shaking the sand from her hair. *Some books mentioned teleportation portals, which were either distorted or chaotic. They transported people towards random destinations and threw them out in random places. The portal in the Tower of Gulls must have been one of those. It threw me out somewhere at the end of the world. I have no idea where. No one is going to look for me here and no one will find me. If I stay here I'll die.*

She stood up. Summoning up all her strength and bracing herself against the boulder, she took the first step. Then a second. Then a third.

The first steps made her aware that the buckles of her right shoe had been torn off, and the flapping upper made walking impossible. She sat down, this time intentionally and deliberately, and carried out an inspection of her clothes and equipment. While she concentrated on this task, she forgot about her exhaustion and pain.

The first thing she discovered was the dagger. She had forgotten about it, and the sheath had slid around to her back. Next to the dagger, as usual, was a small pouch on a strap. It had been a present from Yennefer. It contained 'things a lady always ought to have'. Ciri untied it. Unfortunately, a lady's standard equipment had not foreseen the situation she was now in. The pouch contained a tortoiseshell comb, a knife and a combination knife and nail file, a packed, sterilised tampon made from linen fabric and a small jade casket containing hand ointment.

Ciri rubbed the ointment into her cracked face and lips at once, then greedily licked the ointment from her lips. Without much thought, she went on to lick out the entire box, revelling in its greasiness and the tiny amount of soothing moisture. The chamomile, ambergris and camphor used to perfume the ointment

made it taste disgusting, but they acted as stimulants.

She strapped the shoe to her ankle with a strip she had ripped from her sleeve, stood up and stamped several times to test it. She unpacked and unfurled the tampon, making a wide headband from it to protect her injured temple and sunburnt forehead.

She stood, adjusted her belt, shifted the dagger nearer to her left hip and instinctively drew it from its sheath, checking the blade with her thumb. It was sharp. She knew it would be.

I'm armed, she thought. *I'm a witcher. No, I won't die here. Hunger? I can endure it. In the Temple of Melitele, it was occasionally necessary to fast for up to two days. But water . . . I have to find water. I'll keep walking until I find some. This accursed desert must finish eventually. If it were a very large desert, I would know something about it. I would have noticed it on the maps I used to look at with Jarre. Jarre . . . I wonder what he's doing now . . .*

I'll set off, she decided. *I'll walk towards the west. I can see where the sun sets. It's the only certain direction. After all, I never lose my way. I always know which way to go. I'll walk all night if I have to. I'm a witcher. When I get my strength back, I'll run like I used to on the Trail at Kaer Morhen. That way I'll get to the edge of the desert quicker. I'll hold out. I have to hold out . . . Ha, I bet Geralt's often been in deserts like this one, if not in even worse ones . . .*

Off I go.

After the first hour of walking, nothing in the landscape had changed. There was still nothing at all around her apart from stones; greyish-red, sharp, shifting underfoot, forcing her to be cautious. There were scrawny bushes, dry and thorny, reaching out to her from clefts in the rocks with their contorted branches. Ciri stopped at the first bush she encountered, expecting to find leaves or young shoots which she would be able to suck and chew. But the bush only had sharp thorns which cut her fingers. It didn't even have any branches suitable to break off and use as a stick. The second and third bushes were no different and she ignored all the rest, passing by them without stopping.

Dusk fell quickly. The sun sank over the jagged horizon, and the sky lit up red and purple. As darkness fell, it became cold. At first, she greeted it with gladness, for the coolness soothed her sunburnt skin. Soon after, however, it became even colder and Ciri's teeth began to chatter. She walked quicker, hoping that a vigorous pace would warm her up, but the effort revived the pain in her side and knee. She began to limp. On top of that, the sun had completely

sunk below the horizon and it was rapidly becoming dark. The moon was new, and the stars twinkling in the sky were no help. Ciri was soon unable to see the ground in front of her. She fell down several times, painfully grazing the skin on her wrists. Twice she caught her feet in clefts in the rocks, and only her well-drilled reactions as she was falling saved her from twisting or breaking an ankle. She realised it was no good. Walking in the dark was impossible.

She sat down on a flat basalt slab, feeling overwhelming despair She had no idea if she was heading in the right direction and had long since lost sight of the point where the sun had disappeared over the horizon. There was now no sign whatsoever of the glow which had guided her during the first hours after nightfall. Around her was nothing but velvety, impenetrable blackness. And bitter cold. Cold which paralysed, which bit at the joints, forcing her to stoop and tuck her head down into her painfully hunched shoulders. Ciri began to miss the sun, even though she knew its return would mean another onslaught of unbearable heat descending upon the rocks. Heat which would prevent her from continuing her journey. Once again, she felt the urge to cry rising in her throat and a wave of desperation and hopelessness overcoming her. But this time the desperation and hopelessness transformed into fury.

'I will not cry!' she screamed in the darkness. 'I am a witcher! I am . . .'

An enchantress.

Ciri lifted her hands and pressed her palms against her temples. *The Power is everywhere. It's in the water, in the air, in the earth . . .*

She quickly stood up, held her hands in front of her, and then slowly and hesitantly took a few steps, feverishly searching for an underground spring. She was fortunate. Almost immediately, she felt a familiar rushing sound, a throbbing in her ears and the energy emanating from a water vein hidden deep within the earth. She imbibed the Power with cautious inhalations, which she gradually released, knowing she was weak and that, in her state, a sudden shortage of oxygen to the brain might render her unconscious and thwart all her efforts. The energy slowly filled her up, giving her a familiar, momentary euphoria. Her lungs began to work more strongly and more quickly. Ciri brought her accelerated breathing under control; too much oxygen to the brain too rapidly could also have fatal consequences.

She'd done it.

First the aching, she thought. *First the paralysing pain in my shoulders and thighs. Then the cold. I have to raise my body temperature . . .*

She gradually recalled the gestures and spells. She performed and uttered some of them too hurriedly and was instantly seized by cramps and convulsions. A sudden spasm and dizziness made her weak at the knees. She sat down on a basalt slab, stilled her shaking hands and brought her fractured, irregular breathing back under control.

She repeated the formulas, forcing herself to be calm and exact, to concentrate and totally focus her will. And this time the result was immediate. She rubbed the warmth sweeping through her into her thighs and neck. She stood up, feeling the exhaustion vanish and her aching muscles relax.

'I'm an enchantress!' she cried in triumph, holding her arms up high. 'Come, immortal light! I summon you! Aen'drean va, eveigh Aine!'

A small, warm sphere of light floated from her hands like a butterfly, casting shifting mosaics of shadow on the stones. Moving her hand slowly, she stabilised the sphere, guiding it so that it was hanging in front of her. It was not the best idea; the light blinded her. She tried to move the sphere behind her back but again with a disappointing result. It cast her own shadow in front of her, making visibility worse. Ciri slowly moved the shining sphere to the side and suspended it just above her right shoulder. Although the sphere was nowhere as good as the real, magical Aine, the girl was extremely proud of her achievement.

'Ha!' she said proudly. 'It's a pity Yennefer can't see this!'

She began to march jauntily and vigorously, striding quickly and confidently, choosing where to step in the flickering and indistinct chiaroscuro cast by the sphere. As she walked, she tried to recall other spells, but none of them seemed suitable or useful in this situation. Furthermore, some of them were very draining, and she was a little afraid of them, not wanting to use them without an obvious need. Unfortunately, she did not know any which would have been able to create water or food. She knew spells like that existed, but didn't know how to cast any of them.

The hitherto lifeless desert came to life in the light of her magical sphere. Ungainly, glossy beetles and hairy spiders scuttled away to

avoid being stepped on. A small reddish-yellow scorpion, pulling its segmented tail behind it, scurried swiftly across her path, disappearing into a crack in the rocks. A long-tailed, green lizard, rustling over the stones, vanished into the gloom. Rodents resembling large mice ran nimbly away from her, leaping high on their hind legs. Several times she saw eyes reflected in the dark, and once she heard a bloodcurdling hiss issuing from a pile of rocks. If she'd had thoughts of catching something edible, the hissing completely discouraged her from groping around among the rocks. She began to watch her step more cautiously, and in her mind's eye she saw the illustrations she had studied in Kaer Morhen. Giant scorpions. Scarletias. Frighteners. Wights. Lamias. Crab spiders. Desertd-welling monsters. She walked on, looking around more timidly and listening out intently, gripping the hilt of her dagger in her sweaty palm.

After several hours, the shining sphere grew faint and the circle of light it was casting shrank and became vague. Ciri, beginning to find it hard to concentrate, uttered the spell again. For a few seconds, the ball pulsated more brightly but soon after darkened and faded once more. The effort made her dizzy. Then she staggered and black and red spots danced in front of her eyes. She sat down hard, crunching the grit and loose stones beneath her.

The sphere finally went out completely. Ciri did not try any more spells; the exhaustion, emptiness and lack of energy she felt inside precluded any chance of success.

A vague glow arose on the horizon, far ahead of her. *I've gone the wrong way*, she realised in horror. *I've muddled everything . . . I was heading towards the west at first, and now the sun's going to rise directly in front of me, which means . . .*

She felt overwhelming fatigue and sleepiness, which not even the bitter cold could frighten away. *I won't fall asleep*, she decided. *I can't fall asleep . . . I just cannot . . .*

She was woken by fierce cold and growing brightness, and brought back to her senses by the gut-wrenching pain in her belly and the dry, nagging, burning sensation in her throat. She tried to stand up. She couldn't. Her stiff, painful limbs failed her. Groping around her with her hands, she felt moisture under her fingers.

'Water . . .' she croaked. 'Water!'

Shaking all over, she got up onto her hands and knees and then lowered her mouth to the basalt slabs, frantically using her tongue to collect the drops which had gathered on the smooth rock and

sucking up the moisture from hollows in the boulder's uneven surface. There was almost half a handful of dew in one of them, which she lapped up with sand and grit, not daring to spit. She looked around.

Carefully, so as not to waste even the tiniest quantity, she used her tongue to gather the glistening drops hanging on the thorns of a stunted shrub, which had mysteriously managed to grow between the rocks. Her dagger was lying on the ground. She could not remember drawing it. The blade was lustreless from a thin layer of dew. She scrupulously and precisely licked the cold metal.

Overcoming the pain which made her whole body stiffen, she crawled on, searching out the moisture on other rocks. But the golden disc of the sun had already burst above the rocky horizon, flooding the desert with blinding, yellow light and instantly drying them. Ciri joyfully greeted the burgeoning warmth, although she was aware that soon she would be mercilessly scorched and longing for the cool of the night again.

She turned away from the glaring orb. The sun was shining in the east. But she had to head towards the west. She had to.

The rapidly intensifying heat soon became unbearable. By noon, it had exhausted her so much that, whether she liked it or not, she had to change her route in order to look for shade. She finally found some protection: a large boulder, shaped like a mushroom. She crawled under it.

And then she saw something lying among the rocks. It was the jade casket which had contained hand ointment but was now licked clean.

She couldn't find the strength inside to cry.

*

Hunger and thirst overcame her exhaustion and resignation. Staggering, she set off once more. The sun still beat down.

Far away on the horizon, beyond the shimmering veil of heat, she saw something which might have been a mountain range. An extremely distant mountain range.

After night fell, she expended immense effort on generating the Power, but only managed to conjure up the magical sphere after several attempts, and those tired her out to such a degree she was unable to go on. She had consumed all her energy and failed to cast the warming and relaxing spells in spite of repeated attempts.

Conjuring up the light gave her courage and raised her spirit, but the cold weakened her. The piercing, bitter cold kept her shivering until dawn, as she waited impatiently for the sunrise. She removed her dagger from its sheath and placed it carefully on a rock so that the dew would condense on the metal. She was absolutely exhausted, but the hunger and thirst drove sleep away. She held out until dawn. It was still dark when she began greedily to lick the dew from the blade. When it grew light, she immediately got on all fours in order to search for more moisture in hollows and crevices.

She heard a hiss.

A large colourful lizard sitting on a nearby rocky ledge opened its toothless jaws at her, ruffled its impressive crest, puffed itself up and lashed the rock with its tail. In front of the lizard she saw a tiny, water-filled crevice.

At first Ciri retreated in horror, but she was quickly seized by desperation and savage fury. Groping around with her trembling hands, she grabbed an angular piece of rock.

'It's my water!' she howled. 'It's mine!'

She hurled the rock. And missed. The lizard jumped on its long-clawed feet and disappeared nimbly into a rocky labyrinth. Ciri flattened herself against the abandoned rock and sucked the rest of the water from the cleft. And then she saw it.

Beyond the rock, in a circular depression, lay seven eggs, all partly protruding from the reddish sand. The girl wasted no time. She fell onto the nest on her knees, seized one of the eggs and sank her teeth into it. The leathery shell burst and collapsed in her hand, the sticky gunk running into her sleeve. Ciri sucked the egg empty and licked her arm. She had difficulty swallowing and couldn't taste anything at all.

She ate every egg and remained on her hands and knees, sticky, dirty, covered in sand, with yolk stuck in her teeth, feverishly digging around in the sand and emitting inhuman, sobbing noises. She froze.

Sit up straight, princess! Don't rest your elbows on the table! Be careful how you serve yourself from the dish! You're dirtying the lace on your sleeves! Wipe your mouth with a napkin and stop slurping! By the gods, has no one ever taught that girl any table manners? Cirilla!

Ciri burst into tears, her head resting on her knees.

She endured the march until noon, when the heat defeated her and

forced her to rest. She dozed for a long time, hidden in the shade beneath a rocky shelf. It wasn't cool in the shade, but it was better than the scorching sun. Eventually her thirst and hunger frightened sleep away again.

The distant range of mountains seemed to be on fire and sparkling in the sun's rays. *There might be snow lying on those mountain peaks,* she thought. *There might be ice. There might be streams. I have to get there. I have to get there fast.*

She walked for almost the entire night. She decided to navigate using the night sky. The whole sky was bedecked in stars and Ciri regretted not paying attention during lessons; not wanting to study the atlases of the constellations in the temple library. Naturally enough, she knew the most important of them: the Seven Goats, the Jug, the Sickle, the Dragon and the Winter Maiden, but those were hanging high in the sky, and would have been difficult to navigate by. She finally managed to select one bright star from the twinkling throng, which she thought was indicating the right direction. She didn't know what it was called, so she christened it herself. She named it the Eye.

*

She walked. The mountain range she was heading towards did not get the slightest bit closer; it was still as far away as it had been the previous day. But it pointed the way.

As she walked, she looked around intently. She found another lizard's nest, containing four eggs. She spotted a green plant, no longer than her little finger, which had miraculously managed to grow between the rocks. She tracked down a large brown beetle. And a thin-legged spider.

She ate everything.

At noon, she vomited up everything she had eaten and then fainted. When she came to, she found a patch of shade and lay, curled up in a ball, her hands clutching her painful belly.

She began to march again at sunset. She moved painfully stiffly. She fell down again and again but got up each time and continued walking.

She kept walking. She had to keep walking.

Evening. Rest. Night. The Eye showed her the way. Marching until she reached the point of utter exhaustion, which came well before sunrise. Rest. Fitful sleep. Hunger. Cold. The absence of magical

energy; a disaster when she tried to conjure up light and warmth. Her thirst only intensified by licking the dew from the dagger's blade and the rocks in the early hours.

When the sun rose she fell asleep in the growing warmth. She was woken by the searing heat. She stood up and continued on her way.

She fainted after less than an hour's march. When she came to the sun was at its zenith, and the heat was unbearable. She didn't have the strength to look for shade. She didn't have the strength to get to her feet. But she did.

She walked on. She didn't give in. She walked for almost the entire following day, and part of the night.

Once again, she slept through the worst of the heat, curled up in a ball beneath a sloping boulder which was partly buried in the sand. Her sleep had been fitful and exhausting; she had dreamed of water. Water which could be drunk. Huge, white waterfalls framed in haze and rainbows. Gurgling streams. Small forest springs shaded by ferns with their roots in the water. Palace fountains smelling of wet marble. Mossy wells and full buckets spilling over . . . drops of water falling from melting icicles . . . Water. Cold, refreshing water, cold enough to make your teeth sting, but with such a wonderful, incomparable taste . . .

She awoke, leapt to her feet and began to walk back the way she had come. She turned around, staggering and falling. She had to go back! She had passed water on the way! She had passed a stream, gushing amongst the rocks! How could she be so foolish!

She came to her senses.

The heat subsided; evening was approaching. The setting sun indicated the way west. The mountains. The sun could not be – could not possibly be – at her back. Ciri chased away the visions and choked back her sobs. She turned around and began to march.

She walked the entire night, but very slowly. She did not get far. She was dropping off to sleep as she walked, dreaming of water. The rising sun found her sitting on a rock, staring at the dagger's blade and her naked forearm.

Blood is a liquid, after all. It can be drunk.

She drove away the hallucinations and nightmares. She licked the dew-covered dagger and began to walk.

She fainted. She came around, seared by the sun and the baking

stones.

Before her, beyond a shimmering heat haze, she saw the jagged, serrated mountain range.

Closer. Significantly closer.

But she had no more strength. She sat up.

The dagger in her hand reflected the sunlight and burnt hot. It was sharp. She knew that.

Why do you torture yourself? said the calm, pedantic voice of the enchantress, Tissaia de Vries. *Why do you condemn yourself to suffering? It's time you put an end to it!*

No. I won't give in.

You will not endure this. Do you know how you die from thirst? Any moment now you will lose your mind, and then it will be too late. Then you won't be able to end it all.

No. I won't give in. I will *endure it.*

She sheathed the dagger. She stood up, staggered and fell down. She stood up again, staggered and began to march.

Above her, high in the yellow sky, she saw a vulture.

When she came to again, she couldn't remember having fallen. She couldn't remember how long she had been lying there. She looked up at the sky. Two more vultures had joined the first one wheeling above her. She didn't have enough strength to get up.

She realised this was the end. She accepted it calmly. Almost with relief.

Something touched her.

It nudged her gently and cautiously on the shoulder. After such a long period of solitude, after so long surrounded by lifeless, motionless rocks, the touch made her jerk up, in spite of her exhaustion. It made her attempt to jump to her feet. Whatever had touched her snorted and sprang back, stamping its feet noisily.

Ciri sat up with difficulty, rubbing the encrusted corners of her eyes with her knuckles.

I've gone mad, she thought.

Several paces in front of her stood a horse. She blinked. It wasn't an illusion. It really was a horse. A young horse, not much more than a foal.

She was now fully awake. She licked her cracked lips and cleared her throat involuntarily. The horse jumped and ran some distance away, its hooves grating over the loose stones. It moved very strangely, and its coat was also unusual – neither dun nor grey. Perhaps the effect was just an illusion, created by the sunlight shining behind it.

The horse snorted and took a few steps towards her. Now she could see it better. Well enough to notice, in addition to its uncharacteristic coat colour, the strange peculiarities in its build: the small head, the extremely slender neck, the very thin pasterns and the long, thick tail. The horse stood and looked at her, holding its muzzle in profile. Ciri let out a quiet sigh.

A horn, at least two spans long, protruded from the horse's domed forehead.

An impossible impossibility, thought Ciri, coming to her senses and gathering her thoughts. *There are no unicorns in the world; they've died out. There wasn't even a unicorn in the witcher's tome in Kaer Morhen! I've only read about them in* The Book of Myths *in the temple . . . Oh, and there was an illustration of a unicorn in that* Physiologus *I looked through in Mr Giancardi's bank . . . But the unicorn in that illustration was more like a goat than a horse. It had shaggy fetlocks and a goat's beard, and its horn must have been two ells long . . .*

She was astonished that she could remember everything so well; incidents that seemed to have happened hundreds of years before. Suddenly her head spun and pain twisted her insides. She groaned and curled up in a ball. The unicorn snorted and took a step towards her, then stopped and raised its head high. Ciri suddenly recalled what the books had said about unicorns.

'Please come closer . . .' she croaked, trying to sit up. 'You may, because I am . . .'

The unicorn snorted, leapt backwards and galloped away, waving its tail vigorously. But after a moment it stopped, tossed its head, pawed the ground with a hoof and whinnied loudly.

'That's not true!' she whined in despair. 'Jarre only kissed me once and that doesn't count! Come back!'

The effort of speaking blurred her vision and she slumped down onto the rock. When she finally managed to raise her head, the unicorn was once more close by. Looking at her inquisitively, it lowered its head and snorted softly.

'Don't be afraid of me . . .' she whispered. 'You don't have to . . .

You can see I'm dying . . .'

The unicorn neighed, shaking its head. Ciri fainted.

When she awoke again she was alone. Aching, stiff, thirsty, hungry, and all alone. The unicorn had been a mirage, an illusion, a dream. And had vanished like a dream. She understood that, accepted it, but still felt regret and despair as though the creature really had existed, had been with her and had abandoned her. Just like everyone had abandoned her.

She tried to stand but could not. She rested her face on the rocks. Very slowly, she reached to one side and felt the hilt of her dagger.

Blood is a liquid. I have to drink.

She heard the clatter of hooves and a snorting.

'You've come back . . .' she whispered, raising her head. 'Have you really come back?'

The unicorn snorted loudly. She saw its hooves, close by. Right beside her. They were wet. They were literally dripping with water.

Hope gave her strength, filled her with euphoria. The unicorn led and Ciri followed him, still not certain if she was in a dream. When exhaustion overcame her she fell to all fours. And then crawled.

The unicorn led her among some rocks to a shallow ravine with a sandy bottom. Ciri used the last of her strength to crawl, but she kept going. Because the sand was wet.

The unicorn stopped above a hollow which was visible in the sand, whinnied and pawed powerfully with his hoof; once, twice, three times. She understood. She crawled closer, helping him. She burrowed, breaking her fingernails, digging, pushing the sand aside. She may have sobbed as she did so, but she wasn't certain. When a muddy liquid appeared at the bottom of the hollow, she pressed her mouth to it at once, lapping up the water muddy with sand, so voraciously that the liquid disappeared. It took immense effort for Ciri to control herself. She used the dagger to dig deeper, then sat up and waited. She felt the sand crunching between her teeth and trembled with impatience, but waited until the hollow filled with water again. And then she drank. She drank long.

The third time, she let the water settle somewhat and then drank about four sand-free, sludgy mouthfuls. And then she remembered the unicorn.

'You must be thirsty too, little horse,' she said. 'But you can't drink mud. No horse ever drank mud.'

The unicorn neighed.

Ciri deepened the hollow, reinforcing the sides with stones.

‘Wait, little horse. Let it settle a little . . .’

‘Little Horse’ snorted, stamped his hooves and turned his head away.

‘Don’t be cross. Drink.’

The unicorn cautiously brought its muzzle towards the water.

‘Drink, Little Horse. It isn’t a dream. It’s real water.’

At first Ciri tarried, not wanting to move away from the spring. She had just invented a new way of drinking by pressing a handkerchief she had soaked in the deepened hollow to her mouth, which allowed her to filter out most of the sand and mud. But the unicorn kept insisting; neighing, stamping, running away and returning again. He was calling her to start walking and was indicating the way. After long consideration, Ciri did as he suggested. The animal was right. It was time to go, to go towards the mountains, to get out of the desert. She set off after the unicorn, looking around and making a precise mental note of the spring’s location. She didn’t want to lose her way, should she ever have to return there.

They travelled together throughout the day. The unicorn, who now answered to Little Horse, led the way. He was a strange little horse. He bit and chewed dry stalks which no normal horse or even a starving goat would have touched. And when he caught a column of large ants wandering among the rocks, he began to eat them too. At first Ciri looked on in astonishment, but then joined in the feast herself. She was hungry.

The ants were dreadfully sour, but possibly because of that they didn’t make her nauseous. Aside from that, the ants were in plentiful supply and she was able to get her stiff jaws moving again. The unicorn ate the ants whole while she contented herself with their abdomens, spitting out hard pieces of their chitinous carapaces.

They went on. The unicorn discovered several clumps of yellowed thistles and ate them with relish. This time Ciri did not join him. But when Little Horse found some lizard’s eggs in the sand, she ate and he watched her. They continued on their way. Ciri noticed a clump of thistles and pointed them out to Little Horse. After a while, Little Horse drew her attention to a huge, black scorpion with a long tail, which must have measured a span and a half. Ciri

trampled the hideous creature. Seeing that she was not interested in eating the scorpion, the unicorn ate it himself, and soon after pointed out another lizard's nest.

It was, it turned out, quite an effective collaboration.

They walked on.

The mountain range was getting closer and closer.

When it was very dark, the unicorn stopped. He slept standing up. Ciri, who was familiar with horses, initially tried to persuade him to lie down; she would have been able to sleep lying on him and benefit from his warmth. But it came to nothing. Little Horse grew cross and walked away, remaining aloof. He refused to behave in the classical way, as described in the learned books; he clearly did not have the slightest intention of resting his head in her lap. Ciri was full of doubts. She even wondered if the books were lying about unicorns and virgins, but there was also another possibility. The unicorn was clearly a foal and, as a young animal, may not have known anything about virgins. She rejected the possibility of Little Horse being able to sense, or take seriously, those few strange dreams she had once had. Who would ever take dreams seriously?

He was somewhat of a disappointment to her. They had been wandering for two days and nights, but he had not found any more water, even though he had been searching for it. Several times he stopped, twisted his head, moved his horn around, and then trotted off, rummaging in rocky clefts or rooting about in the sand with his hooves. He found ants and he found ants' eggs and larvae. He found a lizard's nest. He found a colourful snake, which he deftly trampled to death. But he did not find any water.

Ciri noticed that the unicorn roamed around; he didn't keep to a straight course. She came to the reasonable conclusion that the creature did not live in the desert at all. He had strayed there. Just as she had.

*

The ants, which they were beginning to find in abundance, contained some sour juice, but Ciri began to think more and more seriously about returning to the spring. Should they go even further and not find any water, her strength might not hold out. The heat was still terrible and the march exhausting.

She was just about to explain as much to Little Horse when he suddenly gave a long-drawn-out neigh, waved his tail and galloped off between some jagged rocks. Ciri followed him, eating ants'

bodies as she walked.

The considerable expanse between the rocks was occupied by a wide sandy hollow. There was a distinct dip in the centre.

'Ha!' said Ciri, pleased. 'You're a clever pony, Little Horse. You've found another spring. There's got to be water in there!'

The unicorn gave a long snort, circling the hollow at a gentle trot. Ciri came closer. The hollow was large; at least twenty feet wide. It described a precise, regular circle resembling a funnel, as regular as if someone had pressed a gigantic egg into the sand. Ciri suddenly realised that such a regular shape could not have come about by accident. But by then it was too late.

Something moved at the bottom of the crater and Ciri was hit in the face by a sudden shower of sand and small stones. She leapt back, lost her balance and realised she was sliding downwards. The fountains of stones that were shooting out weren't only hitting her – they were also striking the edges of the pit, and the edges were crumbling in waves and sliding towards the bottom. She screamed and floundered like a drowning swimmer, vainly trying to find a foothold. She realised immediately that sudden movements only worsened her situation, making the sand subside more quickly. She turned over on her back, dug in with her heels, and spread her arms out wide. The sand at the bottom shifted and undulated, and she saw some brown, hooked pincers, at least a yard long, emerging from it. She screamed again, this time much louder.

The hail of stones suddenly stopped raining down on her, flying instead towards the opposite edge of the pit. The unicorn reared, neighing frenziedly, and the edge collapsed beneath him. He tried to struggle free from the shifting sand, but in vain; he was getting more and more bogged down and slipping more and more quickly towards the bottom. The dreadful pincers snapped violently. The unicorn neighed in despair, and thrashed around, helplessly striking the slipping sand with his forehooves. His back legs were completely stuck. When he had slid to the very bottom of the pit, he was caught by the horrible pincers of the creature which was concealed in the centre.

Hearing a frenzied wail of agony, Ciri screamed and charged downwards, wresting her dagger from its sheath. When she reached the bottom, she realised her mistake. The monster was hidden deep, and the dagger thrusts didn't even touch it through the layers of sand. On top of that the unicorn, held fast in the monstrous pincers and being dragged into the sandy trap, was frantic with pain and

squealing, blindly pounding away with its forehooves and risking fracturing its limbs.

Witcher dances and tricks were useless here. But there was one quite simple spell. Ciri summoned the Power and struck using telekinesis.

A cloud of sand flew up into the air, uncovering the hidden monster, which had latched itself onto the squealing unicorn's thigh. Ciri yelled in horror. She had never seen anything so revolting in her entire life; not in illustrations, nor in any witcher books. She would have been incapable of imagining anything so hideous.

The monster was a dirty grey colour, plump and pot-bellied like a blood-gorged louse, and the narrow segments of its barrel-shaped torso were covered with sparse bristles. It appeared not to have any legs, but its pincers were almost the same length as its entire body.

Deprived of its sandy refuge the creature immediately released the unicorn and began to bury itself with a rapid, urgent wriggling of its bloated body. It performed this manoeuvre extremely ably, and the unicorn, struggling to escape from the trap, helped it by pushing mounds of sand downwards. Ciri was seized by fury and the lust for revenge. She threw herself at the monstrosity, now barely visible beneath the sand, and thrust her dagger into its domed back.

She attacked it from behind, prudently keeping away from the snapping pincers, which, it transpired, the monster was able to extend quite far backwards. She stabbed again, and the creature continued to bury itself at astonishing speed. But it was not burying itself in the sand to escape. It was doing so to attack. It only had to wriggle twice more in order to cover itself completely. Once hidden, it violently propelled out waves of stones, burying Ciri up to mid-thigh. She struggled to free herself and lunged backwards, but there was nowhere to escape; she was still in a crater of loose sand, where each movement pulled her downwards. The sand at the bottom bulged in a wave, which glided towards her, and from the wave emerged the clashing, cruelly hooked pincers.

She was rescued by Little Horse. Slipping down to the bottom of the crater, he used his hooves to strike the bulge of sand which betrayed the presence of the monster hidden just beneath the surface. The savage kicks uncovered the grey back and the unicorn lowered its head and stabbed the monster with its horn, striking at the precise point where the head, with its flailing pincers, was

attached to the potbellied thorax. Seeing that the pincers of the monster, now pinned against the ground, were helplessly raking the sand, Ciri leapt forward and thrust the dagger deep into its wriggling body. She jerked the blade out and struck again. And again. The unicorn shook its horn free and drove its forehooves down powerfully onto the barrel-shaped body.

The trampled monster was no longer trying to bury itself. It had stopped moving entirely. A greenish liquid darkened the sand around it.

They climbed out of the crater with great difficulty. Ciri ran a few paces away and collapsed on the sand, breathing heavily and shaking under the waves of adrenaline which were assaulting her larynx and temples. The unicorn walked in circles around her. He was moving awkwardly. Blood dripped from the wound on his thigh, and ran down his leg onto his fetlock, leaving a red trail as he walked. Ciri got up onto her hands and knees and was violently sick. After a moment she stood up, swayed, and then staggered over to the unicorn, but Little Horse wouldn't let her touch him. He ran away, lay down and rolled on the ground. Then he cleaned his horn, stabbing it into the sand several times.

Ciri also cleaned and wiped the blade of her dagger, still glancing anxiously at the nearby crater. The unicorn stood up, whinnied and then walked over to her.

'I'd like to look at your wound, Little Horse.'

Little Horse neighed and shook his horned head.

'It's up to you. If you can walk, we'll set off. We'd better not stay here.'

Soon after, another vast sandbar appeared in their way, dotted all over with pits, which were hollowed out in the sand almost to the edge of the surrounding rocks. Ciri looked at them in horror; some of the craters were at least twice as big as the one in which they had fought for their lives.

They weren't brave enough to cross the sandbar by weaving their way between the craters. Ciri was convinced they were traps for careless creatures, and the monsters with the pincers lurking in them were only dangerous to the victims that fell in. By being cautious and staying away from the hollows, one could conceivably cut across the sandy ground without fear that one of the monsters would emerge and pursue them. She was sure there was no risk, but she preferred not to find out. The unicorn was clearly of the same

opinion; he snorted and ran off, drawing her away from the sandbar. They made their journey longer by giving the dangerous terrain a wide berth, sticking close to the rocks and the hard, stony ground, through which none of the beasts would have been capable of digging.

As she walked, Ciri never took her eyes off the pits. Several times, she saw fountains of sand shooting up from the deadly traps; the monsters were deepening and repairing their lairs. Some of the craters were so close to each other that the stones flung out by one monster ended up in other craters, disturbing the creatures hidden at the bottom, and then a terrible cannonade would begin, with sand whizzing and blasting around like hail.

Ciri wondered what the sand monsters ate in this arid, desolate wilderness. She didn't have to wait long to find out; a dark object flew out of one of the nearby pits in a wide arc, falling close to them with a thump. After a moment's hesitation, she ran down onto the sand from the rocks. The object that had flown out of the crater was a rodent, resembling a rabbit. At least it looked like rabbit fur. For the body was shrunken; as hard and dry as a bone and as light and hollow as a pea pod. There wasn't a drop of blood in it. Ciri shuddered; now she knew what the monsters preyed on.

The unicorn neighed a warning. Ciri looked up. There was no crater in the near vicinity, and the sand was flat and smooth. And then, before her eyes, the smooth, flat sand suddenly bulged and the bulge began to glide quickly towards her. She threw the shrivelled carcass down and hurried back to the rocks.

The decision to steer clear of the sandbar turned out to have been very sensible.

They went on, skirting around even the smallest patches of sand, treading only on rocky ground.

The unicorn walked slowly, limping. The cuts on his thigh continued to bleed. But he still refused to allow her to approach him and examine the wound.

The sandbar narrowed considerably and began to meander. The fine, loose sand was replaced by coarse grit and then larger stones. They had not seen any pits for a long time now, so they decided to follow the path marked out by the remains of the sandbar. Ciri, although once again wearied by thirst and hunger, began to walk faster. There was hope. The rocky shoal was not what it seemed. It was actually the bed of a river with its source in the mountains. There was no water in the river, but it led to some springs which,

although they were too small and produced too little water to fill the watercourse, were large enough to drink from.

She walked more quickly but then had to slow down because the unicorn could not keep pace with her. He was walking with visible difficulty, limping, dragging his leg, and planting his hoof awkwardly. When evening came, he lay down. He didn't get up when she approached him. This time he let her examine the wound.

There were two cuts, one on each side of his extremely swollen, angrily red thigh. Both cuts were inflamed, both were still bleeding and a sticky, foul-smelling pus was dripping along with the blood.

The monster had been venomous.

The next day it was even worse. The unicorn could barely walk. In the evening, he lay down on the rocks and refused to get up. When she knelt down beside him, he swung his head and horn towards the wounded thigh and neighed. There was suffering in the neighing.

The pus oozed more and more intensively and the smell was repulsive. Ciri took out her dagger. The unicorn whinnied shrilly, tried to stand and then collapsed rump first on the stone.

'I don't know what to do . . .' she sobbed, looking at the blade. 'I really don't know . . . I'm sure I should cut open the wound and squeeze out the pus and the venom . . . But I don't know how. I might harm you even more.'

The unicorn tried to lift its head. It neighed. Ciri sat down on the rocks, clutching her head in her hands.

'They didn't teach me how to tend wounds,' she said bitterly. 'They taught me how to kill, telling me that's how I could save people. It was one big lie, Little Horse. They deceived me.'

Night was falling and it was quickly becoming dark. The unicorn was lying down, and Ciri was thinking frantically. She had collected some thistles and dry stalks, which grew in abundance on the banks of the dried-up riverbed, but Little Horse didn't want to eat them. He laid his head lifelessly on the rocks, no longer trying to lift it. All he could do was blink. Froth appeared on his muzzle.

'I can't help you, Little Horse,' she said in a stifled voice. 'I don't have anything . . .'

Except magic.

I'm an enchantress.

She stood up and held out a hand. Nothing happened. She needed a great deal of magical energy, but there wasn't a trace of any here. She hadn't expected that. It astonished her.

But wait, there are water veins everywhere!

She took a few paces, first in one direction and then in the other. She began to walk around in a circle. She stepped backwards.

Nothing.

'You damned desert!' she shouted, shaking her fists. 'There's nothing in you! No water and no magic! And magic was supposed to be everywhere! That was a lie too! Everybody deceived me, everybody!'

The unicorn neighed.

Magic is everywhere. It's in water, in the earth, in the air . . .

And in fire.

Ciri slammed her fist angrily against her forehead. It hadn't occurred to her earlier perhaps because, among the bare rocks, there hadn't even been anything to burn. But now she had a supply of dry thistles and stalks, and in order to create a tiny spark she ought only to need the tiny amount of energy she could still feel inside . . .

She gathered more sticks, arranged them in a heap and piled dry thistles around them. She cautiously put her hand in.

'Aenye!'

The pile of sticks glowed brightly, a flame flickered, then flared up, set the leaves on fire, consumed them and shot upwards. Ciri threw on more dry stalks.

What now? she thought, looking at the flame coming back to life. *Now to gather the energy. But how? Yennefer has forbidden me from touching fire energy . . . But I don't have a choice! Or any time! I have to act now; the sticks and leaves are burning fast . . . the fire will go out . . . Fire . . . how beautiful it is, how warm . . .*

She didn't know when or how it happened. As she stared at the flames she suddenly felt a pounding in her temples. She clutched her breast, feeling as though her ribcage would burst. A pain throbbed in her belly, her crotch and her nipples, which instantly transformed into horrifying pleasure. She stood up. No, she didn't stand up. She floated up.

The Power filled her like molten lead. The stars in the sky danced

like stars reflected on the surface of a pond. The Eye, burning in the west, exploded with light. She took that light and with it the Force.

'Hael, Aenye!'

The unicorn neighed in a frenzy and tried to spring up, pushing with its forehooves. Ciri's arm rose automatically, her hand formed a gesture involuntarily, and her mouth shouted out the spell of its own accord. Bright, undulating light streamed from her fingers. The fire roared with great flames.

The waves of light streaming from her hand touched the unicorn's injured thigh, converging and penetrating.

'I wish you to be healed! That is my wish! Vess'hael, Aenye!'

The Power exploded inside her and she was filled with a wild euphoria. The fire shot upwards, and everything became bright around her. The unicorn raised his head, neighed and then suddenly leapt up from the ground, taking a few awkward paces. He bent his neck, swung his head towards his thigh, quivered his nostrils and snorted as if in disbelief. He neighed loud and long, kicked his hooves, swished his tail and galloped around the fire.

'I've healed you!' cried Ciri proudly. 'I've healed you! I'm a sorceress! I managed to draw the power from the fire! And I have that power! I can do anything I want!'

She turned away. The blazing fire roared, shooting sparks.

'We don't have to look for any more springs! We don't have to drink scooped-up mud any longer! I have the power now! I feel the power that's in this fire! I'll make rain fall on this accursed desert! I'll make it gush from the rocks! I'll make flowers grow here! Grass! Cabbages! I can do anything now! Anything!'

She lifted both arms, screaming out spells and chanting invocations. She didn't understand them, didn't remember when she had learnt them – or even if she'd *ever* learnt them. That was unimportant. She felt power, felt strength, was burning with fire. She was the fire. She trembled with the power that had pervaded her.

The night sky was suddenly riven by a slash of lightning. A wind whipped up among the rocks and thistles. The unicorn gave a long neigh and reared up. The fire roared upwards, exploding. The sticks and stems had charred long before; now the rock itself was afire. But Ciri paid no attention to it. She felt power. She saw only the fire. She heard only the fire.

You can do anything, whispered the flames. *You are in possession of our power. You can do anything. The world is at your feet. You are great. You are mighty.*

There was a figure among the flames. A tall, young woman with long, straight, coal-black hair. The woman smiled, wildly, cruelly, and the fire writhed and danced around her.

You are mighty! Those that harmed you did not know who they had challenged! Avenge yourself! Make them pay! Make them all pay! Let them tremble with fear at your feet, teeth chattering, not daring to look you in the face! Let them beg for mercy but do not grant it to them! Make them pay! Make them pay for everything! Revenge!

Behind the black-haired woman there was fire and smoke and, in the smoke, rows of gallows, rows of sharpened stakes, scaffolds, mountains of corpses. They were the corpses of Nilfgaardians, of those who had captured and plundered Cintra and killed King Eist and her grandmother Calanthe, of those who had murdered people in the streets of the city. A knight in black armour swung on a gibbet. The noose creaked and crows fought each other to peck at his eyes through his winged helmet's visor. Other gibbets stretched away towards the horizon, and on them hung Scoia'tael, those who killed Paulie Dahlberg in Kaedwen, and those who'd pursued Ciri on the Isle of Thanedd. The sorcerer Vilgefortz danced on a towering stake, his beautiful, fraudulently noble face contorted and blue-black with suffering. The sharpened, bloodstained point of the stake protruded from his collarbone . . . Other sorcerers from Thanedd were kneeling on the ground, their hands tied behind their backs and sharpened stakes awaiting them . . .

Stakes piled high with bundles of firewood rose up all the way to the burning horizon, marked by ribbons of smoke. Chained to the nearest stake was . . . Triss Merigold. Beyond her was Margarita Laux-Antille . . . Mother Nenneke . . . Jarre . . . Fabio Sachs . . .

No. No. No.

Yes, screamed the black-haired woman. *Death to them all! Take your revenge on all of them. Despise them! They all harmed you or wanted to harm you! Or perhaps they will want to harm you in the future! Hold them in contempt, for at last the time of contempt is here! Contempt, revenge and death! Death to the entire world! Death, destruction and blood!*

There is blood on your hand, blood on your dress . . .

They betrayed you! Tricked you! Harmed you! Now you have the

power, so take revenge!

Yennefer's mouth was cut and torn, pouring blood; her hands and feet were shackled, fastened to the wet, dirty walls of a dungeon by heavy chains. The mob around the scaffold shrieked, the poet Dandelion laid his head on the block, the blade of the executioner's axe flashed above him. The street urchins crowded beneath the scaffold unfolded a kerchief to be spattered with blood . . . The screaming of the mob drowned out the noise of the blow, so powerful it made the scaffold shudder . . .

They betrayed you! They deceived and tricked you! To them you were a pawn, just a puppet on a stick! They used you! They condemned you to hunger, to the burning sun, to thirst, to misery and to loneliness! The time of contempt and revenge is come! You have the power! You are mighty! Let the whole world cower before thee! Let the whole world cower before the Elder Blood!

Now the witchers were being led onto the scaffold: Yesemir, Eskel, Coen, Lambert. And Geralt . . . Geralt was staggering, covered in blood . . .

'*No!*'

Fire surrounded her, and beyond the wall of flames was a furious neighing. Unicorns were rearing, shaking their heads and dashing their hooves against the ground. Their manes were like tattered battle flags, their horns were as long and sharp as swords. The unicorns were huge, as huge as warhorses, much bigger than her Little Horse. *Where had they come from? Where had so many of them come from?* The flame shot upwards with a roar. The black-haired woman raised her hands, and they were covered in blood. The heat billowed her hair.

Let it burn, Falka, let it all burn!

'Go away! Be gone! I don't want you! I don't want your power!

Let it burn, Falka, let it burn!

'I don't want to!'

You do! You desire this! Desire and lust seethe in you like a flame! The pleasure is enslaving you! It is might! It is force! It is power! The most delicious of the world's pleasures!

Lightning. Thunder. Wind. The thudding of hooves and the neighing of unicorns galloping with abandon around the fire.

'I don't want that power! I don't want it! I relinquish it!'

She didn't know if the fire had gone out or if her eyes had clouded over as she slumped to the ground, feeling the first drops of rain on her face.

The being should be divested of its beingness. It cannot be allowed to exist. The being is dangerous. Confirmation?

Negative. The being did not summon the Power for itself. It did it to save Ihuarraquax. The being feels sympathy. Thanks to the being, Ihuarraquax is once more among us.

But the being has the Power. Should it wish to make use of it . . .

It will not be able to use it. Never. It relinquished it. It relinquished the Power. Utterly. The Power disappeared. It is most curious . . .

We will never understand these beings.

We do not need to understand them! We will remove existence from the being. Before it is too late. Confirmation?

Negative. Let us leave this place. Let us leave the being. Let us leave it to its fate.

She did not know how long she lay on the rocks, trembling, staring at the changing colours of the sky. It was by turns dark and light, cold and hot, and she lay powerless, dried out like that dead rodent's carcass sucked dry and thrown from the crater.

She did not think about anything. She was alone. She was empty. Now she had nothing and she felt nothing inside. There was no thirst, hunger, fatigue or fear. Everything had vanished, even the will to survive. She was one great, cold, dreadful void. She felt that void with all her being, with every cell of her body.

She felt blood on her inner thighs. She did not care. She was empty. She had lost everything.

The colour of the sky was changing. She did not move. Was there any point in moving in such a void?

She did not move when hooves thudded around her, when horseshoes clanged. She did not react to the loud cries and calls, to the excited voices, to the horses' snorts. She did not move when hard, powerful hands seized her. When she was lifted, she drooped limply. She did not react to the jerking or the shaking, to the harsh, aggressive questions. She did not understand them and did not want to understand.

She was empty and indifferent. She reacted indifferently to water being splashed on her face. When a canteen was put to her mouth,

she did not choke. She drank. Indifferently.

Neither did she care later. She was hauled up onto a saddle. Her crotch was tender and painful. She was shivering so she was wrapped in a blanket. She was numb and limp, on the verge of fainting, so she was fastened by a belt to the rider sitting behind her. The rider stank of sweat and urine. She did not care.

There were riders all around. Many riders. Ciri looked at them indifferently. She was empty. She had lost everything. Nothing mattered any longer.

Nothing.

Not even the fact that the knight in command of the riders wore a helmet decorated with the wings of a raptor.

CHAPTER SEVEN

When the fire was lit at the foot of the criminal's pyre and the flames began to engulf her, she began to hurl abuse at the knights, barons, sorcerers and lord councillors gathered in the square; using such words that terror seized them all. Although at first only damp logs were placed on the pyre, in order that the she-devil would not perish quickly and would know the full agony of fire, now came the order to throw on more dry sticks and put an end to the torture as quickly as possible. However, a veritable demon had entered the accursed one; for although she was already sizzling well, she uttered no cries of anguish, but instead began to hurl even more awful abuse. 'An avenger will be born of my blood,' she cried. 'From my tainted Elder Blood will be born the avenger of the nations and of the world! He will avenge my torment! Death, death and vengeance to all of you and your kin!' Only this much was she able to cry out before the flame consumed her. Thus perished Falka; such was her punishment for spilling innocent blood.

Roderick de Novembre, *The History of the World,*
Volume II

'Look at her. Sunburnt and covered in cuts. She's an outcast. She's drinking like a fish and is as ravenous as a wolf. She came out of the east, I tell you. She crossed Korath. She crossed the Frying Pan.'

'Rubbish! No one survives the Frying Pan. She's come out of the

west, down from the mountains, along the course of the Suchak. She barely touched the edge of Korath and that was enough for her. We found her lying in a heap on the ground, almost lifeless.'

'The desert also drags on for miles to the west. So where did she walk from?'

'She didn't walk, she'd been riding. Who knows how far? There were hoof prints by her. Her horse must have thrown her in the Suchak valley, and that's why she's battered and bruised.'

'Why is she so important to Nilfgaard, I wonder? When the prefect sent us off on that search party, I thought some important noblewoman had gone missing. But her? An ordinary slummock, a shabby drudge, and dazed and mute to boot. I really don't know, Skomlik, if we've found the one we're after . . .'

'That's 'er. But ordinary she is not. Had she been ordinary, we'd have found her dead.'

'It was a close thing. There's no doubt the rain saved her. The oldest grandfathers can't recall rain in the Frying Pan, dammit. Clouds always pass by Korath . . . Even when it rains in the valleys, not a single drop falls there!'

'Look at her wolfing down that food. It's as if she'd had nothing in her gob for a week . . . Hey, you, slut! Like that pork fat? And that dry bread?'

'Ask her in Elven. Or in Nilfgaardian. She doesn't understand Common Speech. She's some kind of elven spawn . . .'

'She's a simpleton, not right in the head. When I lifted her onto the horse this morning, it was like holding a wooden doll.'

'Don't you have eyes?' asked the powerful, balding one they called Skomlik, baring his teeth. 'What kind of Trappers are you, if you haven't rumbled her yet? She's neither stupid, nor simple. She's pretending. She's a strange and cunning little bird.'

'So why's she so important to Nilfgaard? They've promised a reward. There are patrols rushing around all over the place . . . Why?'

'That I don't know. Though it might be an idea to ask her . . . A whip across the back might encourage her . . . Ha! Did you mark how she looked at me? She understands everything, she's listening carefully. Hey, wench! I'm Skomlik, a hunter. Also called a Trapper. And this, look here, is a whip. Also called a knout! Want to keep the skin on your back? Then let's hear it—'

‘Enough! Silence!’

A loud, stern order, tolerating no opposition, came from another campfire, where a knight and his squire were sitting.

‘Getting bored, Trappers?’ asked the knight menacingly. ‘Then get down to some work. The horses need grooming. My armour and weapons need cleaning. Go to the forest for wood. And do not touch the girl! Do you understand, you churls?’

‘Indeed, noble Sir Sweers,’ muttered Skomlik. His comrades looked sheepish.

‘To work! Carry out my orders!’

The Trappers made themselves busy.

‘Fate has really punished us with that arsehole,’ muttered one of them. ‘Oh, that the prefect put us under the command of that fucking knight—’

‘Full of himself,’ muttered another quietly, glancing around stealthily. ‘And, after all, it was us Trappers what found the girl . . . We had the hunch to ride into the Suchak valley.’

‘Right enough. We deserve the credit, but His Lordship will take the bounty. We’ll barely see a groat . . . They’ll toss us a florin. “There you go, be grateful for your lord’s generosity, Trapper”.’

‘Shut your traps,’ hissed Skomlik. ‘He might hear you . . .’

Ciri found herself alone by the fire. The knight and squire looked at her inquisitively, but said nothing.

The knight was a middle-aged but still robust man with a scarred face. When riding, he wore a helmet with birds’ wings, but they were not the wings Ciri had first seen in her nightmares and later on the Isle of Thanedd. He was not the Black Knight of Cintra. But he was a Nilfgaardian knight. When he issued orders, he spoke the Common Speech fluently, but with a marked accent, similar to that of the Elves. However, he spoke with his squire (a boy not much older than Ciri) in a language resembling the Elder Speech, but harder and less melodious. It had to be Nilfgaardian. Ciri, who spoke the Elder Speech well, understood most of the words. But she didn’t let on that she understood. The Nilfgaardian knight and his squire had peppered her with questions during the first stop, at the edge of the desert known as the Frying Pan or Korath. She hadn’t answered then, because she had been indifferent and stupefied. Befuddled. A few days into the ride, when they had left the rocky ravines and rode down into green valleys, Ciri had already fully

recovered her faculties. At last she began to notice the world around her and react to it, albeit apathetically. But she continued to ignore questions, so the knight stopped speaking to her at all. He appeared not to pay her any attention. Only the ruffians – the ones calling themselves Trappers – took an interest in her. And they also tried to question her. Aggressively.

But the Nilfgaardian in the winged helmet swiftly took them to task. It was clear who was the master and who was the servant.

Ciri pretended to be a simple mute, but she listened intently. She slowly began to understand her situation. She had fallen into Nilfgaard's hands. Nilfgaard had hunted her and found her, no doubt having located the route the chaotic portal in Tor Lara had transported her along. The winged knight and the Trappers had achieved what neither Yennefer nor Geralt had been able to do.

What had happened to Yennefer and Geralt on Thanedd? Where was she? She feared the worst. The Trappers and their leader, Skomlik, spoke a simple, slovenly version of the Common Speech, but without a Nilfgaardian accent. The Trappers were ordinary men, but were serving the knight from Nilfgaard. They were looking forward to the thought of the bounty the prefect would pay them for finding Ciri. In florins.

The only countries which used florins and where the people served Nilfgaardians were the Provinces in the far south, administered by imperial prefects.

The following day, during a stop by the bank of a stream, Ciri began to consider her chances of escaping. Magic might help her. She cautiously tried the most simple spell, a mild telekinesis. But her fears were confirmed. She didn't have even a trace of magical energy. Having foolishly played with fire, her magical abilities had deserted her utterly.

She became indifferent once more. To everything. She became withdrawn and sank into apathy, where she remained for a long while.

Until the day the Blue Knight blocked their path across the moorland.

'Oh dear, oh dear,' muttered Skomlik, looking at the horsemen barring their way. 'This means trouble. They're Varnhagens from the stronghold in Sarda . . .'

The horsemen came closer. At their head, on a powerful grey, rode a giant of a man in a glittering blue, enamelled suit of armour.

Close behind him rode a second armoured horseman, while two more in simple, dun costumes – clearly servants – brought up the rear.

The Nilfgaardian in the winged helmet rode out to meet them, reining in his bay in a dancing trot. His squire fingered the hilt of his sword and turned around in the saddle.

‘Stay back and guard the girl,’ he barked to Skomlik and his Trappers. ‘And don’t interfere!’

‘I ain’t that stupid,’ said Skomlik softly, as soon as the squire had ridden away. ‘I ain’t so stupid as to interfere in a feud between the lords of Nilfgaard . . .’

‘Will there be a fight, Skomlik?’

‘Bound to be. There’s an ancestral vendetta and blood feud between the Sweers and the Varnhagens. Dismount. Guard the wench, because she’s our best asset and our profit. If we’re lucky, we’ll get the entire bounty that’s on her head.’

‘The Varnhagens are sure to be hunting the girl too. If they overcome us, they’ll take her from us . . . And there’s only four of us . . .’

‘Five,’ said Skomlik, flashing his teeth. ‘One of the camp followers from Sarda is a mucker of mine, if I’m not mistaken. You’ll see; the benefits from this ruckus will come to us, not to Their Lordships . . .’

The knight in the blue armour reined in his grey. The winged knight came to a halt facing him. The Blue Knight’s companion trotted up and stopped behind him. His strange helmet was decorated with two straps of leather hanging from the visor, resembling two long whiskers or walrus tusks. Across his saddle, Two Tusks held a menacing-looking weapon somewhat resembling the spontoons carried by the guardsmen from Cintra, but with a considerably shorter shaft and a longer blade.

The Blue Knight and the Winged Knight exchanged a few words. Ciri could not make out what they were saying, but their tone left her in no doubt. They were not words of friendship. The Blue Knight suddenly sat up straight in the saddle, pointed fiercely at Ciri, and said something loudly and angrily. In answer, the Winged Knight cried out just as angrily and shook his fist in his armoured glove, clearly sending the Blue Knight on his way.

And then it began.

The Blue Knight dug his spurs into his grey and charged forward, yanking his battleaxe from a holder by his saddle. The Winged Knight spurred on his bay, pulling his sword from its scabbard. Before the armoured knights came together in battle, however, Two Tusks attacked, urging his horse into a gallop with the shaft of his spontoon. The Winged Knight's squire leapt on him, drawing his sword, but Two Tusks rose up in the saddle and thrust the spontoon straight into the squire's chest. The long blade penetrated his gorget and hauberk with a crack, the squire groaned loudly and thudded to the ground, grasping the spontoon, which was thrust in as far as the crossguard.

The Blue Knight and the Winged Knight collided with a crash and a thud. The battleaxe was more lethal but the sword was quicker. The Blue Knight was hit in the shoulder and a piece of his enamelled spaulder flew off to one side, spinning, its strap flapping behind it. The knight shuddered in the saddle and streaks of crimson glistened on the blue armour. The impact pushed the warriors apart. The Winged Nilfgaardian turned his bay back, but then Two Tusks fell upon him, raising his sword to strike two-handed. The Winged Knight tugged at his reins and Two Tusks, steering his horse with his legs, galloped past. The Winged Knight managed to strike him in passing, however. Ciri saw the metal plate of the rerebrace deform and blood spurt out from beneath the metal.

The Blue Knight was already coming back, swinging his battleaxe and screaming. The two knights exchanged thundering blows at full tilt and then drew apart. Two Tusks fell on the Winged Knight once more; their horses collided and their swords clanged. Two Tusks slashed the Winged Knight, destroying his rerebrace and rondel. The Winged Knight straightened up and struck a powerful blow from the right into the side of Two Tusk's breastplate. Two Tusks swayed in the saddle. The Winged Knight stood in his stirrups and struck another mighty blow, between the dented and cloven pauldron and the helmet. The blade of the broad sword cut into the metal with a clang and became caught. Two Tusks tensed up and shuddered. The horses came together, stamping their hooves and gnashing their teeth on their bits. The Winged Knight braced himself against his pommel and pulled his sword out of Two Tusks's body. Two Tusks toppled from his saddle and crashed under the horses' hooves. The sound of horseshoes striking and twisting armour rang out as he was trampled by his own mount.

The Blue Knight turned his grey and attacked, lifting his

battleaxe. The wound to his hand impeded his efforts to control his horse. The Winged Knight noticed this and stole up deftly from the right, standing in his stirrups to deliver a terrible blow. The Blue Knight caught the blow on his battleaxe and knocked the sword out of the Winged Knight's hand. The horses crashed together once more. The Blue Knight was immensely strong; the heavy axe in his hand rose and fell like a twig. A blow thudded on the Winged Knight's armour, making the bay sit down on its haunches. The Winged Knight swayed, but remained in the saddle. Before the battleaxe had time to fall again, he released the reins and twisted his left hand, seizing a heavy angular mace hanging from a leather sword knot, and hit the Blue Knight savagely on the helmet. The helmet rang like a bell and now it was the turn of the Blue Knight to sway in his saddle. The horses squealed, trying to bite each other and not wanting to separate.

The Blue Knight, although clearly dazed by the blow from the mace, managed to strike again with his battleaxe, hitting his opponent in the breastplate with a thud. It seemed an absolute miracle that they were both able to stay in the saddle, but it was simply owing to their high pommels and cantles. Blood dripped down the sides of both horses; particularly conspicuous on the grey's light coat. Ciri looked on in horror. She had been taught to fight in Kaer Morhen, but she could not imagine how she could have faced either of those two strongmen. Or parry even one of their powerful blows.

The Blue Knight seized the helve of the battleaxe, which was plunged deeply into the Winged Knight's breastplate, in both hands. He bent forward and heaved, trying to push his opponent out of the saddle. The Winged Knight struck him hard with the mace; once, twice, three times. Blood spurted from the peak of the helmet, splashing onto the blue armour and the grey's neck. The Winged Knight spurred his bay away, the impetus of the horse wrenching the axe's blade from his breastplate. The Blue Knight, swaying in the saddle, released the helve. The Winged Knight transferred the mace to his right hand, rode up, and struck with a vicious blow, shoving the Blue Knight's head against his horse's neck. Taking the reins of the grey in his free hand, the Nilfgaardian struck again with his mace. The blue suit of armour rang like a cast-iron pot and blood gushed from the misshapen helmet. One more blow and the Blue Knight fell head first under the grey's hooves. The grey trotted away, but the Winged Knight's bay, evidently specially trained, trampled the fallen knight with a clatter. The Blue Knight was still alive, evidenced by his desperate cries of pain. The bay continued

to trample him with such force that the wounded Winged Knight could not stay in the saddle and fell alongside him with a thud.

‘They’ve finished each other off, dammit,’ grunted the Trapper who was holding Ciri.

‘Noble knights. The plague and the pox on them all,’ spat another.

The Blue Knight’s servants were watching from a distance. One of them wheeled his horse around.

‘Stop right there, Remiz!’ yelled Skomlik. ‘Where are you going? To Sarda? In a hurry to get to the gallows?’

The servants came to a halt. One of them looked over, shielding his eyes with his hand.

‘Is that you, Skomlik?’

‘Yes, it is! Get over here, Remiz, don’t worry! Knightly spats aren’t our business!’

Ciri had suddenly had enough of inaction. She nimbly tore herself free from the Trapper holding her, set off at a run, caught hold of the Blue Knight’s grey, and with one leap was in the saddle with the high pommel.

She might have managed her escape had not the servants from Sarda been mounted and on fresh horses. They caught up with her without difficulty and snatched the reins from her. She jumped off and sprinted towards the forest, but the horsemen caught her once again. One of them seized her by the hair in full flight, then pulled and dragged her behind him. Ciri screamed, hanging from his arm. The horseman threw her down at Skomlik’s feet. The knout swished, and Ciri howled and curled up in a ball, protecting her head with her hands. The whip swished again, cutting into the backs of her hands. She rolled away, but Skomlik jumped after her, kicked her, and then pinned her down with his boot.

‘Trying to escape, you viper?’

The knout swished. Ciri howled. Skomlik kicked her again and lashed her with the knout.

‘Stop hitting me!’ she screamed, cowering.

‘So you can talk, bitch! Cat let go of your tongue? I’ll teach you —’

‘Control yourself, Skomlik!’ shouted one of the Trappers. ‘Do you want to beat the life out of her or what? She’s worth too much to waste!’

‘Bloody hell,’ said Remiz, dismounting. ‘Is she the one Nilfgaard’s spent a week searching for?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Ha! All the garrisons are hunting for her. She’s some kind of important personage to Nilfgaard. They say a mighty sorceror divined that she must be somewhere in the area. That’s what they were saying in Sarda, at least. Where did you find her?’

‘In the Frying Pan.’

‘That’s not possible!’

‘It is, it is,’ said Skomlik angrily, frowning. ‘We’ve got her and the reward’s ours. Why are you standing around like statues? Bind the little bird and get her up in the saddle! Let’s scram, boys! Look lively!’

‘I think the Honourable Sweers,’ said one of the Trappers, ‘is still breathing . . .’

‘But not for long. Curse him! We’re riding straight to Amarillo, boys. To the prefect. We’ll deliver the wench to him and pick up the bounty.’

‘To Amarillo?’ Remiz scratched the back of his head, and looked at the scene of the recent fight. ‘And right into the hangman’s hands? What will you tell the prefect? That the knights battered each other to death and you’re all in one piece? When the whole story comes out the prefect will have you hanged, and send us back to Sarda under guard . . . And then the Varnhagens will take the bounty. You might want to head for Amarillo, but I’d rather disappear into the forest . . .’

‘You’re my brother-in-law, Remiz,’ said Skomlik. ‘And even though you’re a son of a bitch for beating my sister you’re still a mate. So I’ll save your skin. We’re going to Amarillo, I said. The prefect knows there’s a feud between the Sweers and the Varnhagens. They met and did each other in. That’s normal for them. What could we have done? And we – heed my words – found the wench afterwards. We did, the Trappers. You’re a Trapper now, too, Remiz. The prefect hasn’t got a bloody clue how many of us set off with Sweers. He won’t count us up . . .’

‘Haven’t you forgotten something, Skomlik?’ asked Remiz in a slow drawl, looking at the other servant from Sarda.

Skomlik turned around slowly, then as quick as a flash pulled out a knife and thrust it hard into the servant’s throat. The servant

rasped and then collapsed on the ground.

'I don't forget about anything,' said the Trapper coldly. 'We're all in it together. There are no witnesses, and not too many heads to divide the bounty amongst either. To horse, boys, and on to Amarillo! There's a fair distance between us and the bounty, so let's not hang around!'

After leaving a dark, wet, beech forest, they saw a village at the foot of the mountain: a dozen or so thatched cottages inside the ring of a low stockade enclosing a bend in a small river.

The wind carried the scent of smoke. Ciri wiggled her numb fingers, which were fastened by a leather strap to the pommel. She was numb all over; her buttocks ached unbearably and she was being tormented by a full bladder. She'd been in the saddle since daybreak. She had not rested during the night, since she had been forced to sleep with her hands fastened to the wrists of two Trappers lying on either side of her. Each time she moved, the Trappers reacted with curses and threats to beat her.

'It's a village,' said one of them.

'I can see that,' responded Skomlik.

They rode down the slope, their horses' hooves crunching through the tall, dry grass. They soon found themselves on a bumpy track leading straight to the village, towards a wooden bridge and a gate in the stockade.

Skomlik reined back his horse and stood up in his stirrups.

'What village is this? I've never stopped here. Remiz, do you know these parts?'

'Years ago,' said Remiz, 'this village was called White River. But when the unrest began, some locals joined the rebels. Then the Varnhagens of Sarda put it to the torch, murdered the villagers or took them prisoner. Now only Nilfgaardian settlers live here, all newcomers. And the village has been renamed Glyswen. These settlers are fierce, nasty people. I'm telling you, let's not dally. We should ride on.'

'We have to let the horses rest,' protested one of the Trappers, 'and feed them. And my belly's rumbling like I've swallowed a brass band. Why worry about the settlers? They're just rabble. Scum. We'll wave the prefect's order in front of their noses. I mean, the prefect's a Nilfgaardian like them. You watch, they'll bow down before us.'

‘I can just see that,’ growled Skomlik. ‘Has anyone seen a Nilfgaardian bow? Remiz, is there an inn in this ’ere Glyswen?’

‘Yes. The Varnhagens didn’t burn it down.’

Skomlik turned around in the saddle and looked at Ciri.

‘We’ll have to untie her,’ he said. ‘We can’t risk anyone recognising her . . . Give her a mantle. And a hood for her head . . . Hey there! Where you going, you slummock?’

‘I have to go into the bushes—’

‘I’ll give you bushes, you slut! Squat by the track! And mark: don’t breathe a word in the village. Don’t start getting clever! One squeak and I’ll slit your throat. If I don’t get any florins for you, no one’s getting any.’

They approached at a walk, the horses’ hooves thudding on the bridge. Right away, some settlers armed with lances emerged from behind the stockade.

‘They’re guarding the gate,’ muttered Remiz. ‘I wonder why.’

‘Me too,’ Skomlik muttered back, raising himself in his stirrups. ‘They’re guarding the gate, and the stockade’s down by the mill. You could drive a wagon through there . . .’

They rode closer and reined in their horses.

‘Greetings, gentlemen!’ called out Skomlik jovially, but somewhat unnaturally. ‘Good day to you.’

‘Who are you?’ asked the tallest of the settlers brusquely.

‘We, mate, are the army,’ lied Skomlik, leaning back in the saddle. ‘In the service of His Lordlyship, the prefect of Amarillo.’

The settler slid his hand down the shaft of his lance and scowled at Skomlik. He clearly couldn’t recall when he and the Trapper had become mates.

‘His Lordship the prefect sent us here,’ Skomlik continued to lie, ‘to learn how his countrymen, the good people of Glyswen, are faring. His Lordlyship sends his greetings and enquires if the people of Glyswen need any kind of help.’

‘We’re getting by,’ said the settler. Ciri noticed he spoke the Common Speech in a similar way to the Winged Knight, with the same accent, as though he was trying to imitate Skomlik’s lazy speech pattern. ‘We’ve got used to looking after ourselves.’

‘The prefect will be pleased to hear it. Is the inn open? We’re

parched . . .'

'It's open,' said the settler grimly. 'For the moment.'

'For the moment?'

'For the moment. For we'll soon be pulling it down. The rafters and planks will serve us for a granary. The inn's no use to anyone. We toil in the fields and don't visit the inn. The inn only serves travellers, mostly of a sort that aren't to our liking. Some of that kind are drinking there now.'

'Who's that?' asked Remiz, blanching somewhat. 'Not from the stronghold in Sarda, by any chance? Not the Honourable Varnhagens?'

The settler grimaced and moved his lips around, as though intending to spit.

'Unfortunately not. They're the Lords Barons' militiamen. The Nissirs.'

'The Nissirs?' frowned Skomlik. 'Where did they come from? Under whose command?'

'Their commander is tall and black-haired, with whiskers like a catfish.'

'Eh!' Skomlik turned to his companions. 'We're in luck. We only know one like that, don't we? It's sure to be our old comrade "Trust Me" Vercta. Remember him? And what are the Nissirs doing here, mate?'

'The Lords Nissir,' explained the settler grimly, 'are bound for Tyffi. They honoured us with a visit. They're moving a prisoner. They've caught one of those of Rats.'

'Of course they have,' snorted Remiz. 'And why not the Nilfgaardian emperor?'

The settler frowned and tightened his grip on the shaft of his lance. His companions murmured softly.

'Go to the inn, sirs,' said the settler, the muscles in his jaw working, 'and talk to the Lords Nissir, your comrades. You claim to be in the prefect's service, so ask the Lords Nissirs why they're taking the criminal to Tyffi, rather than impaling him on a stake right here, right now, as the prefect ordered. And remind the Lords Nissirs, your comrades, that the prefect is in command here, not the Baron of Tyffi. We already have the oxen yoked up and the stake sharpened. If the Lords Nissirs don't want to, we'll do the necessary.

Tell them that.'

'I'll tell them. Rely on me,' said Skomlik, winking meaningfully at his comrades. 'Farewell, gentlemen.'

They set off at a walk between the cottages. The village appeared deserted; there was not a soul around. An emaciated pig was rooting around by one of the fences and some dirty ducks were splashing around in the mud. A large black tomcat crossed the riders' path.

'Ugh, ugh, bloody cat,' said Remiz, leaning over, spitting and making a sign with his fingers to protect himself from black magic. 'He ran across our path, the son of a bitch!'

'I hope he chokes on a mouse!'

'What was it?' said Skomlik, turning back.

'A cat. As black as pitch. He crossed our path, ugh, ugh.'

'To hell with him,' said Skomlik, looking all around. 'Just look how empty it is. But I saw the people in their cottages, watching. And I saw a lance blade glint in that doorway.'

'They're guarding their womenfolk,' laughed the man who had wished ill on the cat. 'The Nissirs are in the village! Did you hear what that yokel was saying? It's obvious they don't like them.'

'And no wonder. Trust Me and his company never pass up a chance. They'll get what's coming to them one day, those Lords Nissirs. The barons call them "keepers of the peace", and that's what they're paid to do. To keep order and guard the roads. But try whispering "Nissir" near a peasant's ear, and you'll see. He'll shit his pants in fear. But they'll get their comeuppance. They'll slaughter one too many calf, rape one too many wench, and the peasants will tear them apart with their pitchforks. You'll see. Did you notice their fierce expressions by those gates? They're Nilfgaardian settlers. You don't want to mess with them . . . Ah, and here's the inn . . .'

They urged the horses on.

The inn had a slightly sunken, very mossy thatched roof. It stood some distance from the cottages and farm buildings, although it marked the central point of the entire area encircled by the dilapidated stockade; the place where the two roads passing through the village crossed. In the shadow cast by the only large tree in the vicinity were two enclosures; one for cattle and the other for horses. In the latter stood five or six unsaddled horses. On the

steps leading up to the door sat two individuals in leather jerkins and pointed fur hats. They were both nursing earthenware mugs, and between them stood a bowl full of bones picked clean of meat.

'Who are you?' yelled one of them at the sight of Skomlik and his company dismounting. 'What do you want? Be off with you! This inn is occupied by the forces of law and order!'

'Don't holler, Nissir, don't holler,' said Skomlik, pulling Ciri down from the saddle. 'And get that door open, because we want to go inside. Your commander, Vercta, is a friend of ours.'

'I don't know you!'

'Because you're naught but a stripling. Me and Trust Me served together years ago, before Nilfgaard came into power here.'

'Well, if you say so . . .' The fellow hesitated, letting go of his sword hilt. 'You'd better come inside. It's all the same to me . . .'

Skomlik shoved Ciri and another Trapper grabbed her by the collar. They went inside.

It was gloomy and stuffy, and smelled of smoke and baking. The inn was almost empty – only one of the tables was occupied, standing in a stream of light coming through a small window with some kind of animal skin stretched across it. A small group of men were sitting at the table. The innkeeper was bustling around in the background by the fireplace, clinking beer mugs.

'Good cheer to you, Nissirs!' boomed Skomlik.

'We don't shake hands with any old brigands,' growled a member of the company sitting by the window, who then spat on the floor. Another stopped him with a gesture.

'Take it easy,' he said. 'They're mates, don't you recognise them? That's Skomlik and his Trappers. Welcome, welcome!'

Skomlik brightened up and walked towards the table, but stopped on seeing his companions staring at the wooden post holding up the roof timbers. At its base, on a stool, sat a slim, fair-haired youth, strangely erect and stiff. Ciri saw that his unnatural position derived from the fact that his hands were twisted behind him and tied together, and his neck was attached to the post by a leather strap.

'May the pox seize me,' loudly sighed one of the Trappers, the one holding Ciri by the collar, 'Just look, Skomlik. It's Kayleigh!'

'Kayleigh?' Skomlik tilted his head. 'Kayleigh the Rat? Can't be!'

One of the Nissirs sitting at the table, a fat man with hair shorn in

an exotic topknot, gave a throaty laugh.

'Might just be,' he said, licking a spoon. 'It is Kayleigh, in all his foulness. It was worth getting up at daybreak. We're certain to get half a mark of florins of good imperial coin for him.'

'You've nabbed Kayleigh. Well, well,' frowned Skomlik. 'So that Nilfgaardian peasant was telling the truth—'

'Thirty florins, dammit,' sighed Remiz. 'Not a bad sum . . . Is Baron Lutz of Tyffi paying?'

'That's right,' confirmed the other Nissir, black-haired and black-moustached. 'The Honourable Baron Lutz of Tyffi, our lord and benefactor. The Rats robbed his steward on the highway; he was so enraged he offered a bounty. And we, Skomlik, will get it; trust me. Ha, just look, boys, how his nose is out of joint! He doesn't like it that we nabbed the Rat and not him, even though the prefect ordered the gang to be tracked down!'

'Skomlik the Trapper,' said the fat man with the topknot, pointing his spoon at Ciri, 'has also caught something. Do you see, Vercta? Some girl or other.'

'I see,' said the black-moustached man, flashing his teeth. 'What's this, Skomlik? Are you feeling the pinch so much you kidnap children for the ransom? What scruff is this?'

'Mind your own business!'

'Who's touchy?' laughed the one with the topknot. 'We only want to check she's not your daughter.'

'His daughter?' laughed Vercta, the one with the black moustache. 'Chance would be a fine thing. You need balls to sire a daughter.'

The Nissirs roared with laughter.

'Fuck off, you dolts!' yelled Skomlik, puffed up. 'All I'll tell you is this, Vercta. Before Sunday's past you might be surprised to hear who people will be talking about. You and your Rat, or me and my prize. And we'll see who's the more generous: your baron or the imperial prefect of Amarillo!'

'You can kiss my arse,' declared Vercta contemptuously, and went back to slurping his soup. 'You, your prefect, your emperor and the whole of Nilfgaard, trust me. And don't get crabby. I'm well aware Nilfgaard's been hunting some girl for a week, so hard you can't see the road for dust. I know there's a bounty on her. But I don't give a monkey's. I have no intention of serving the Nilfgaardians and I

curse them. I serve Baron Lutz now. I answer to him; no one else.'

'Unlike you,' rasped Skomlik, 'your baron kisses the Nilfgaardian hand and licks Nilfgaardian boots. Which means you don't have to. So it's easy for you to talk.'

'Easy, now,' said the Nissir in a placatory manner. 'That wasn't against you; trust me. It's fine that you found the wench Nilfgaard's searching for, and I'm glad you'll get the reward and not those bloody Nilfgaardians. And you serve the prefect? No one chooses his own master; it's them that chooses, ain't it? Come on, sit down with us, we'll have a drink since we're all here together.'

'Aye, why not,' agreed Skomlik. 'But first give us a bit of twine. I'll tie the wench to the post next to your Rat, all right?'

The Nissirs roared with laughter.

'Look at 'im, the terror of the borderland!' cackled the fat one with the topknot. 'The armed forces of Nilfgaard! Bind 'er up, Skomlik, bind 'er up good and tight. But use an iron chain, because your important captive is likely to break her bonds and smash your face in before she escapes. She looks so dangerous, I'm trembling!'

Even Skomlik's companions snorted with suppressed laughter. The Trapper flushed, twisted his belt, and walked over to the table.

'Just to be sure she won't make a run for it—'

'Do as you bloody want,' interrupted Vercta, breaking bread. 'If you want to talk, sit down and get a round in. And hang the wench up by her feet from the ceiling, if you wish. I couldn't give a shit. It's just bloody funny, Skomlik. Perhaps she *is* an important prisoner to you and your prefect, but to me she's a skinny, frightened kid. Want to tie her up? She can barely stand, never mind escape; trust me. What are you afraid of?'

'I'll tell you what I'm afraid of,' said Skomlik, pursing his lips. 'This is a Nilfgaardian settlement. The settlers didn't exactly greet us with bread and salt, and they said they've already got a stake sharpened for your Rat. And the law's with them, because the prefect issued an edict that any brigands that are caught should be punished on the spot. If you don't give them their prisoner, they're ready to sharpen a stake for you too.'

'Oh dear, oh dear,' said the fat man with the topknot. 'They're only fit to scare birds, the rascals. They'd better not interfere with us, because blood will be spilt.'

'We won't give them the Rat,' added Vercta. 'He's ours and he's

going to Tyffi. And Baron Lutz will put the whole case to rights with the prefect. Let's not waste our breath. Sit you down.'

The Trappers, sliding their sword belts around, were happy to join the Nissirs' table, yelling at the innkeeper and pointing in unison at Skomlik as their sponsor. Skomlik kicked a stool towards the post, yanked Ciri by the arm and pushed her so hard she fell over, banging her shoulder against the knee of the boy who was tied to the post.

'Sit there,' he snarled. 'And don't you dare move, or I'll thrash you like a dog.'

'You louse,' growled the stripling, looking at him through half-closed eyes. 'You fucking . . .'

Ciri didn't know most of the words which erupted from the boy's angry, scowling mouth, but from the change coming over Skomlik's face she realised they must have been extremely filthy and offensive. The Trapper blanched with rage, took a swing, hit the boy in the face, then seized him by his long, fair hair and shoved him, banging the back of his head against the post.

'Hey!' called out Vercta, getting up from the table. 'What's going on over there?'

'I'll knock the mangy Rat's teeth out!' roared Skomlik. 'I'll tear his legs from his arse!'

'Come here and stop your screeching,' said the Nissir, sitting down, draining his mug of beer in a single draught and wiping his moustache. 'You can knock your prisoner around all you like, but hands off ours. And you, Kayleigh, don't play the hero. Sit still and ponder over the scaffold that Baron Lutz is having built. The list of punishments the hangman's going to perform on you is already written, trust me, and measures three ells. Half the town's already placing bets about how far down the list you'll make it. So save your strength, Rat. I'm going to put a small sum on that you won't let me down and you'll hold out at least to castration.'

Kayleigh spat and turned his head away, as much as the strap around his neck would allow. Skomlik hauled up his belt, threw Ciri a baleful glance, sitting perched on the stool, then joined the company at the table, cursing, since all that remained in the jug of beer the innkeeper had brought them were streaks of froth.

'How did you catch Kayleigh?' he asked, indicating to the innkeeper that he wanted to extend the order. 'And alive? Because I can't believe you knocked off the other Rats.'

‘To tell the truth,’ answered Vercta, critically examining what he had just picked from his nose, ‘we were lucky. He was all alone. He’d left the gang and nipped over to New Forge for a night with his girlfriend. The village headman knew we weren’t far away and sent word. We got there before sun-up and collared him in the hay; he didn’t even squeal.’

‘And we all had some sport with his wench,’ cackled the fat one with the topknot. ‘If Kayleigh hadn’t satisfied her that night, there was no harm done. We satisfied her so thoroughly in the morning she couldn’t move her arms or legs!’

‘Well, I tell you, you’re incompetent fools,’ declared Skomlik loudly and derisively. ‘You fucked away a pretty penny, you thickheads. Instead of wasting time on the wench, you ought to have heated up a branding iron and made the Rat tell you where his gang were spending the night. You could’ve had the lot of ’em. Giselher, Reef and the rest. The Varnhagens of Sarda offered twenty florins for Giselher a year ago. And for that whore, what’s her name . . . Mistle, wasn’t it? The prefect would give even more after what she did to his nephew at Druigh, when the Rats fleeced that convoy.’

‘You, Skomlik,’ grimaced Vercta, ‘were either born stupid, or a hard life has driven all the good sense out of your head. There are six of us. Do you expect me to take on the whole gang with six men, or what? And we won’t miss out on the bounty, either. Baron Lutz will warm Kayleigh’s heels in the dungeons. He’ll take his time, trust me. Kayleigh will sing, he’ll betray their hideouts and base, then we’ll go there in force and number, we’ll surround the gang, and pick them out like crayfish from a sack.’

‘Yeah, right. They’ll be waiting for you. They’ll find out you’ve got Kayleigh and lie low in their other hideouts and in the rushes. No, Vercta, you have to stare the truth in the face: you fucked up. You traded the reward for a woman. That’s you all over . . . nothing but fucking on your mind.’

‘You’re the fucker!’ Vercta jumped up from the table. ‘If you’re in such a hurry, go after the Rats with your heroes yourself! But beware, because taking on the Rats, Your Honourable Nilfgaardian Lackeyship, isn’t the same as catching young wenches!’

The Nissirs and Trappers began to trade insults with each other. The innkeeper quickly brought them more beer, snatching the empty jug from the hand of the fat one with the topknot, who was aiming it at Skomlik. The beer quickly took the heat out of the

quarrel, cooled their throats and calmed their tempers.

‘Bring us victuals!’ yelled the fat one to the innkeeper. ‘Scrambled egg and sausage. Beans, bread and cheese!’

‘And beer!’

‘What are you goggling at, Skomlik? We’re in the money today! We fleeced Kayleigh of his horse, his pouch, his trinkets, his sword, his saddle and sheepskin, and we sold everything to the dwarves!’

‘We sold his wench’s red shoes as well. And her beads!’

‘Ho, ho, enough to buy a few rounds, indeed! Glad to hear it!’

‘Why are you so glad? We’ve got beer money, not you. All you can do is wipe the snot from your prisoner’s nose or pluck lice from her! The size of the purse reflects the class of prisoner, ha, ha!’

‘You sons of bitches!’

‘Ha, ha, sit down. I was jesting, shut your trap!’

‘Let’s drink to settle our differences! The drinks are on us!’

‘Where’s that scrambled egg, innkeeper, a plague on you! Quickly!’

‘And bring us that beer!’

Huddled on the stool, Ciri raised her head, meeting Kayleigh’s furious green eyes staring at her from under his tousled fringe of fair hair. A shudder passed through her. Kayleigh’s face, though not unattractive, was evil, very evil. Ciri could see that this boy, although not much older than her, was capable of anything.

‘The gods must have sent you to me,’ whispered the Rat, piercing her with his green stare. ‘Just think. I don’t believe in them, but they sent you. Don’t look around, you little fool. You have to help me . . . Listen carefully, scumbag . . .’

Ciri huddled down even more and lowered her head.

‘Listen,’ hissed Kayleigh, indeed flashing his teeth like a rat. ‘In a moment, when the innkeeper passes, you’ll call him . . . Listen to me, by the devil . . .’

‘No,’ she whispered. ‘They’ll beat me . . .’

Kayleigh’s mouth twisted, and Ciri realised that being beaten by Skomlik was by no means the worst thing she might encounter. Although Skomlik was huge, and Kayleigh thin and bound, she sensed instinctively which of them she ought to fear more.

‘If you help me,’ whispered the Rat, ‘I’ll help you. I’m not alone. I’ve got comrades who don’t abandon a friend in need . . . Get it? And when my comrades arrive, when it all kicks off, I can’t stay tied up to this post. Those scoundrels will carve me up . . . Listen carefully, dammit. I’ll tell you what you’re to do . . .’

Ciri lowered her head even further. Her lips quivered.

The Trappers and the Nissirs were devouring the scrambled eggs, and smacking their lips like wild boars. The innkeeper stirred something in a cauldron and brought another jug of beer and a loaf of rye bread to the table.

‘I’m hungry,’ squeaked Ciri obediently, blanching slightly. The innkeeper stopped, looked at her in a friendly way, and then looked around at the revellers.

‘Can I give her some food, sir?’

‘Bugger off!’ yelled Skomlik indistinctly, flushing and spitting scrambled eggs. ‘Get away from her, you bloody spit-turner, before I wrench your legs off! None of that! And you sit still, you gadabout, or I’ll—’

‘Hey, Skomlik, are you sodding crazy, or what?’ interrupted Vercta, struggling to swallow a slice of bread piled high with onions. ‘Look at him, boys, the skinflint. He stuffs himself on other people’s money, but stints on a young girl. Give her a bowl, innkeeper. I’m paying, and I decide who gets it and who doesn’t. And if anyone doesn’t like it, he may get a smack in his bristly chops.’

Skomlik flushed even more, but said nothing.

‘That’s reminded me,’ added Vercta. ‘We must feed the Rat, so he won’t collapse on the road, or the baron would flay us alive, trust me. The wench can feed him. Hey, innkeeper! Knock up some grub for them! And you, Skomlik, what are you grumbling about? What’s not to your liking?’

‘She needs to be watched,’ said the Trapper, nodding at Ciri, ‘because she’s a strange kind of bird. Were she a normal wench, then Nilfgaard wouldn’t be chasing after her, nor the prefect offering a reward . . .’

‘We can soon find out if she’s ordinary or not,’ chuckled the fat one with the topknot. ‘We just need to look between her legs! How about it, boys? Shall we take her to the barn for a while?’

‘Don’t you dare touch her!’ snapped Skomlik. ‘I won’t allow it!’

‘Oh, really? Like we’re going to ask you!’

‘I’m putting the bounty and my head on the line, to deliver her there in one piece! The prefect of Amarillo—’

‘Fuck your prefect. We’re paying for your drinks and you’re denying us some fun? Hey, Skomlik, don’t be a cheapskate! And you won’t get into trouble, never fear, nor will you miss out on the reward! You’ll deliver her in one piece. A wench isn’t a fish bladder, it doesn’t pop from being squeezed!’

The Nissirs burst into loud chuckles. Skomlik’s companions chimed in. Ciri shuddered, went pale and raised her head. Kayleigh smiled mockingly.

‘Understand now?’ he hissed from his faintly smiling mouth. ‘When they get drunk, they’ll start on you. They’ll rape you. We’re in the same boat. Do what I told you. If I escape, you will too . . .’

‘Grub up!’ called the innkeeper. He didn’t have a Nilfgaardian accent. ‘Come and get it, miss!’

‘A knife,’ whispered Ciri, taking the bowl from him.

‘What?’

‘A knife. And fast.’

‘If it’s not enough, take more!’ said the innkeeper unnaturally, sneaking a glance at the diners and putting more groats into the bowl. ‘Be off with you.’

‘A knife.’

‘Be off or I’ll call them . . . I can’t . . . They’ll burn down the inn.’

‘A knife.’

‘No. I feel sorry for you, missy, but I can’t. I can’t, you have to understand. Go away . . .’

‘No one,’ she said, repeating Kayleigh’s words in a trembling voice, ‘will get out of here alive. A knife. And fast. And when it all starts, get out of here.’

‘Hold the bowl, you clod!’ yelled the innkeeper, turning to shield Ciri with his body. He was pale and his jaws were chattering slightly. ‘Nearer the frying pan.’

She felt the cold touch of a kitchen knife, which he was sliding into her belt, covering the handle with her jacket.

‘Very good,’ hissed Kayleigh. ‘Sit so that you’re covering me. Put the bowl on my lap. Take the spoon in your left hand and the knife

in your right. And cut through the twine. Not there, idiot. Under my elbow, near the post. Be careful, they're watching.'

Ciri's throat went dry. She lowered her head almost to the bowl.

'Feed me and eat yourself.' The green eyes staring from half-closed lids hypnotised her. 'And keep cutting. As if you meant it, little one. If I escape, you will too . . .'

True, thought Ciri, cutting through the twine. The knife smelled of iron and onion, and the blade was worn down from frequent sharpening. *He's right. Do I know where those scoundrels will take me? Do I know what that Nilfgaardian prefect wants from me? Maybe a torturer's waiting for me in Amarillo, or perhaps the wheel, gimlets and pincers. Red-hot irons . . . I won't let them lead me like a lamb to the slaughter. Better to take a chance . . .*

A tree stump came crashing in through the window, taking the frame and broken glass with it. It landed on the table, wreaking havoc among the bowls and mugs. The tree stump was followed by a young woman with close-cropped fair hair in a red doublet and high, shiny boots reaching above the knee. Crouching on the table, she whirled a sword around her head. One of the Nissirs, the slowest, who hadn't managed to get up or jump out of the way, toppled over backwards with the bench, blood spurting from his mutilated throat. The girl rolled nimbly off the table, making room for a boy in a short, embroidered sheepskin jacket to jump in through the window.

'It's the Raaats!!' yelled Vercta, struggling with his sword, which was entangled in his belt.

The fat one with the topknot drew his weapon, jumped towards the girl who was kneeling on the floor, and swung. But the girl, even though she was on her knees, deftly parried the blow, spun away, and the boy in the sheepskin jacket who had jumped in after her slashed the Nissir hard across the temple. The fat man fell to the floor, suddenly as limp as a palliasse.

The inn door was kicked open and two more Rats burst inside. The first was tall and dark, dressed in a studded kaftan and a scarlet headband. He sent two Trappers to opposite corners with swift blows of his sword and then squared off with Vercta. The second, broad-shouldered and fair-haired, ripped open Remiz, Skomlik's brother-in-law, with a sweeping blow. The others rushed to escape, heading for the kitchen door. But the Rats were already entering that way too; a dark-haired girl in fabulously coloured clothes suddenly erupted from the kitchen. She stabbed one of the Trappers

with a rapid thrust, forced back another with a moulinet, and then hacked the innkeeper down before he had time to identify himself.

The inn was full of uproar and the clanging of swords. Ciri hid behind the post.

‘Mistle!’ shouted Kayleigh, tearing apart the partially cut twine and struggling with the strap still binding his neck to the post. ‘Giselher! Reef! Over here!’

The Rats were busy fighting, though, and only Skomlik heard Kayleigh’s cry. The Trapper turned around and prepared to thrust, intending to pin the Rat to the post. Ciri reacted instinctively, like lightning, as she had during the fight with the wyvern in Gors Velen and on Thanedd. All the moves she had learnt in Kaer Morhen happened automatically, almost without her conscious control. She jumped out from behind the post, whirled into a pirouette, fell on Skomlik and struck him powerfully with her hip. She was too small and lightly built to shove the hefty Trapper back, but she was able to disrupt the rhythm of his movement. And draw his attention towards her.

‘You bitch!’

Skomlik took a swing, his sword wailing through the air. Once again, Ciri’s body instinctively made a graceful evasive manoeuvre and the Trapper almost lost his balance, lunging after his thrusting blade. Swearing foully, he struck again, putting all his strength behind the blow. Ciri dodged nimbly, landing surely on her left foot, and whirled into a pirouette in the other direction. Skomlik slashed again, but again was unable to make contact.

Vercta suddenly fell between them, spattering them both with blood. The Trapper stepped back and looked around. He was surrounded by dead bodies. And by the Rats, who were approaching from all sides with drawn swords.

‘Don’t move,’ said the dark one in the red headband, finally releasing Kayleigh. ‘It looks like he really wants to hack that girl to death. I don’t know why. Nor why he hasn’t managed to yet. But let’s give him a chance, seeing as he wants it so much.’

‘Let’s give her a chance too, Giselher,’ said the broad-shouldered one. ‘Let it be a fair fight. Give her some hardware, Iskra.’

Ciri felt the hilt of a sword in her hand. It was a little too heavy for her.

Skomlik panted furiously, and lunged at her, brandishing his

blade in a flashing moulinet. He was slow. Ciri dodged the blows which began raining down on her using quick feints and half turns, without even attempting to parry them. Her sword merely served her as a counterweight for her evasive manoeuvres.

'Incredible,' laughed the girl with the close-cropped hair. 'She's an acrobat!'

'She's fast,' said the colourful girl who had given Ciri the sword. 'Fast as a she-elf. Hey, you, fatty! Perhaps you'd prefer one of us? You're getting no change out of her!'

Skomlik withdrew, looked around, then suddenly leapt forward, trying to stab Ciri with a thrust like a heron seizing its prey. Ciri avoided the thrust with a short feint and spun away. For a second she saw a swollen, pulsating vein on Skomlik's neck. She knew that in that position he wouldn't be able to avoid the blow or parry it. She knew where and how to strike.

But she did not strike.

'That's enough.'

She felt a hand on her shoulder. The girl in the colourful costume shoved her aside, and at the same time two other Rats – the one in the short sheepskin coat and the close-cropped one – pushed Skomlik into the corner of the inn, blocking him in with their swords.

'Enough of this lark,' repeated the flamboyantly dressed girl, turning Ciri towards herself. 'It's going on too long. And you're to blame, miss. You could've killed him, but you didn't. I don't think you'll live long.'

Ciri shuddered, looking into the huge, dark, almond-shaped eyes, seeing the teeth exposed in a smile. Teeth so small they made the smile seem ghoulish. Neither the eyes nor the teeth were human. The colourful girl was an elf.

'Time to run,' said Giselher, the one in the scarlet headband, sharply. He was clearly the leader. 'It's indeed taking too long! Mistle, finish off the bastard.'

The close-cropped girl approached, raising her sword.

'Mercy!' screamed Skomlik, falling on his knees. 'Spare my life! I have young children . . . Very young . . .'

The girl struck savagely, twisting at the hips. Blood splashed the whitewashed wall in a wide, irregular arc of crimson flecks.

‘I can’t stand little children,’ said the close-cropped girl, wiping blood off the fuller with a quick movement of her fingers.

‘Don’t just stand there, Mistle,’ urged the one in the scarlet headband. ‘To horse! We must fly! It’s a Nilfgaardian settlement; we don’t have any friends here!’

The Rats sped out of the inn. Ciri didn’t know what to do, but she didn’t have time to think. Mistle, the close-cropped one, pushed her towards the door.

Outside the inn, among pieces of broken beer mugs and chewed bones, lay the bodies of the Nissirs who had been guarding the entrance. Settlers armed with lances were running up from the village, but at the sight of the Rats bursting out of the inn they disappeared among the cottages.

‘Can you ride?’ yelled Mistle at Ciri.

‘Yes . . .’

‘So let’s go. Grab a horse and ride! There’s a bounty on our heads and this is a Nilfgaardian village! They’re all grabbing bows and spears! Jump on and follow Giselher! Keep to the middle of the track and stay away from the cottages!’

Ciri hurdled a low fence, seized the reins of one of the Trappers’ horses, jumped into the saddle, and slapped the horse on the rump with the flat of the sword, which had never left her hand. She set off at a swift gallop, overtaking Kayleigh and the flamboyant elf they called Iskra. She raced with the Rats towards the mill. She saw a man with a crossbow emerging from behind one of the cottages, aiming at Giselher’s back.

‘Cut him down!’ she heard from behind her. ‘Have him, girl!’

Ciri leaned back in the saddle, forcing the galloping horse to change direction with a tug of the reins and pressure from her heels, and swung her sword. The man with the crossbow turned around at the last moment and she saw his face contorted in terror. Ciri’s arm, which was raised to strike, hesitated for a moment, which was enough for the galloping horse to carry her past him. She heard the clang of the bowstring being released. Her horse squealed, its croup twitched and it reared up. Ciri jumped, wrenching her feet from the stirrups and landed nimbly, dropping into a crouch. Iskra, galloping up, leaned out of the saddle to swing powerfully, and slashed the crossbowman across the back of his head. He fell to his knees, toppled forward and fell headlong into a puddle, splashing mud. The wounded horse neighed and thrashed

around beside him, finally rushing off between the cottages, kicking vigorously.

‘You idiot!’ yelled the she-elf, passing Ciri at full pelt. ‘You bloody idiot!’

‘Jump on!’ screamed Kayleigh, riding over to her. Ciri ran up and seized the outstretched hand. The impetus jerked her, her shoulder joint creaking, but she managed to jump onto the horse and cling to the fair-haired Rat. They galloped off, overtaking Iskra. The elf turned back, pursuing one more crossbowman, who had thrown down his weapon and fled towards some barn doors. Iskra caught him with ease. Ciri turned her head away. She heard the mutilated crossbowman howl briefly and savagely, like an animal.

Mistle caught them up, pulling a saddled riderless horse behind her. She shouted something which Ciri didn’t hear properly, but understood at once. She let go of Kayleigh, jumped onto the ground at full speed, and ran over to the horse, which was dangerously close to some buildings. Mistle threw her the reins, looked around and shouted a warning. Ciri turned around just in time to avoid the treacherous thrust of a spear, dealt by a stocky settler who had appeared from behind a pigsty, with a nimble half turn.

What happened later haunted her dreams for a long time after. She remembered everything, every movement. The half turn which saved her from the spear blade placed her in an ideal position. The spearman was leaning well forward, unable either to jump away or to protect himself with the spear shaft he was holding in both hands. Ciri thrust flat, spinning the opposite way in a half turn. For a moment, she saw a mouth open to scream in a face with the bristle of several days of beard growth. She saw the forehead lengthened by a bald patch, fair-skinned above the line where a cap or hat had protected it from the sun. And then everything she saw was blotted out by a fountain of blood.

She was still holding the horse by the reins, but the horse shied, howling, and thrashed around, knocking her to her knees. Ciri did not release the reins. The wounded man moaned and wheezed, thrashing about convulsively among the straw and muck, and blood spurted from him as though from a stuck pig. She felt her gorge rising.

Right alongside, Iskra reined back her horse. Seizing the reins of the still stamping, riderless horse, she tugged, pulling Ciri – still clutching the reins – up onto her feet.

‘Into the saddle!’ she yelled. ‘Get out of here!’

Ciri fought back nausea and jumped into the saddle. There was blood on the sword, which she was still holding. She struggled to overcome the desire to throw the weapon as far away as she could.

Mistle rushed out from between some cottages, chasing two men. One of them managed to get away, leaping over a fence, but the second, hit by a short thrust, fell to his knees, clutching his head in both hands.

Mistle and Iskra leapt into a gallop, but a moment later pulled up their horses, bracing themselves in their stirrups, because Giselher and the other Rats were returning from near the mill. Behind them rushed a pack of armed settlers, yelling loudly to summon up their courage.

'After us!' yelled Giselher, riding past at full speed. 'After us, Mistle! To the river!'

Mistle, leaning over to one side, tugged on her reins, turned her horse back and galloped after him, clearing some low wattle fences. Ciri pressed her face against her horse's mane and set off after her. Iskra galloped along beside her. The speed blew her beautiful, dark hair around, revealing a small, pointed ear decorated with a filigree earring.

The man wounded by Mistle was still kneeling in the middle of the road, rocking back and forth and holding his bloody head in both hands. Iskra wheeled her horse around, galloped up to him and struck downwards with her sword, powerfully, with all her strength. The wounded man wailed. Ciri saw his severed fingers fly up like woodchips from a chopping block and fall onto the ground like fat, white grubs.

She barely overcame the urge to vomit.

Mistle and Kayleigh waited for them by a gap in the stockade; the rest of the Rats were already far away. The foursome set off in a hard, fast gallop, and hurtled across the river, splashing water which spurted up above the horses' heads. Leaning forward, pressing their cheeks against the horses' manes, they climbed up a sandy slope and then flew across a meadow, purple with lupines. Iskra, riding the fastest horse, took the lead.

They raced into a forest, into damp shade, between the trunks of beeches. They had caught up with Giselher and the others, but they only slowed for a moment. After crossing the forest and reaching moorland, they once again set off at a gallop. Soon Ciri and Kayleigh had been left behind, the Trappers' horses unable to keep

pace with the beautiful, pedigree mounts the Rats were riding. Ciri had an additional difficulty; she could barely reach the big horse's stirrups, and at a gallop was unable to adjust the stirrup leathers. She could ride without stirrups as well as she could with, but knew that in that position she would not be able to endure a gallop for long.

Fortunately, after a few minutes, Giselher slowed the pace and stopped the leading group, letting Ciri and Kayleigh catch up with them. Ciri slowed to a trot. She still couldn't shorten the stirrup leathers, since there were no holes in the straps. Without slowing, she swung her right leg over the pommel and switched to side-saddle.

Mistle, seeing the girl's riding position, burst out laughing.

'Do you see, Giselher? She isn't only an acrobat, she's a circus rider, too! Eh, Kayleigh, where did you happen upon this she-devil?'

Iskra, reining back her beautiful chestnut, skin still dry and raring to gallop on, rode over, pushing against Ciri's dapple grey. The horse neighed and stepped back, tossing its head. Ciri tightened the reins, leaning back in the saddle.

'Do you know the reason you're still alive, you cretin?' snarled the elf, pulling her hair away from her forehead. 'The peasant you so mercifully spared released the trigger too soon, so he hit the horse and not you. Otherwise you'd have a quarrel sticking into your back up to its fletchings! Why do you carry that sword?'

'Leave her alone, Iskra,' said Mistle, stroking the sweaty neck of her mount. 'Giselher, we have to slow down or we'll ride the horses into the ground! I mean, no one's chasing us right now.'

'I want to cross the Velda as quickly as possible,' said Giselher. 'We'll rest on the far bank. Kayleigh, how's your horse?'

'He'll hold out. He's no racehorse, but he's a powerful beast.'

'All right, let's go.'

'Hold on,' said Iskra. 'What about this chit?'

Giselher looked back, straightened his scarlet headband, and rested his gaze on Ciri. His face and its expression somewhat resembled Kayleigh's; the same malevolent grimace, the same narrowed eyes, the thin, protruding lower jaw. He was older than the fair-haired Rat, though, and the bluish shadow on his cheeks was evidence that he was already shaving.

'Yeah, true,' he said brusquely. 'What about you, wench?'

Ciri lowered her head.

'She helped me,' chimed in Kayleigh. 'If it hadn't been for her, that lousy Trapper would have nailed me to the post . . .'

'The villagers saw her escaping with us,' added Mistle. 'She cut one of them down and I doubt he survived. They're settlers from Nilfgaard. If the girl falls into their hands, they'll club her to death. We can't leave her.'

Iskra snorted angrily but Giselher gestured to her to be quiet.

'She can ride with us,' he decided, 'as far as Velda. Then we'll see. Ride your horse normally, maid. If you don't manage to keep up, we won't look back. Understood?'

Ciri nodded eagerly.

'Talk, girl. Who are you? Where are you from? What's your name? Why were you travelling under escort?'

Ciri lowered her head. During the ride she'd had time to try to invent a story. And she had thought up several. But the leader of the Rats didn't look like someone who would believe any of them.

'Right,' pressed Giselher. 'You've been riding with us for a few hours. You're taking breaks with us, but I haven't even heard the sound of your voice. Are you dumb?'

Fire shot upwards in flames amid a shower of sparks, flooding the ruins of the shepherd's cottage in a wave of golden light. As if obedient to Giselher's order, the fire lit up Ciri's face, in order more easily to uncover the lies and insincerity in it. *But I can't tell them the truth*, Ciri thought in desperation. *They're robbers. Brigands. If they find out about the Nilfgaardians, that the Trappers caught me for the bounty, they may want to claim it for themselves. And anyway, the truth is too far-fetched for them to believe.*

'We got you out of the settlement,' continued the gang leader slowly. 'We brought you here, to one of our hideouts. We gave you food. You're sitting at our campfire. So tell us who you are.'

'Leave her be,' said Mistle suddenly. 'When I look at you, Giselher, I see a Nissir, a Trapper or one of those Nilfgaardian sons of bitches. And I feel as if I'm being interrogated, chained to a torturer's bench in a dungeon!'

'Mistle's right,' said the fair-haired boy in the short sheepskin jacket. Ciri shuddered to hear his accent. 'The girl clearly doesn't want to say who she is, and it's her right. I didn't say much when I joined you, either. I didn't want you to know I'd been one of those

Nilfgaardian bastards—'

'Don't talk rubbish, Reef.' Giselher waved a hand. 'It was different with you. And you, Mistle, you're wrong. It's not an interrogation. I want her to say who she is and where she's from. When I find out, I'll point out the way home, and that's all. How can I do that if I don't know . . . ?'

'You don't know anything,' said Mistle, turning to look at him. 'Not even if she has a home. And I'm guessing she doesn't. The Trappers picked her up on the road because she was alone. That's typical of those cowards. If you send her on her way she won't survive in the mountains. She'll be torn apart by wolves or die of hunger.'

'What shall we do with her, then?' asked the broad-shouldered one in an adolescent bass, jabbing a stick at the burning logs. 'Dump her outside some village or other?'

'Excellent idea, Asse,' sneered Mistle. 'Don't you know what peasants are like? They're short of labourers. They'll put her to work grazing cattle, after first injuring one of her legs so she won't be able to run away. At night, she'll be treated as nobody's property; in other words she'll be anybody's. You know how she'll have to pay for her board and lodgings. Then in spring she'll get childbed fever giving birth to somebody's brat in a dirty pigsty.'

'If we leave her a horse and a sword,' drawled Giselher, without taking his eyes off Ciri, 'I wouldn't like to be the peasant who tried to injure her leg. Or tried knocking her up. Did you see the jig she danced in the inn with that Trapper, the one Mistle finished off? He was stabbing at thin air. And she was dancing like it was nothing . . . Ha, it's true, I'm more interested in where she learnt tricks like that than in her name or family. I'd love to know—'

'Tricks won't save her,' suddenly chipped in Iskra, who up until then had been busy sharpening her sword. 'She only knows how to dance. To survive, you have to know how to kill, and she doesn't.'

'I think she does,' grinned Kayleigh. 'When she slashed that guy across the neck, the blood shot up six foot in the air . . .'

'And she almost fainted at the sight of it,' the elf snorted.

'Because she's still a child,' interjected Mistle. 'I think I can guess who she is and where she learnt those tricks. I've seen girls like her before. She's a dancer or an acrobat from some wandering troupe.'

'Since when have we been interested in dancers and acrobats?

Dammit, it's almost midnight and I'm getting sleepy. Enough of this idle chatter. We need a good night's sleep, to be in New Forge by twilight. The village headman there – I don't think you need reminding – shopped Kayleigh to the Nissirs. So the entire village ought to see the night sky glow red. And the girl? She's got a horse, she's got a sword. She earned both of them fairly and squarely. Let's give her a bit of grub and a few pennies. For saving Kayleigh. And then let her go where she wants to. Let her take care of herself . . .'

'Fine,' said Ciri, pursing her lips and standing up. A silence fell, only interrupted by the crackling of the fire. The Rats looked at her curiously, in anticipation.

'Fine,' she repeated, astonished at the strange sound of her own voice. 'I don't need you, I didn't ask for anything . . . And I don't want to stay with you! I'll leave—'

'So you aren't dumb,' said Giselher sombrely. 'Not only can you speak, you're cocky, with it.'

'Look at her eyes,' snorted Iskra. 'Look how she holds her head. She's a raptor! A young falcon!'

'You want to go,' said Kayleigh. 'Where to, if I may ask?'

'What do you care?' screamed Ciri, and her eyes blazed with a green light. 'Do I ask you where you're going? I couldn't care less! And I don't care about you! You're no use to me! I can cope . . . I'll manage! By myself!'

'By yourself?' repeated Mistle, smiling strangely. Ciri fell silent and lowered her head. The Rats also fell silent.

'It's night,' said Giselher finally. 'No one rides at night. And no one rides alone, girl. Anyone who's alone is sure to die. There are blankets and furs over there, by the horses. Take what you need. Nights in the mountains are cold. Why are you goggling your green eyes at me? Prepare yourself a bed and go to sleep. You need to rest.'

After a moment of thought, she did as he said. When she returned, carrying a blanket and a fur wrap, the Rats were no longer sitting around the campfire. They were standing in a semicircle, and the red gleam of the flames was reflected in their eyes.

'We are the Rats of the Marches,' said Giselher proudly. 'We can sniff out booty a mile away. We aren't afraid of traps. And there's nothing we can't bite through. We're the Rats. Come over here,

girl.'

She did as she was told.

'You don't have anything,' added Giselher, handing her a belt set with silver. 'Take this at least.'

'You don't have anyone or anything,' said Mistle, smiling, throwing a green, satin tunic over her shoulders and pressing an embroidered blouse into her hands.

'You don't have anything,' said Kayleigh, and the gift from him was a small stiletto in a sheath sparkling with precious stones. 'You are all alone.'

'You don't have anyone,' Asse repeated after him. Ciri was given an ornamental pendant.

'You don't have any family,' said Reef in his Nilfgaardian accent, handing her a pair of soft, leather gloves. 'You don't have any family or . . .'

'You will always be a stranger,' completed Iskra seemingly carelessly, placing a beret with pheasant's feathers on Ciri's head with a swift and unceremonious movement. 'Always a stranger and always different. What shall we call you, young falcon?'

Ciri looked her in the eyes.

'Gvalch'ca.'

The elf laughed.

'When you finally start speaking, you speak in many languages, Young Falcon! Let it be then. You shall bear a name of the Elder Folk, a name you have chosen for yourself. You will be Falka.'

Falka.

She couldn't sleep. The horses stamped and snorted in the darkness, and the wind soughed in the crowns of the fir trees. The sky sparkled with stars. The Eye, for so many days her faithful guide in the rocky desert, shone brightly. The Eye pointed west, but Ciri was no longer certain if that was the right way. She wasn't certain of anything any longer.

She couldn't fall asleep, although for the first time in many days she felt safe. She was no longer alone. She had made a makeshift bed of branches out of the way, some distance from the Rats, who were sleeping on the fire-warmed clay floor of the ruined shepherd's hut. She was far from them, but felt their closeness and presence. She was not alone.

She heard some quiet steps.

‘Don’t be afraid.’

It was Kayleigh.

‘I won’t tell them Nilfgaard’s looking for you,’ whispered the fair-haired Rat, kneeling down and leaning over her. ‘I won’t tell them about the bounty the prefect of Amarillo has promised for you. You saved my life in the inn. I’ll repay you for it. With something nice. Right now.’

He lay down beside her, slowly and cautiously. Ciri tried to get up, but Kayleigh pressed her down onto her bed with a strong and firm, though not rough, movement. He placed his fingers gently on her mouth. Although he needn’t have. Ciri was paralysed with fear, and she couldn’t have uttered a cry from her tight, painfully dry throat even if she had wanted to. But she didn’t want to. The silence and darkness were better. Safer. More familiar. She was covered in terror and shame. She groaned.

‘Be quite, little one,’ whispered Kayleigh, slowly unlacing her shirt. Slowly, with gentle movements, he slid the material from her shoulders, and pulled the edge of the shirt above her hips. ‘And don’t be afraid. You’ll see how nice it is.’

Ciri shuddered beneath the touch of the dry, hard, rough hand. She lay motionless, stiff and tense, full of an overpowering fear which took her will away, and an overwhelming sense of revulsion, which assailed her temples and cheeks with waves of heat. Kayleigh slipped his left arm beneath her head, pulled her closer to him, trying to dislodge the hand which was tightly gripping the lap of her shirt and vainly trying to pull it downwards. Ciri began to shake.

She sensed a sudden commotion in the surrounding darkness, felt a shaking, and heard the sound of a kick.

‘Mistle, are you insane?’ snarled Kayleigh, lifting himself up a little.

‘Leave her alone, you swine.’

‘Get lost. Go to bed.’

‘Leave her alone, I said.’

‘Am I bothering her, or something? Is she screaming or struggling? I just want to cuddle her to sleep. Don’t interfere.’

‘Get out of here or I’ll cut you.’

Ciri heard the grinding of a knife in a metal sheath.

'I'm serious,' repeated Mistle, looming indistinctly in the dark above them. 'Get lost and join the boys. Right now.'

Kayleigh sat up and swore under his breath. He stood up without a word and walked quickly away.

Ciri felt the tears running down her cheeks, quickly, quicker and quicker, creeping like wriggling worms among the hair by her ears. Mistle lay down beside her, and covered her tenderly with the fur. But she didn't pull the dishevelled shirt down. She left it as it had been. Ciri began to shake again.

'Be still, Falka. It's all right now.'

Mistle was warm, and smelled of resin and smoke. Her hand was smaller than Kayleigh's; more delicate, softer. More pleasant. But its touch stiffened Ciri once more, once more gripped her entire body with fear and revulsion, clenched her jaw and constricted her throat. Mistle lay close to her, cradling her protectively and whispering soothingly, but at the same time, her small hand relentlessly crept like a warm, little snail, calmly, confidently, decisively. Certain of its way and its destination. Ciri felt the iron pincers of revulsion and fear relaxing, releasing their hold; she felt herself slipping from their grip and sinking downwards, downwards, deep, deeper and deeper, into a warm and wet well of resignation and helpless submissiveness. A disgusting and humiliatingly pleasant submissiveness.

She moaned softly, desperately. Mistle's breath scorched her neck. Her moist, velvet lips tickled her shoulder, her collarbone, very slowly sliding lower. Ciri moaned again.

'Quiet, Falcon,' whispered Mistle, gently sliding her arm under her head. 'You won't be alone now. Not any more.'

The next morning, Ciri arose with the dawn. She carefully slipped out from under the fur, without waking Mistle, who was sleeping with parted lips and her forearm covering her eyes. She had goose flesh on her arm. Ciri tenderly covered the girl. After a moment's hesitation, she leaned over and kissed Mistle gently on her close-cropped hair, which stuck up like a brush. She murmured in her sleep. Ciri wiped a tear from her cheek.

She was no longer alone.

The rest of the Rats were also asleep; one of them was snoring, another farted just as loudly. Iskra lay with her arm across

Giselher's chest, her luxuriant hair in disarray. The horses snorted and stamped, and a woodpecker drummed the trunk of a pine with a short series of blows.

Ciri ran down to a stream. She spent a long time washing, trembling from the cold. She washed with violent movements of her shaking hands, trying to wash off what was no longer possible to wash off. Tears ran down her cheeks.

Falka.

The water foamed and soughed on the rocks, and flowed away into the distance; into the fog.

Everything was flowing away into the distance. Into the fog.

Everything.

They were outcasts. They were a strange, mixed bag created by war, misfortune and contempt. War, misfortune and contempt had brought them together and thrown them onto the bank, the way a river in flood throws and deposits drifting, black pieces of wood smoothed by stones onto its banks.

Kayleigh had woken up in smoke, fire and blood, in a plundered stronghold, lying among the corpses of his adoptive parents and siblings. Dragging himself across the corpse-strewn courtyard, he came across Reef. Reef was a soldier from a punitive expedition, which Emperor Emhyr var Emreis had sent to crush the rebellion in Ebbing. He was one of the soldiers who had captured and plundered the stronghold after a two-day siege. Having captured it, Reef's comrades abandoned him, although Reef was still alive. Caring for the wounded was not a custom among the killers of the Nilfgaardian special squads.

At first, Kayleigh planned to finish Reef off. But Kayleigh didn't want to be alone. And Reef, like Kayleigh, was only sixteen years old.

They licked their wounds together. Together they killed and robbed a tax collector, together they gorged themselves on beer in a tavern, and later, as they rode through the village on stolen horses, they scattered the rest of the stolen money all around them, laughing their heads off.

Together, they ran from the Nissirs and Nilfgaardian patrols.

Giselher had deserted from the army. It was probably the army of the lord of Gheso who had allied himself with the insurgents from Ebbing. Probably. Giselher didn't actually know where the press

gang had dragged him to. He had been dead drunk at the time. When he sobered up and received his first thrashing from the drill sergeant, he ran away. At first, he wandered around by himself, but after the Nilfgaardians crushed the insurrectionary confederation the forests were awash with other deserters and fugitives. The fugitives quickly formed up into gangs. Giselher joined one of them.

The gang ransacked and burnt down villages, attacking convoys and transports, and then dwindled away in desperate escapes from the Nilfgaardian cavalry troops. During one of those flights, the gang happened upon some forest elves in a dense forest and met with destruction; met with invisible death, hissing down on them in the form of grey arrows flying from all sides. One of the arrows penetrated Giselher's shoulder and pinned him to a tree. The next morning, the one who pulled the arrow and dressed his wound was Aenyeweddien.

Giselher never found out why the elves had condemned Aenyeweddien to banishment, for what misdeed they had condemned her to death; since it was a death sentence for a free elf to be alone in the narrow strip of no-man's-land dividing the free Elder Folk from the humans. The solitary elf was sure to perish should she fail to find a companion.

Aenyeweddien found a companion. Her name, meaning 'Child of the Fire' in loose translation, was too difficult and too poetic for Giselher. He called her Iskra.

Mistle came from a wealthy, noble family from the city of Thurn in North Maecht. Her father, a vassal of Duke Rudiger, joined the insurrectionary army, was defeated and vanished without trace. When the people of Thurn were escaping from the city at the news of an approaching punitive expedition by the notorious Pacifiers of Gemmera, Mistle's family also fled, but Mistle got lost in the panic-stricken crowd. The elegantly dressed and delicate maiden, who had been carried in a sedan chair from early childhood, was unable to keep pace with the fugitives. After three days of solitary wandering, she fell into the hands of the manhunters who were following the Nilfgaardians. Girls younger than seventeen were in demand. As long as they were untouched. The manhunters didn't touch Mistle, not once they'd checked she really was untouched. Mistle spent the entire night following the examination sobbing.

In the valley of the River Velda, the caravan of manhunters was routed and massacred by a gang of Nilfgaardian marauders. All the manhunters and male captives were killed. Only the girls were spared. The girls didn't know why they had been spared. Their

ignorance did not last long.

Mistle was the only one to survive. She was pulled out of the ditch where she had been thrown naked, covered in bruises, filth, mud and congealed blood, by Asse, the son of the village blacksmith, who had been hunting the Nilfgaardians for three days, insane with the desire for revenge for what the marauders had done to his father, mother and sisters, which he'd had to watch, hidden in a hemp field.

They all met one day during the celebrations of Lammas, the Festival of the Harvest, in one of the villages in Gheso. At the time, war and misery had not especially afflicted the lands on the upper Velda – the villages were celebrating the beginning of the Month of the Sickle traditionally, with a noisy party and dance.

They didn't take long to find each other in the merry crowd. Too much distinguished them. They had too much in common. They were united by their love of gaudy, colourful, fanciful outfits, of stolen trinkets, beautiful horses, and of swords – which they didn't even unfasten when they danced. They stood out because of their arrogance and conceit, overconfidence, mocking truculence and impetuousness.

And their contempt.

They were children of the time of contempt. And they had nothing but contempt for others. For them, only force mattered. Skill at wielding weapons, which they quickly acquired on the high roads. Resoluteness. Swift horses and sharp swords.

And companions. Comrades. Mates. Because the one who is alone will perish; from hunger, from the sword, from the arrow, from makeshift peasant clubs, from the noose, or in flames. The one who is alone will perish; stabbed, beaten or kicked to death, defiled, like a toy passed from hand to hand.

They met at the Festival of the Harvest. Grim, black-haired, lanky Giselher. Thin, long-haired Kayleigh, with his malevolent eyes and mouth set in a hateful grimace. Reef, who still spoke with a Nilfgaardian accent. Tall, long-legged Mistle, with cropped, straw-coloured hair sticking up like a brush. Big-eyed and colourful Iskra, lithe and ethereal in the dance, quick and lethal in a fight, with her narrow lips and small, elven teeth. Broad-shouldered Asse with fair, curly down on his chin.

Giselher became the leader. And they christened themselves the Rats. Someone had called them that and they took a liking to it.

They plundered and murdered, and their cruelty became legendary.

At first the Nilfgaardian prefects ignored them. They were certain that – following the example of other gangs – they would quickly fall victim to the massed ranks of furious peasantry, or that they would destroy or massacre each other themselves when the quantity of loot they collected would make cupidity triumph over criminal solidarity. The prefects were right with respect to other gangs, but were mistaken when it came to the Rats. Because the Rats, the children of contempt, scorned spoils. They attacked, robbed and killed for entertainment, and they handed out the horses, cattle, grain, forage, salt, wood tar and cloth stolen from military transports in the villages. They paid tailors and craftsmen handfuls of gold and silver for the things they loved most of all: weapons, costumes and ornaments. The recipients fed and watered them, put them up and hid them. Even when whipped raw by the Nilfgaardians and Nissirs, they did not betray the Rats' hideouts or favoured routes.

The prefects offered a generous reward; and at the beginning, there were people who were tempted by Nilfgaardian gold. But at night, the informers' cottages were set on fire, and the people escaping from the inferno died on the glittering blades of the spectral riders circling in the smoke. The Rats attacked like rats. Quietly, treacherously, cruelly. The Rats adored killing.

The prefects used methods which had been tried and tested against other gangs; several times they tried to install a traitor among the Rats. Unsuccessfully. The Rats didn't accept anyone. The close-knit and loyal group of six created by the time of contempt didn't want strangers. They despised them.

Until the day a pale-haired, taciturn girl, as agile as an acrobat, appeared. A girl about whom the Rats knew nothing.

Aside from the fact that she was as they had once been; like each one of them. Lonely and full of bitterness, bitterness for what the time of contempt had taken from her.

And in times of contempt anyone who is alone must perish.

Giselher, Kayleigh, Reef, Iskra, Mistle, Asse and Falka. The prefect of Amarillo was inordinately astonished when he learnt that the Rats were now operating as a gang of seven.

'Seven?' said the prefect of Amarillo in astonishment, looking at the soldier in disbelief. 'There were seven of them, not six? Are you

certain?'

'May I live and breathe,' muttered the only soldier to escape the massacre in one piece.

His wish was quite apt; his head and half of his face were swathed in dirty, bloodstained bandages. The prefect, who was no stranger to combat, knew that the sword had struck the soldier from above and from the left – with the very tip of the blade. An accurate blow, precise, demanding expertise and speed, aimed at the right ear and cheek; a place unprotected by either helmet or gorget.

'Speak.'

'We were marching along the bank of the Velda towards Thurn,' the soldier began. 'We had orders to escort one of Chamberlain Evertsen's transports heading south. They attacked us by a ruined bridge, as we were crossing the river. One wagon got bogged down, so we unharnessed the horses from another to haul it out. The rest of the convoy went on and I stayed behind with five men and the bailiff. That's when they jumped us. The bailiff, before they killed him, managed to shout that it was the Rats, and then they were on top of us . . . And put paid to every last man. When I saw what was happening . . .'

'When you saw what was happening,' scowled the prefect, 'you spurred on your horse. But too late to save your skin.'

'That seventh one caught up with me,' said the soldier, lowering his head. 'That seventh one, who I hadn't seen at the beginning. A young girl. Not much more than a kid. I thought the Rats had left her at the back because she was young and inexperienced . . .'

The prefect's guest slipped out of the shadow from where he had been sitting.

'It was a girl?' he asked. 'What did she look like?'

'Just like all the others. Painted and done up like a she-elf, colourful as a parrot, dressed up in baubles, in velvet and brocade, in a hat with feathers—'

'Fair-haired?'

'I think so, sir. When I saw her, I rode hard, thinking I'd at least bring one down to avenge my companions; that I'd repay blood with blood . . . I stole up on her from the right, to make striking easier . . . How she did it, I don't know. But I missed her. As if I was striking an apparition or a wraith . . . I don't know how that she-devil did it. I had my guard up but she struck through it. Right in

the kisser . . . Sire, I was at Sodden, I was at Aldersberg. And now I've got a souvenir for the rest of my life from a tarted-up wench . . .'

'Be thankful you're alive,' grunted the prefect, looking at his guest. 'And be thankful you weren't found carved up by the river crossing. Now you can play the hero. Had you'd legged it without putting up a fight, had you reported the loss of the cargo without that souvenir, you'd soon be hanging from a noose and clicking your heels together! Very well. Dismissed. To the field hospital.'

The soldier left. The prefect turned towards his guest.

'You see for yourself, Honourable Sir Coroner, that military service isn't easy here. There's no rest; our hands are full. You there, in the capital, think all we do in the province is fool around, swill beer, grope wenches and take bribes. No one thinks about sending a few more men or a few more pennies, they just send orders: give us this, do that, find that, get everyone on their feet, dash around from dawn to dusk . . . While my head's splitting from my own troubles. Five or six gangs like the Rats operate around here. True, the Rats are the worst, but not a day goes by—'

'Enough, enough,' said Stefan Skellen, pursing his lips. 'I know what your bellyaching is meant to achieve, Prefect. But you're wasting your time. No one will release you from your orders. Don't count on it. Rats or no Rats, gangs or no gangs, you are to continue with the search. Using all available means, until further notice. That is an imperial order.'

'We've been looking for three weeks,' the prefect said with a grimace. 'Without really knowing who or what we're looking for: an apparition, a ghost or a needle in a haystack. And what's the result? Only that a few men have disappeared without trace, no doubt killed by rebels or brigands. I tell you once more, coroner, if we've not found your girl yet, we'll never find her. Even if someone like her were around here, which I doubt. Unless—'

The prefect broke off and pondered, scowling at the coroner.

'That wench . . . That seventh one riding with the Rats . . .'

Tawny Owl waved a hand dismissively, trying to make his gesture and facial expression appear convincing.

'No, Prefect. Don't expect easy solutions. A decked out half-elf or some other female bandit in brocade is certainly not the girl we're looking for. It definitely isn't her. Continue the search. That's an order.'

The prefect became sullen and looked through the window.

‘And about that gang,’ added Stefan Skellen, the Coroner of Imperator Emhyr, sometimes known as Tawny Owl, in a seemingly indifferent voice, ‘about those Rats, or whatever they’re called . . . Take them to task, Prefect. Order must prevail in the Province. Get to work. Catch them and hang them, without ceremony or fuss. All of them.’

‘That’s easy to say,’ muttered the prefect. ‘But I shall do everything in my power to, please assure the imperator of that. I think, nonetheless, that it would be worth taking that seventh girl with the Rats alive just to be sure—’

‘No,’ interrupted Tawny Owl, making sure not to let his voice betray him. ‘Without exception, hang them all. All seven of them. We don’t want to hear any more about them. Not another word.’

Endnotes

1. The Scoia'tael – commonly known as the Squirrels – are nonhuman guerrillas. Predominantly elves, their ranks also include halflings and dwarves, and they are so named due to their habit of attaching squirrel tails to their caps or clothing. Allied with Nilfgaard, motivated by the racism of men, they fight all humans in the Northern Kingdoms.

2. The lower part of Lydia van Bredevoort's face, as seen in society and her portraits, was actually an illusion. Experiments on a mysterious artefact had left her with burns, and throat and larynx mutations.

Baptism of Fire

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Then the soothsayer spake thus to the witcher: 'This counsel I shall give you: don hobnailed boots and take an iron staff. Walk in your hobnailed boots to the end of the world, tap the road in front of you with the staff, and let your tears fall. Go through fire and water, do not stop, do not look back. And when your boots are worn out, when your iron staff is worn down, when the wind and the sun have dried your eyes such that not a single tear will fall from them, then you will find what you are searching for, what you love, at the end of the world. Perhaps.'

And the witcher walked through fire and water, never looking back. But he took neither hobnailed boots nor a staff. He took only his witcher's sword. He obeyed not the words of the soothsayer. And rightly so, for she was wicked.

Flourens Delannoy, *Tales and Legends*

Chapter One

Birds were chirping loudly in the undergrowth.

The slopes of the ravine were overgrown with a dense, tangled mass of brambles and barberry; a perfect place for nesting and feeding. Not surprisingly, it was teeming with birds. Greenfinches trilled loudly, redpolls and whitethroats twittered, and chaffinches gave out ringing 'vink-vink's every now and then. *The chaffinch's call signals rain*, thought Milva, glancing up at the sky. There were no clouds. *But chaffinches always warn of the rain. We could do with a little rain.*

Such a spot, opposite the mouth of a ravine, was a good place for a hunter, giving a decent chance of a kill – particularly here in Brokilon Forest, which was abundant with game. The dryads, who controlled extensive tracts of the forest, rarely hunted and humans dared to venture into it even less often. Here, a hunter greedy for meat or pelts became the quarry himself. The Brokilon dryads showed no mercy to intruders. Milva had once discovered that for herself.

No, Brokilon was not short of game. Nonetheless, Milva had been waiting in the undergrowth for more than two hours and nothing had crossed her line of sight. She couldn't hunt on the move; the drought which had lasted for more than a month had lined the forest floor with dry brush and leaves, which rustled and crackled at every step. In conditions like these, only standing still and unseen would lead to success, and a prize.

An admiral butterfly alighted on the nock of her bow. Milva didn't shoo it away, but watched it closing and opening its wings. She also looked at her bow, a recent acquisition which she still wasn't tired of admiring. She was a born archer and loved a good weapon. And she was holding the best of the best.

Milva had owned many bows in her life. She had learned to shoot using ordinary ash and yew bows, but soon gave them up for composite reflex bows, of the type elves and dryads used. Elven bows were shorter, lighter and more manageable and, owing to the laminated composition of wood and animal sinew, much 'quicker' than yew bows. An arrow shot with them reached the target much more swiftly and along a flatter arc, which considerably reduced the possibility of its being blown off course. The best examples of such weapons, bent fourfold, bore the elven name of *zefhar*, since the bow's shape formed that rune. Milva had used zefhars for several

years and couldn't imagine a bow capable of outclassing them.

But she had finally come across one. It was, of course, at the Seaside Bazaar in Cidaris, which was renowned for its diverse selection of strange and rare goods brought by sailors from the most distant corners of the world; from anywhere a frigate or galleon could reach. Whenever she could, Milva would visit the bazaar and look at the foreign bows. It was there she bought the bow she'd thought would serve her for many years. She had thought the zefhar from Zerrikania, reinforced with polished antelope horn, was perfect. For just a year. Twelve months later, at the same market stall, owned by the same trader, she had found another rare beauty.

The bow came from the Far North. It measured just over five feet, was made of mahogany, had a perfectly balanced riser and flat, laminated limbs, glued together from alternating layers of fine wood, boiled sinew and whalebone. It differed from the other composite bows in its construction and also in its price; which is what had initially caught Milva's attention. When, however, she picked up the bow and flexed it, she paid the price the trader was asking without hesitation or haggling. Four hundred Novigrad crowns. Naturally, she didn't have such a titanic sum on her; instead she had given up her Zerrikanian zefhar, a bunch of sable pelts, a small, exquisite elven-made medallion, and a coral cameo pendant on a string of river pearls.

But she didn't regret it. Not ever. The bow was incredibly light and, quite simply, perfectly accurate. Although it wasn't long it had an impressive kick to its laminated wood and sinew limbs. Equipped with a silk and hemp bowstring stretched between its precisely curved limbs, it generated fifty-five pounds of force from a twenty-four-inch draw. True enough, there were bows that could generate eighty, but Milva considered that excessive. An arrow shot from her whalebone fifty-fiver covered a distance of two hundred feet in two heartbeats, and at a hundred paces still had enough force to impale a stag, while it would pass right through an unarmoured human. Milva rarely hunted animals larger than red deer or heavily armoured men.

The butterfly flew away. The chaffinches continued to make a racket in the undergrowth. And still nothing crossed her line of sight. Milva leant against the trunk of a pine and began to think back. Simply to kill time.

Her first encounter with the Witcher had taken place in July, two

weeks after the events on the Isle of Thanedd and the outbreak of war in Dol Angra. Milva had returned to Brokilon after a fortnight's absence; she was leading the remains of a Scoia'tael commando defeated in Temeria during an attempt to make their way into war-torn Aedirn. The Squirrels had wanted to join the uprising incited by the elves in Dol Blathanna. They had failed, and would have perished had it not been for Milva. But they'd found her, and refuge in Brokilon.

Immediately on her arrival, she had been informed that Aglaïs needed her urgently in Col Serrai. Milva had been a little taken aback. Aglaïs was the leader of the Brokilon healers, and the deep valley of Col Serrai, with its hot springs and caves, was where healings usually took place.

She responded to the call, convinced it concerned some elf who had been healed and needed her help to re-establish contact with his commando. But when she saw the wounded witcher and learned what it was about, she was absolutely furious. She ran from the cave with her hair streaming behind her and offloaded all her anger on Aglaïs.

'He saw me! He saw my face! Do you understand what danger that puts me in?'

'No, no I don't understand,' replied the healer coldly. 'That is Gwynbleidd, the Witcher, a friend of Brokilon. He has been here for a fortnight, since the new moon. And more time will pass before he will be able to get up and walk normally. He craves tidings from the world; news about those close to him. Only you can supply him with that.'

'Tidings from the world? Have you lost your mind, dryad? Do you know what is happening in the world now, beyond the borders of your tranquil forest? A war is raging in Aedirn! Brugge, Temeria and Redania are reduced to havoc, hell, and much slaughter! Those who instigated the rebellion on Thanedd are being hunted high and low! There are spies and an'givare – informers – everywhere; it's sometimes sufficient to let slip a single word, make a face at the wrong moment, and you'll meet the hangman's red-hot iron in the dungeon! And you want me to creep around spying, asking questions, gathering information? Risking my neck? And for whom? For some half-dead witcher? And who is he to me? My own flesh and blood? You've truly taken leave of your senses, Aglaïs.'

'If you're going to shout,' interrupted the dryad calmly, 'let's go deeper into the forest. He needs peace and quiet.'

Despite herself, Milva looked over at the cave where she had seen the wounded witcher a moment earlier. *A strapping lad*, she had thought, *thin, yet sinewy . . . His hair's white, but his belly's as flat as a young man's; hard times have been his companion, not lard and beer . . .*

'He was on Thanedd,' she stated; she didn't ask. 'He's a rebel.'

'I know not,' said Aglaïs, shrugging. 'He's wounded. He needs help. I'm not interested in the rest.'

Milva was annoyed. The healer was known for her taciturnity. But Milva had already heard excited accounts from dryads in the eastern marches of Brokilon; she already knew the details of the events that had occurred a fortnight earlier. About the chestnut-haired sorceress who had appeared in Brokilon in a burst of magic; about the cripple with a broken arm and leg she had been dragging with her. A cripple who had turned out to be the Witcher, known to the dryads as Gwynbleidd: the White Wolf.

At first, according to the dryads, no one had known what steps to take. The mutilated witcher screamed and fainted by turns, Aglaïs had applied makeshift dressings, the sorceress cursed and wept. Milva did not believe that at all: who has ever seen a sorceress weep? And later the order came from Duén Canell, from the silver-eyed Eithné, the Lady of Brokilon. Send the sorceress away, said the ruler of the Forest of the Dryads. And tend to the Witcher.

And so they did. Milva had seen as much. He was lying in a cave, in a hollow full of water from the magical Brokilon springs. His limbs, which had been held in place using splints and put in traction, were swathed in a thick layer of the healing climbing plant – conynhaela – and turfs of knitbone. His hair was as white as milk. Unusually, he was conscious: anyone being treated with conynhaela normally lay lifeless and raving as the magic spoke through them . . .

'Well?' the healer's emotionless voice tore her from her reverie. 'What is it going to be? What am I to tell him?'

'To go to hell,' snapped Milva, lifting her belt, from which hung a heavy purse and a hunting knife. 'And you can go to hell, too, Aglaïs.'

'As you wish. I shall not compel you.'

'You are right. You will not.'

She went into the forest, among the sparse pines, and didn't look

back. She was angry.

Milva knew about the events which had taken place during the first July new moon on the Isle of Thanedd; the Scoia'tael talked about it endlessly. There had been a rebellion during the Mages' Conclave on the island. Blood had been spilt and heads had rolled. And, as if on a signal, the armies of Nilfgaard had attacked Aedirn and Lyria and the war had begun. And in Temeria, Redania and Kaedwen it was all blamed on the Squirrels. For one thing, because a commando of Scoia'tael had supposedly come to the aid of the rebellious mages on Thanedd. For another, because an elf or possibly half-elf had supposedly stabbed and killed Vizimir, King of Redania. So the furious humans had gone after the Squirrels with a vengeance. The fighting was raging everywhere and elven blood was flowing in rivers . . .

Ha, thought Milva, *perhaps what the priests are saying is true after all and the end of the world and the day of judgement are close at hand? The world is in flames, humans are preying not only on elves but on other humans too. Brothers are raising knives against brothers . . . And the Witcher is meddling in politics . . . and joining the rebellion. The Witcher, who is meant to roam the world and kill monsters eager to harm humans! No witcher, for as long as anyone can remember, has ever allowed himself to be drawn into politics or war. Why, there's even the tale about a foolish king who carried water in a sieve, took a hare as a messenger, and appointed a witcher as a palatine. And yet here we have the Witcher, carved up in a rebellion against the kings and forced to escape punishment in Brokilon. Perhaps it truly is the end of the world!*

'Greetings, Maria.'

She started. The short dryad leaning against a pine had eyes and hair the colour of silver. The setting sun gave her head a halo against the background of the motley wall of trees. Milva dropped to one knee and bowed low.

'My greetings to you, Lady Eithné.'

The ruler of Brokilon stuck a small, crescent-shaped, golden knife into a bast girdle.

'Arise,' she said. 'Let us take a walk. I wish to talk with you.'

They walked for a long time through the shadowy forest; the delicate, silver-haired dryad and the tall, flaxen-haired girl. Neither of them broke the silence for some time.

'It is long since you were at Duén Canell, Maria.'

‘There was no time, Lady Eithné. It is a long road to Duén Canell from the River Ribbon, and I . . . But of course you know.’

‘That I do. Are you weary?’

‘The elves need my help. I’m helping them on your orders, after all.’

‘At my request.’

‘Indeed. At your request.’

‘And I have one more.’

‘As I thought. The Witcher?’

‘Help him.’

Milva stopped and turned back, breaking an overhanging twig of honeysuckle with a sharp movement, turning it over in her fingers before flinging it to the ground.

‘For half a year,’ she said softly, looking into the dryad’s silvery eyes, ‘I have risked my life guiding elves from their decimated commandos to Brokilon . . . When they are rested and their wounds healed, I lead them out again . . . Is that so little? Haven’t I done enough? Every new moon, I set out on the trail in the dark of the night. I’ve begun to fear the sun as much as a bat or an owl does . . .’

‘No one knows the forest trails better than you.’

‘I will not learn anything in the greenwood. I hear that the Witcher wants me to gather news, by moving among humans. He’s a rebel, the ears of the an’givare prick up at the sound of his name. I must be careful not to show myself in the cities. And what if someone recognises me? The memories still endure, the blood is not yet dry . . . for there was a lot of blood, Lady Eithné.’

‘A great deal.’ The silver eyes of the old dryad were alien, cold; inscrutable. ‘A great deal, indeed.’

‘Were they to recognise me, they would impale me.’

‘You are prudent. You are cautious and vigilant.’

‘In order to gather the tidings the Witcher requests, it is necessary to shed vigilance. It is necessary to ask. And now it is dangerous to demonstrate curiosity. Were they to capture me—’

‘You have contacts.’

‘They would torture me. Until I died. Or grind me down in Drakenborg—’

‘But you are indebted to me.’

Milva turned her head away and bit her lip.

‘It’s true, I am,’ she said bitterly. ‘I have not forgotten.’

She narrowed her eyes, her face suddenly contorted, and she clenched her teeth tightly. The memory shone faintly beneath her eyelids; the ghastly moonlight of that night. The pain in her ankle suddenly returned, held tight by the leather snare, and the pain in her joints, after they had been cruelly wrenched. She heard again the soughing of leaves as the tree shot suddenly upright . . . Her screaming, moaning; the desperate, frantic, horrified struggle and the invasive sense of fear which flowed over her when she realised she couldn’t free herself . . . The cry and fear, the creak of the rope, the rippling shadows; the swinging, unnatural, upturned earth, upturned sky, trees with upturned tops, pain, blood pounding in her temples . . .

And at dawn the dryads, all around her, in a ring . . . The distant silvery laughter . . . *A puppet on a string! Swing, swing, marionette, little head hanging down* . . . And her own, unnatural, wheezing cry. And then darkness.

‘Indeed, I have a debt,’ she said through clenched teeth. ‘Indeed, for I was a hanged man cut from the noose. As long as I live, I see, I shall never pay off that debt.’

‘Everyone has some kind of debt,’ replied Eithné. ‘Such is life, Maria Barring. Debts and liabilities, obligations, gratitude, payments . . . Doing something for someone. Or perhaps for ourselves? For in fact we are always paying ourselves back and not someone else. Each time we are indebted we pay off the debt to ourselves. In each of us lies a creditor and a debtor at once and the art is for the reckoning to tally inside us. We enter the world as a minute part of the life we are given, and from then on we are ever paying off debts. To ourselves. For ourselves. In order for the final reckoning to tally.’

‘Is this human dear to your, Lady Eithné? That . . . that witcher?’

‘He is. Although he knows not of it. Return to Col Serrai, Maria Barring. Go to him. And do what he asks of you.’

In the valley, the brushwood crunched and a twig snapped. A magpie gave a noisy, angry ‘chacker-chacker’, and some chaffinches took flight, flashing their white wing bars and tail feathers. Milva

held her breath. At last.

Chacker-chacker, called the magpie. Chacker-chacker-chacker. Another twig cracked.

Milva adjusted the worn, polished leather guard on her left forearm, and placed her hand through the loop attached to her gear. She took an arrow from the flat quiver on her thigh. Out of habit, she checked the arrowhead and the fletchings. She bought shafts at the market – choosing on average one out of every dozen offered to her – but she always fletched them herself. Most ready-made arrows in circulation had too-short fletchings arranged straight along the shaft, while Milva only used spirally fletched arrows, with the fletchings never shorter than five inches.

She nocked the arrow and stared at the mouth of the ravine, at a green spot of barberry among the trees, heavy with bunches of red berries.

The chaffinches had not flown far and began their trilling again. *Come on, little one*, thought Milva, raising the bow and drawing the bowstring. *Come on. I'm ready.*

But the roe deer headed along the ravine, towards the marsh and springs which fed the small streams flowing into the Ribbon. A young buck came out of the ravine. A fine specimen, weighing in – she estimated – at almost four stone. He lifted his head, pricked up his ears, and then turned back towards the bushes, nibbling leaves.

With his back toward her, he was an easy victim. Had it not been for a tree trunk obscuring part of the target, Milva would have fired without a second thought. Even if she were to hit him in the belly, the arrow would penetrate and pierce the heart, liver or lungs. Were she to hit him in the haunch, she would destroy an artery, and the animal would be sure to fall in a short time. She waited, without releasing the bowstring.

The buck raised his head again, stepped out from behind the trunk and abruptly turned round a little. Milva, holding the bow at full draw, cursed under her breath. A shot face-on was uncertain; instead of hitting the lung, the arrowhead might enter the stomach. She waited, holding her breath, aware of the salty taste of the bowstring against the corner of her mouth. That was one of the most important, quite invaluable, advantages of her bow; were she to use a heavier or inferior weapon, she would never be able to hold it fully drawn for so long without tiring or losing precision with the shot.

Fortunately, the buck lowered his head, nibbled on some grass protruding from the moss and turned to stand sideways. Milva exhaled calmly, took aim at his chest and gently released her fingers from the bowstring.

She didn't hear the expected crunch of ribs being broken by the arrow, however. For the buck leapt upwards, kicked and fled, accompanied by the crackling of dry branches and the rustle of leaves being shoved aside.

Milva stood motionless for several heartbeats, petrified like a marble statue of a forest goddess. Only when all the noises had subsided did she lift her hand from her cheek and lower the bow. Having made a mental note of the route the animal had taken as it fled, she sat down calmly, resting her back against a tree trunk. She was an experienced hunter, she had poached in the lord's forests from a child. She had brought down her first roe deer at the age of eleven, and her first fourteen-point buck on the day of her fourteenth birthday – an exceptionally favourable augury. And experience had taught that one should never rush after a shot animal. If she had aimed well, the buck would fall no further than two hundred paces from the mouth of the ravine. Should she have been off target – a possibility she actually didn't contemplate – hurrying might only make things worse. A badly injured animal, which wasn't agitated, would slow to a walk after its initial panicked flight. A frightened animal being pursued would race away at breakneck speed and would only slow down once it was over the hills and far away.

So she had at least half an hour. She plucked a blade of grass, stuck it between her teeth and drifted off in thought once again. The memories came back.

When she returned to Brokilon twelve days later, the Witcher was already up and about. He was limping somewhat and slightly dragging one hip, but he was walking. Milva was not surprised – she knew of the miraculous healing properties of the forest water and the herb conynhaela. She also knew Aglaïs's abilities and on several occasions had witnessed the astonishingly quick return to health of wounded dryads. And the rumours about the exceptional resistance and endurance of witchers were also clearly no mere myths either.

She did not go to Col Serrai immediately on her arrival, although the dryads hinted that Gwynbleidd had been impatiently awaiting

her return. She delayed intentionally, still unhappy with her mission and wanting to make her feelings clear. She escorted the Squirrels back to their camp. She gave a lengthy account of the incidents on the road and warned the dryads about the plans to seal the border on the Ribbon by humans. Only when she was rebuked for the third time did Milva bathe, change and go to the Witcher.

He was waiting for her at the edge of a glade by some cedars. He was walking up and down, squatting from time to time and then straightening up with a spring. Aglaïs had clearly ordered him to exercise.

'What news?' he asked immediately after greeting her. The coldness in his voice didn't deceive her.

'The war seems to be coming to an end,' she answered, shrugging. 'Nilfgaard, they say, has crushed Lyria and Aedirn. Verden has surrendered and the King of Temeria has struck a deal with the Nilfgaardian emperor. The elves in the Valley of Flowers have established their own kingdom but the Scoia'tael from Temeria and Redania have not joined them. They are still fighting . . .'

'That isn't what I meant.'

'No?' she said, feigning surprise. 'Oh, I see. Well, I stopped in Dorian, as you asked, though it meant going considerably out of my way. And the highways are so dangerous now . . .'

She broke off, stretching. This time he didn't hurry her.

'Was Codringher,' she finally asked, 'whom you asked me to visit, a close friend of yours?'

The Witcher's face did not twitch, but Milva knew he understood at once.

'No. He wasn't.'

'That's good,' she continued easily. 'Because he's no longer with us. He went up in flames along with his chambers; probably only the chimney and half of the façade survived. The whole of Dorian is abuzz with rumours. Some say Codringher was dabbling in black magic and concocting poisons; that he had a pact with the devil, so the devil's fire consumed him. Others say he'd stuck his nose and his fingers into a crack he shouldn't have, as was his custom. And it wasn't to somebody's liking, so they bumped him off and set everything alight, to cover their tracks. What do you think?'

She didn't receive a reply, or detect any emotion on his ashen face. So she continued, in the same venomous, arrogant tone of

voice.

‘It’s interesting that the fire and Codringher’s death occurred during the first July new moon, exactly when the unrest on the Isle of Thanedd was taking place. As if someone had guessed that Codringher knew something about the disturbances and would be asked for details. As if someone wanted to stop his trap up good and proper in advance, strike him dumb. What do you say to that? Ah, I see you won’t say anything. You’re keeping quiet, so I’ll tell you this: your activities are dangerous, and so is your spying and questioning. Perhaps someone will want to shut other traps and ears than Codringher’s. That’s what I think.’

‘Forgive me,’ he said a moment later. ‘You’re right. I put you at risk. It was too dangerous a task for a—’

‘For a woman, you mean?’ she said, jerking her head back, flicking her still wet hair from her shoulder with a sudden movement. ‘Is that what you were going to say? Are you playing the gentleman all of a sudden? I may have to squat to piss, but my coat is lined with wolf skin, not coney fur! Don’t call me a coward, because you don’t know me!’

‘I do,’ he said in a calm, quiet voice, not reacting to her anger or raised voice. ‘You are Milva. You lead Squirrels to safety in Brokilon, avoiding capture. Your courage is known to me. But I recklessly and selfishly put you at risk—’

‘You’re a fool!’ she interrupted sharply. ‘Worry about yourself, not about me. Worry about that young girl!’

She smiled disdainfully. Because this time his face did change. She fell silent deliberately, waiting for further questions.

‘What do you know?’ he finally asked. ‘And from whom?’

‘You had your Codringher,’ she snorted, lifting her head proudly. ‘And I have my own contacts. The kind with sharp eyes and ears.’

‘Tell me, Milva. Please.’

‘After the fighting on Thanedd,’ she began, after waiting a moment, ‘unrest erupted everywhere. The hunt for traitors began, particularly for any sorcerers who supported Nilfgaard and for the other turncoats. Some were captured, others vanished without trace. You don’t need much nous to guess where they fled to and under whose wings they’re hiding. But it wasn’t just sorcerers and traitors who were hunted. A Squirrel commando led by the famous Faoiltiarna also helped the mutinous sorcerers in the rebellion on

Thanedd. So now he's wanted. An order has been issued that every elf captured should be tortured and interrogated about Faoiltiarna's commando.'

'Who's Faoiltiarna?'

'An elf, one of the Scoia'tael. Few have got under the humans' skin the way he has. There's a hefty bounty on his head. But they're seeking another too. A Nilfgaardian knight who was on Thanedd. And also for a . . .'

'Go on.'

'The an'givare are asking about a witcher who goes by the name of Geralt of Rivia. And about a girl named Cirilla. Those two are to be captured alive. It was ordered on pain of death: if either of you is caught, not a hair on your heads is to be harmed, not a button may be torn from her dress. Oh! You must be dear to their hearts for them to care so much about your health . . .'

She broke off, seeing the expression on his face, from which his unnatural composure had abruptly disappeared. She realised that however hard she tried, she was unable to make him afraid. At least not for his own skin. She unexpectedly felt ashamed.

'Well, that pursuit of theirs is futile,' she said gently, with just a faintly mocking smile on her lips. 'You are safe in Brokilon. And they won't catch the girl alive either. When they searched through the rubble on Thanedd, all the debris from that magical tower which collapsed— Hey, what's wrong with you?'

The Witcher staggered, leant against a cedar, and sat down heavily near the trunk. Milva leapt back, horrified by the pallor which his already whitened face had suddenly taken on.

'Aglaïs! Sirssa! Fauve! Come quickly! Damn, I think he's about to keel over! Hey, you!'

'Don't call them . . . There's nothing wrong with me. Speak. I want to know . . .'

Milva suddenly understood.

'They found nothing in the debris!' she cried, feeling herself go pale too. 'Nothing! Although they examined every stone and cast spells, they didn't find . . .'

She wiped the sweat from her forehead and held back with a gesture the dryads running towards them. She seized the Witcher by his shoulders and leant over him so that her long hair tumbled over his pale face.

‘You misunderstood me,’ she said quickly, incoherently; it was difficult to find the right words among the mass which were trying to tumble out. ‘I only meant— You understood me wrongly. Because I . . . How was I to know she is so . . . No . . . I didn’t mean to. I only wanted to say that the girl . . . That they won’t find her, because she disappeared without a trace, like those mages. Forgive me.’

He didn’t answer. He looked away. Milva bit her lip and clenched her fists.

‘I’m leaving Brokilon again in three days,’ she said gently after a long, very long, silence. ‘The moon must wane a little and the nights become a little darker. I shall return within ten days, perhaps sooner. Shortly after Lammas, in the first days of August. Worry not. I shall move earth and water, but I shall find out everything. If anyone knows anything about that maiden, you’ll know it too.’

‘Thank you, Milva.’

‘I’ll see you in ten days . . . Gwynbleidd.’

‘Call me Geralt,’ he said, holding out a hand. She took it without a second thought. And squeezed it very hard.

‘And I’m Maria Barring.’

A nod of the head and the flicker of a smile thanked her for her sincerity. She knew he appreciated it.

‘Be careful, please. When you ask questions, be careful who you ask.’

‘Don’t worry about me.’

‘Your informers . . . Do you trust them?’

‘I don’t trust anyone.’

‘The Witcher is in Brokilon. Among the dryads.’

‘As I thought,’ Dijkstra said, folding his arms on his chest. ‘But I’m glad it’s been confirmed.’

He remained silent for a moment. Lennep licked his lips. And waited.

‘I’m glad it’s been confirmed,’ repeated the head of the secret service of the Kingdom of Redania, pensively, as though he were talking to himself. ‘It’s always better to be certain. If only Yennefer were with him . . . There isn’t a witch with him, is there, Lennep?’

‘I beg your pardon?’ the spy started. ‘No, Your Lordship. There isn’t. What are your orders? If you want him alive, I’ll lure him out of Brokilon. But if you’d prefer him dead . . .’

‘Lennep,’ said Dijkstra, raising his cold, pale blue eyes towards the agent. ‘Don’t be overzealous. In our trade, officiousness never pays and should always be viewed with suspicion.’

‘Sire,’ said Lennep, blanching somewhat. ‘I only—’

‘I know. You only asked about my orders. Well, here they are: leave the Witcher alone.’

‘Yes, sire. And what about Milva?’

‘Leave her alone, too. For now.’

‘Yes, sire. May I go?’

‘You may.’

The agent left, cautiously and silently closing the oak door behind him. Dijkstra remained silent for a long time, staring at the towering pile of maps, letters, denunciations, interrogation reports and death sentences in front of him.

‘Ori.’

The secretary raised his head and cleared his throat. He said nothing.

‘The Witcher is in Brokilon.’

Ori Reuven cleared his throat again, involuntarily glancing under the table, towards his boss’s leg. Dijkstra noticed the look.

‘That’s right. I won’t let him get away with that,’ he barked. ‘I couldn’t walk for two weeks because of him. I lost face with Philippa, forced to whimper like a dog and beg her for a bloody spell, otherwise I’d still be hobbling. I can’t blame anyone but myself; I underestimated him. But the worst thing is that I can’t get my own back and tan his witcher’s hide! I don’t have the time, and anyway, I can’t use my own men to settle private scores! That’s right isn’t it, Ori?’

‘Ahem . . .’

‘Don’t grunt at me. I know. But, hell, power tempts! How it beguiles, invites to be made use of! How easy it is to forget, when one has it! But if you forget once, there’s no end to it . . . Is Philippa Eilhart still in Montecalvo?’

‘Yes.’

‘Take a quill and an inkwell. I’ll dictate a letter to her. I shall begin . . . Damn it, I can’t concentrate. What’s that bloody racket, Ori? What’s happening in the square?’

‘Some students are throwing stones at the Nilfgaardian envoy’s residence. We paid them to do so, hem, hem, if I’m not mistaken.’

‘Oh. Very well. Close the window. And have the lads throw stones at the dwarf Giancardi’s bank, tomorrow. He refused to reveal the details of some accounts.’

‘Giancardi, hem, hem, donated a considerable sum of money to the military fund.’

‘Ha. Then have them throw stones at the banks that didn’t donate.’

‘They all did.’

‘Oh, you’re boring me, Ori. Write, I said. Darling Phil, the sun of my . . . Blast, I keep forgetting. Take a new sheet of paper. Ready?’

‘Of course, hem, hem.’

‘Dear Philippa. Mistress Triss Merigold is sure to be worried about the witcher she teleported from Thanedd to Brokilon, which she kept so secret that even I didn’t know anything. It hurt me terribly. Please reassure her: the Witcher is doing well now. He has even begun to send female emissaries from Brokilon to search for traces of Princess Cirilla, the young girl you’re so interested in. Our good friend Geralt clearly doesn’t know Cirilla is in Nilfgaard, where she’s preparing for her wedding to Imperator Emhyr. It’s important to me that the Witcher lies low in Brokilon, which is why I’ll do my best to ensure the news reaches him. Have you got that?’

‘Hem, hem . . . the news reaches him.’

‘New paragraph! It puzzles me . . . Ori, wipe the bloody quill! We’re writing to Philippa, not to the royal council. The letter must look neat! New paragraph. It puzzles me why the Witcher hasn’t tried to make contact with Yennefer. I refuse to believe that his passion, which was verging on obsession, has petered out so suddenly, irrespective of learning his darling’s political objectives. On the other hand, if Yennefer is the one who handed Cirilla over to Emhyr, and if there’s proof of it, I would gladly make sure the Witcher was furnished with it. The problem would solve itself, I’m certain, and the faithless, black-haired beauty would be on very shaky ground. The Witcher doesn’t like it when anyone touches his little girl, as Artaud Terranova discovered on Thanedd in no

uncertain terms. I would like to think, Phil, that you don't have any evidence of Yennefer's betrayal and you don't know where she is hiding. It would hurt me greatly to discover this is the latest secret being concealed from me. I have no secrets from you . . . What are you sniggering about, Ori?'

'Oh, nothing, hem, hem.'

'Write! I have no secrets from you, Phil, and I count on reciprocity. With my deepest respect, et cetera, et cetera. Give it here, I'll sign it.'

Ori Reuven sprinkled the letter with sand. Dijkstra made himself more comfortable, interlacing his fingers over his stomach and twiddling his thumbs.

'That Milva, the Witcher's spy,' he asked. 'What can you tell me about her?'

'She is engaged at present, hem, hem' – his secretary coughed – 'in escorting the remnants of Scoia'tael units defeated by the Temerian Army to Brokilon. She rescues elves from hunts and traps, enabling them to rest and regroup into combat commandos . . .'

'Refrain from supplying me with common knowledge,' interrupted Dijkstra. 'I'm familiar with Milva's activities, and will eventually make use of them. Otherwise I would have sold her out to the Temerians long since. What can you tell me about Milva herself? As a person?'

'She comes, if I'm not mistaken, from some godforsaken village in Upper Sodden. Her true name is Maria Barring. Milva is a nickname the dryads gave her. In the Elder Speech it means—'

'Red Kite,' interrupted Dijkstra. 'I know.'

'Her family have been hunters for generations. They are forest dwellers, and feel most comfortable in the greenwood. When old Barring's son was trampled to death by an elk, the old man taught his daughter the forest crafts. After he passed away, her mother married again. Hem, hem . . . Maria didn't get on with her stepfather and ran away from home. She was sixteen at the time, if I'm not mistaken. She headed north, living from hunting, but the lords' gamekeepers didn't make her life easy, hunting and harrying her as though she were fair game. So she began to poach in Brokilon and it was there, hem, hem, that the dryads got hold of her.'

'And instead of finishing her off, they took her in,' Dijkstra

muttered. ‘Adopted her, if you will . . . And she repaid their kindness. She struck a pact with the Hag of Brokilon, old silver-eyed Eithné. Maria Barring is dead; long live Milva . . . How many human expeditions had come unstuck by the time the forces in Verden and Kerack cottoned on? Three?’

‘Hem, hem . . . Four, if I’m not mistaken . . .’ Ori Reuven was always hoping he wasn’t mistaken, although in fact his memory was infallible. ‘All together, it was about five score humans, those who’d gone after dryad scalps most savagely. And it took them a long time to catch on, because Milva occasionally carried someone out of the slaughter on her own back, and whoever she’d rescued would praise her courage to the skies. It was only after the fourth time, in Verden, if I’m not mistaken, that someone caught on. “Why is it?” the shout suddenly went up, hem, hem, “that the guide who bands humans together to fight the dryads always gets out in one piece?” And the cat was out of the bag. The guide *was* leading them. But into a trap, right into the shooting range of the dryads waiting in ambush . . .’

Dijkstra slid an interrogation report to the edge of his desk, because the parchment still seemed to reek of the torture chamber.

‘And then,’ he concluded, ‘Milva vanished into Brokilon like the morning mist. And it’s still difficult to find volunteers for expeditions against the dryads in Verden. Old Eithné and young Red Kite were carrying out pretty effective purges. And they dare say that we, humans, invented all the dirty tricks. On the other hand . . .’

‘Hem, hem?’ coughed Ori Reuven, surprised by his boss’s sudden – and then continuing – silence.

‘On the other hand, they may have finally begun to learn from us,’ said the spy coldly, looking down at the denunciations, interrogation reports and death sentences.

Milva grew anxious when she couldn’t see blood anywhere near where the buck had disappeared. She suddenly recalled that he had jumped just as she had fired her arrow. Had jumped or was about to; it amounted to the same thing. He had moved and the arrow might have hit him in the belly. Milva cursed. A shot to the belly was a disgrace for any hunter! Urgh, the very thought of it!

She quickly ran over to the slope of the ravine, looking carefully among the brambles, moss and ferns. She was hunting for her

arrow. It was equipped with four blades so sharp they could shave the hairs on your forearm. Fired from a distance of fifty paces the arrow must have passed right through the animal.

She searched, she found it and sighed in relief, then spat three times, happy with her luck. She needn't have worried; it was better than she had imagined. The arrow was not covered in sticky, foul-smelling stomach contents. Neither did it bear traces of bright, pink, frothy blood from the lungs. What covered the shaft was dark red and viscous. The arrow had gone through the heart. Milva didn't have to creep or stalk; she had been spared a long walk following the deer's tracks. The buck had to be lying in the undergrowth, no more than a hundred paces from the clearing, in a spot that would be surely indicated by the blood. And after being shot through the heart, he would have started bleeding after a few paces, so she knew she would easily find the trail.

She picked it up after ten paces and followed it, once again losing herself in her reverie.

She kept the promise she had given the Witcher. She returned to Brokilon five days after the Harvest Festival – five days after the new moon – which marked the beginning of the month of August for people, and for elves, Lammas, the seventh and penultimate savaed of the year.

She crossed the Ribbon at daybreak with five elves. The commando she was leading had initially numbered nine riders, but the soldiers from Brugge were following them the whole time. Three furlongs before the river they were hot on their trail, pressing hard, and only abandoned their efforts when they reached the Ribbon, with Brokilon looming up in the dawn mists on the far bank. The soldiers were afraid of Brokilon and that alone saved the commando. They made it across. Exhausted and wounded. But not all of them.

She had news for the Witcher, but thought that Gwynbleidd was still in Col Serrai. She had intended to see him around noon, after a good long sleep so she was astonished when he suddenly emerged from the fog like a ghost. He sat down beside her without a word, watching as she made herself a makeshift bed by spreading a blanket over a heap of branches.

'You're in a hurry, Witcher,' she scoffed. 'I'm ready to drop. I've been in the saddle all day and all night, my backside's numb, and my trousers are soaked up to my belt, for we crept our way through

the wetlands at dawn like a pack of wolves . . .'

'Please. Did you learn anything?'

'Yes I did,' she snorted, unlacing and pulling off her drenched, clinging boots. 'Without much difficulty, because everybody's talking about it. You never told me your young girl was such a personage! I'd thought she was your stepdaughter, some sort of waif and stray, a star-crossed orphan. And who does she turn out to be? A Cintran princess! Well! And perhaps you're a prince in disguise?'

'Tell me, please.'

'The kings won't get their hands on her now, for your Cirilla, it turns out, fled straight from Thanedd to Nilfgaard; probably with those treacherous mages. And Imperator Emhyr received her there with all ceremony. And do you know what? He's said to be thinking of marrying her. Now let me rest. We can talk after I've slept, if you want.'

The Witcher said nothing. Milva hung her wet footwraps on a forked branch, positioned so that the rising sun's rays would fall on them, and tugged at her belt buckle.

'I want to get undressed,' she growled. 'Why are you still hanging about? You can't have expected happier news, can you? You're in no danger; no one's asking after you, the spies have stopped being interested in you. And your wench has escaped from the clutches of the kings and will be declared Imperatoress . . .'

'Is that information reliable?'

'Nothing is certain these days,' she yawned, sitting down on her bed, 'apart from the fact that the sun journeys across the heavens from the east to the west. But what people are saying about the Nilfgaardian Imperator and the Princess of Cintra seems to be true. It's all anyone's talking about.'

'Why this sudden interest?'

'You really don't know? She's said to be bringing Emhyr a goodly acreage of land in her dowry! And not just Cintra, but land on this side of the Yaruga too! Ha, and she'll be my Lady as well, for I'm from Upper Sodden, and the whole of Sodden, it turns out, is her fiefdom! So if I bring down a buck in her forests and they lay hands on me, I can be hung on her orders . . . Oh, what a rotten world! And a pox on it, I can't keep my eyes open . . .'

'Just one more question. Did they capture any sorceresses— I mean did they capture anyone from that pack of treacherous

sorcerers?'

'No. But one enchantress, they say, took her own life. Soon after Vengerberg fell and the Kaedwen Army entered Aedirn. No doubt out of distress, or fear of torture—'

'There were riderless horses in the commando you brought here. Would the elves give me one?'

'Oh, in a hurry, I see,' she muttered, wrapping herself in the blanket. 'I think I know where you're planning to . . .'

She fell silent, astonished by the expression on his face before she realised that the news she had brought was not at all happy. She saw that she understood nothing, nothing at all. Suddenly, unexpectedly, unawares, she felt the urge to sit down by his side, bombard him with questions, listen to him, learn more, perhaps offer counsel . . . She urgently ground her knuckles into the corners of her eyes. *I'm exhausted*, she thought, *death was breathing down my neck all night. I have to rest. And anyway, why should I be bothered by his sorrows and cares? What does he matter to me? And that wench? To hell with him and with her! A pox on it, all this has driven the sleep from me . . .*

The Witcher stood up.

'Will the elves give me a horse?' he repeated.

'Take whichever you please,' she said a moment later. 'But don't let them see you. They gave us a good hiding by the ford, blood was spilt . . . And don't touch the black; he's mine . . . What are you waiting for?'

'Thank you for your help. For everything.'

She didn't answer.

'I'm indebted to you. How shall I pay you back?'

'How? By getting out of my sight!' she cried, raising herself on an elbow and tugging sharply at the blanket. 'I . . . I have to sleep! Take a horse . . . and go . . . To Nilfgaard, to hell, to all the devils. Makes no difference to me! Go away and leave me in peace!'

'I'll pay back what I owe,' he said quietly. 'I won't forget. It may happen that one day you'll be in need of help. Or support. A shoulder to lean on. Then call out, call out in the night. And I'll come.'

The buck lay on the edge of the slope, which was spongy from

gushing springs and densely overgrown with ferns, his neck contorted, with a glassy eye staring up at the sky. Milva saw several large ticks bored into his light brown belly.

'You'll have to find yourselves some other blood, vermin,' she muttered, rolling up her sleeves and drawing a knife. 'Because this is going cold.'

With a swift and practised movement, she slit the skin from sternum to anus, adroitly running the blade around the genitalia. She cautiously separated the layer of fat, up to her elbows in blood. She severed the gullet and pulled the entrails out. She cut open the stomach and gall bladder, hunting for bezoars. She didn't believe in their magical qualities, but there was no shortage of fools who did and would pay well for them.

She lifted the buck and laid him on a nearby log, his slit belly pointing downwards, letting the blood drain out. She wiped her hands on a bunch of ferns.

She sat down by her quarry.

'Possessed, insane Witcher,' she said softly, staring at the crowns of the Brokilon pines looming a hundred feet above her. 'You're heading for Nilfgaard to get your wench. You're heading to the end of the world, which is all in flames, and you haven't even thought about supplying yourself with victuals. I know you have someone to live for. But do you have anything to live on?'

Naturally enough, the pines didn't comment or interrupt her monologue.

'I don't think,' Milva said, using her knife to scrape the blood out from beneath her fingernails, 'you have the slightest chance of getting your young girl back. You won't make it to the Yaruga, never mind Nilfgaard. I don't think you'll even make it to Sodden. I think you're fated to die. It's written on your fierce face, it's staring through your hideous eyes. Death will catch up with you, O mad Witcher, it'll catch up with you soon. But thanks to this little buck at least it won't be death by starvation. It may not be much, but it's something. That's what I think.'

Dijkstra sighed to himself at the sight of the Nilfgaardian ambassador entering the audience chamber. Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen, Imperator Emhyr var Emreis's envoy, was accustomed to conducting conversations in diplomatic language, and adored larding his sentences with pompous linguistic oddities,

comprehensible only to diplomats and scholars. Dijkstra had studied at the Academy of Oxenfurt, and although he had not been awarded the title of Master of Letters, he knew the basics of bombastic scholarly jargon. However, he was reluctant to use it, since he hated with a vengeance pomposity and all forms of pretentious ceremony.

'Greetings, Your Excellency.'

'Your Lordship,' Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen said, bowing ceremoniously. 'Ah, please forgive me. Perhaps I ought to say: Your Grace the Duke? Your Highness the Regent? Secretary of State? 'Pon my word, offices are falling on you like hailstones, such that I really don't know how to address you so as not to breach protocol.'

'"Your Majesty" would be best,' Dijkstra replied modestly. 'You are aware after all, Your Excellency, that the king is judged by his court. And you are probably aware that when I shout: "Jump!" the court in Tretogor asks: "How high?"'

The ambassador knew that Dijkstra was exaggerating, but not inordinately. Prince Radovid was still a minor, Queen Hedwig distraught by her husband's tragic death, and the aristocracy intimidated, stupefied, at variance and divided into factions. Dijkstra was the *de facto* governor of Redania and could have taken any rank he pleased with no difficulty. But Dijkstra had no desire to do so.

'Your Lordship deigned to summon me,' the ambassador said a moment later. 'Passing over the Foreign Minister. To what do I owe this honour?'

'The minister,' Dijkstra said, looking up at the ceiling, 'resigned from the post owing to his poor state of health.'

The ambassador nodded gravely. He knew perfectly well that the Foreign Minister was languishing in a dungeon and, being a coward and a fool, had doubtless told Dijkstra everything about his collusion with the Nilfgaardian secret service during the demonstration of torture instruments preceding his interrogation. He knew that the network established by Vattier de Rideaux, head of the imperial secret service, had been crushed, and all its threads were in Dijkstra's hands. He also knew that those threads led directly to his person. But his person was protected by immunity and protocol forced them to play this game to the bitter end. Particularly following the curious, encoded instructions recently sent to the embassy by Vattier and Coroner Stephan Skellen, the imperial agent for special affairs.

‘Since his successor has not yet been named,’ Dijkstra continued, ‘it is my unpleasant duty to inform you that Your Excellency is now deemed *persona non grata* in the Kingdom of Redania.’

The ambassador bowed.

‘I regret,’ he said, ‘that the distrust that resulted in the mutual recall of ambassadors are the consequence of matters which, after all, directly concern neither the Kingdom of Redania nor the Nilfgaardian Empire. The Empire has not undertaken any hostile measures against Redania.’

‘Apart from a blockade against our ships and goods at the mouth of the Yaruga and the Skellige Islands. And apart from arming and supporting gangs of Scoia’tael.’

‘Those are insinuations.’

‘And the concentration of imperial forces in Verden and Cintra? The raids on Sodden and Brugge by armed gangs? Sodden and Brugge are under Temerian protection; we in turn are in alliance with Temeria, Your Excellency, which makes an attack on Temeria an attack on us. In addition, there are matters which directly concern Redania: the rebellion on the Isle of Thanedd and the criminal assassination of King Vizimir. And the question of the role the Empire played in those incidents.’

‘*Quod attinet* the incident on Thanedd,’ the ambassador said, spreading his arms, ‘I have not been empowered to express an opinion. His Imperial Highness Emhyr var Emreis is unaware of the substance of the private feuds of your mages. I regret the fact that our protests are achieving minimal success in the face of the propaganda which seeks to suggest something else. Propaganda disseminated, I dare say, not without the support of the highest authorities of the Kingdom of Redania.’

‘Your protests greatly astonish and surprise me,’ Dijkstra said, smiling faintly. ‘Since the Imperator in no way conceals the presence of the Cintran princess at his court, after she was abducted from the very same Thanedd.’

‘Cirilla, *Queen* of Cintra,’ Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen corrected him with emphasis, ‘was not abducted, but sought asylum in the Empire. That has nothing to do with the incident on Thanedd.’

‘Indeed?’

‘The incident on Thanedd,’ the ambassador continued, his countenance stony, ‘aroused the Imperator’s horror. And the

murderous attack on the life of King Vizimir, carried out by a madman, evoked his sincere and intense abomination. However, the vile rumour being disseminated among the common people is an even greater abomination, which dares to search for the instigators of these crimes in the Empire.'

'The capture of the actual instigators,' Dijkstra said slowly, 'will put an end to the rumours, one would hope. And their capture and the meting out of justice to them is purely a matter of time.'

'*Justitia fundamentum regnorum*,' admitted Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen gravely. 'And *crimen horribilis non potest non esse punibile*. I affirm that His Imperial Majesty also wishes this to happen.'

'The Imperator has it in his power to fulfil that wish,' Dijkstra threw in casually, folding his arms. 'One of the leaders of the conspiracy, Enid an Gleanna, until recently the sorceress Francesca Findabair, is playing at being queen of the elven puppet state in Dol Blathanna, by the imperial grace.'

'His Imperial Majesty,' said the ambassador, bowing stiffly, 'cannot interfere in the doings of Dol Blathanna, recognised by all its neighbouring powers as an independent kingdom.'

'But not by Redania. For Redania, Dol Blathanna remains part of the Kingdom of Aedirn. Although together with the elves and Kaedwen you have dismantled Aedirn – although not a stone remains of Lyria – you are striking those kingdoms too swiftly from the map of the world. It's too soon, Your Excellency. However, this is neither the time nor the place to discuss it. Let Francesca Findabair play at reigning for now; she'll get her comeuppance. And what of the other rebels and King Vizimir's assassins? What about Vilgefortz of Roggeveen, what about Yennefer of Vengerberg? There are grounds to believe they both fled to Nilfgaard following the collapse of the rebellion.'

'I assure you that is not so,' said the ambassador, raising his head. 'But were it true, they would not escape punishment.'

'They did not wrong you, thus their punishment does not rest with you. Imperator Emhyr would prove his sincere desire for justice, which after all is *fundamentum regnorum*, by handing the criminals over to us.'

'One may not deny the validity of your request,' admitted Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen, feigning an embarrassed smile. 'However, *primo*, those individuals are not in the Empire. And *secundo*, had they even reached it, there exists an impediment. Extradition is carried out on

the basis of a judgment of the law, each case decided upon by the Imperial Council. Bear in mind, Your Lordship, that the breaking of diplomatic ties by Redania is a hostile act; it would be difficult to expect the Council to vote in favour of the extradition of persons seeking asylum, were a hostile country to demand that extradition. It would be an unprecedented matter . . . Unless . . .'

'Unless what?'

'A precedent were established.'

'I do not understand.'

'Were the Kingdom of Redania prepared to hand one of his subjects to the Imperator, a common criminal who had been captured here, the Imperator and his Council would have grounds to reciprocate this gesture of good will.'

Dijkstra said nothing for a long time, giving the impression he was either dozing or thinking.

'Whom do you have in mind?'

'The name of the criminal . . .' said the ambassador, pretending to recall it. He finally searched for a document in his saffian portfolio. 'Forgive me, *memoria fragilis est*. Here it is. A certain Cahir Mawr Dyffryn aep Ceallach. Serious gravamina weigh on him. He is being sought for murder, desertion, *raptus puellae*, rape, theft and forging documents. Fleeing from the Imperator's wrath, he escaped abroad.'

'To Redania? He chose a long route.'

'Your Lordship,' said Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen, smiling faintly, 'does not limit his interests only to Redania, after all. There is not a shadow of doubt in my mind that were the criminal to be seized in any of the allied kingdoms, Your Lordship would hear of it from the reports of numerous . . . friends.'

'What did you say the name of the felon was?'

'Cahir Mawr Dyffryn aep Ceallach.'

Dijkstra fell silent again, pretending to be searching in his memory.

'No,' he said finally. 'No one of that name has been apprehended.'

'Indeed?'

'Regrettably, my *memoria* is not *fragilis* in such cases, Your Excellency.'

'I regret it too,' Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen responded icily.

‘Particularly since the mutual extradition of criminals seems to be impossible to carry out in such circumstances. I shall not weary Your Lordship any longer. I wish you good health and good fortune.’

‘Likewise. Farewell, Your Excellency.’

The ambassador left, after several elaborate, ceremonial bows.

‘You can kiss *sempiternum meam*, you sly old devil,’ Dijkstra muttered, folding his arms. ‘Ori!’

His secretary, red in the face from suppressing his cough, emerged from behind a curtain.

‘Is Philippa still in Montecalvo?’

‘Yes, hem, hem. Mistresses Laux-Antille, Merigold and Metz are with her.’

‘War may break out in a day or two, the border on the Yaruga will soon go up in flames, and they’ve hidden themselves in some godforsaken castle! Take a quill and write. Darling Phil . . . Oh, bugger!’

‘I’ve written: “Dear Philippa”.’

‘Good. Continue. It may interest you that the freak in the plumed helmet, who disappeared from Thanedd as mysteriously as he appeared, is called Cahir Mawr Dyffryn and is the son of Seneschal Ceallach. This strange individual is being sought not only by us, but also, it would appear, by the secret service of Vattier de Rideaux and the men of that son-of-a-bitch . . .’

‘Mistress Philippa, hem, hem, does not like expressions of that kind. I have written: “that scoundrel”.’

‘Let it be: that scoundrel Stephan Skellen. You know as well as I do, dear Phil, that the imperial secret service is urgently hunting only those agents and emissaries who got under Emhyr’s skin. Those who, instead of carrying out their orders or dying, betrayed him and their orders alike. The case thus appears quite curious, since we were certain that this Cahir’s orders concerned the capture of Princess Cirilla and her delivery to Nilfgaard.

‘New paragraph: I would like to discuss in person the strange, but well-founded suspicions this matter has evoked in me, and the somewhat astonishing, but reasonable theories I have arrived at. With my deepest respect et cetera, et cetera.’

Milva rode south, as the crow flies, first along the banks of the Ribbon, through Burn Stump, and then, having crossed the river, through marshy gorges covered in a soft, bright green carpet of hair-cap moss. She guessed that the Witcher, not knowing the terrain as well as she did, would not risk crossing onto the human-controlled bank. Taking a short cut across a huge bend in the river, which curved towards Brokilon, there was a chance she might catch up with him in the region of the Ceann Treise Falls. Were she to ride hard and not take a break, she even stood a chance of overtaking him.

The chirruping chaffinches hadn't been mistaken. The sky had clouded over considerably to the south. The air had become dense and heavy, and the mosquitoes and horseflies extremely annoying.

When she rode into the wetlands, thick with hazel hung with still-green nuts and leafless, blackish buckthorn, she felt a presence. She didn't hear it. She felt it. And so she knew it must be elves.

She reined in her horse, so the bowmen concealed in the undergrowth could have a good look at her. She also held her breath. In the hope that she hadn't happened upon quick-tempered ones.

A fly buzzed over the buck, which was slung over the horse's rump.

A rustling. A soft whistling. She whistled back. The Scoia'tael emerged from the brush soundlessly and only then did Milva breathe freely again. She knew them. They belonged to Coinneach Dá Reo's commando.

'Hael,' she said, dismounting. 'Que'ss va?'

'Ne'ss,' an elf whose name she couldn't recall replied coldly. 'Caemm.'

Other elves were encamped in the nearby clearing. There were at least thirty of them, more than there should be in Coinneach's commando. This surprised Milva; in recent times, Squirrel units were more likely to shrink than grow in size. In recent times, commandos had become groups of bloodied, nervy ragamuffins who could barely stand or stay upright in the saddle. This commando was different.

'Cead, Coinneach,' she greeted the approaching commander.

'Ceadmil, sor'ca.'

Sor'ca. Little sister. It's how she was addressed by those she was

friendly with, when they wanted to express their respect and affection. And that they were indeed many, many more winters older than she. At first, she had only been Dh'oine – human – to the elves. Later, when she had begun helping them regularly, they called her Aen Woedbeanna, 'woman of the forest'. Still later, when they knew her better, they called her – following the dryads' example – Milva, or Red Kite. Her real name, which she only revealed to those she was closest to, responding to similar gestures received from them, didn't suit the elves – they pronounced it Mear'ya, with a hint of a grimace, as though in their speech it carried negative connotations. Then they would immediately switch to 'sor'ca'.

'Where are you headed?' asked Milva, looking around more intently, but still not seeing any wounded or ill elves. 'To Eight-Mile? To Brokilon?'

'No.'

She refrained from further questions; she knew them too well. It was enough to glance several times at their motionless, hardened faces, at the exaggerated, pointed calm with which they were preparing their tackle and weapons. One close look into their deep, fathomless eyes was enough. She knew they were going into battle.

To the south the sky was darkening, becoming overcast.

'And where are you headed, sor'ca?' asked Coinneach, then quickly glanced at the buck slung over her horse and smiled faintly.

'South,' she said coldly, putting him right. 'Towards Drieschot.'

The elf stopped smiling.

'Along the human bank?'

'At least as far as Ceann Treise,' she said, shrugging. 'When I reach the falls I'll definitely go back over to the Brokilon side, because . . .'

She turned around, hearing the snorting of horses. Fresh Scoia'tael were joining the already unusually large commando. Milva knew these new ones even better.

'Ciaran!' she shouted softly, without attempting to hide her astonishment. 'Toruviel! What are you doing here? I've only just led you to Brokilon, and you're already—'

'Ess'creasa, sor'ca,' Ciaran aep Dearbh said gravely. The bandage swathed around his head was stained with oozing blood.

‘We have no choice,’ Toruviel repeated. She dismounted cautiously using one arm, in order to protect the other one, which was still bent in a sling. ‘News has come. We may not remain in Brokilon, when every bow counts.’

‘If I had known,’ Milva said, pouting, ‘I wouldn’t have bothered. I wouldn’t have risked my neck at the ford.’

‘News came last night,’ explained Toruviel quietly. ‘We could not . . . We cannot leave our comrades in arms at a time like this. We cannot. Understand that, sor’ca.’

The sky had darkened even more. This time Milva clearly heard thunder in the distance.

‘Don’t ride south, sor’ca,’ Coinneach Dá Reo pleaded. ‘There’s a storm coming.’

‘What can a storm do to. . . ?’ She broke off and looked at him intently. ‘Ah! So that kind of tidings have reached you, have they? It’s Nilfgaard, is it? They are crossing the Yaruga in Sodden? They are striking Brugge? And that’s why you’re marching?’

He did not answer.

‘Yes, just like it was in Dol Angra,’ she said, looking into his dark eyes. ‘Once again the Nilfgaardian Imperator has you sowing mayhem with fire and sword on the humans’ rear lines. And then he will make peace with the kings and they will slaughter you all. You will burn in the very fire you are starting.’

‘Fire purges. And hardens. It must be passed through. Aenyell’hael, ell’ea, sor’ca? In your tongue: a baptism of fire.’

‘I prefer another kind of fire,’ Milva said, untying the buck and throwing it down onto the ground at the feet of the elves. ‘The kind that crackles under the spit. Have it, so you won’t fall from hunger on the march. It’s of no use to me now.’

‘Aren’t you riding south?’

‘I am.’

I’m going south, she thought, *and quickly. I have to warn that fool of a witcher, I have to warn him about what kind of a turmoil he’s getting himself into. I have to make him turn back.*

‘Don’t go, sor’ca.’

‘Give me a break, Coinneach.’

‘A storm is coming from the south,’ the elf repeated. ‘A great

tempest is coming. And a great fire. Hide in Brokilon, little sister, don't ride south. You've done enough for us, you cannot do any more now. And you do not have to. We have to. Ess'tedd, esse creasa! It is time we left. Farewell.'

The air around them was heavy and dense.

The teleprojective spell was complicated; they had to cast it together, joining their hands and thoughts. Even then, it turned out to be a devilishly great effort. Because the distance was considerable too.

Philippa Eilhart's tightly closed eyelids twitched, Triss Merigold panted and there were beads of sweat on Keira Metz's high forehead. Only on Margarita Laux-Antille's face was there no sign of fatigue.

It suddenly became very bright in the poorly lit chamber and a mosaic of flashes danced across the dark wood panelling. A sphere glowing with a milky light was suspended over the round table. Philippa Eilhart chanted the end of the spell and the sphere descended away from her onto one of the twelve chairs positioned around the table. A vague shape appeared inside the sphere. The image shimmered, as the projection was not very stable. But it quickly became more defined.

'Bloody hell,' Keira muttered, wiping her forehead. 'Haven't they heard of glamarye or beautifying spells down in Nilfgaard?'

'Apparently not,' said Triss out of the corner of her mouth. 'They don't seem to have heard of fashion either.'

'Or of make-up,' Philippa said softly. 'But now hush. And don't stare at her. We must stabilise the projection and welcome our guest. Intensify me, Rita.'

Margarita Laux-Antille repeated the spell's formula and Philippa's movements. The image shimmered several times, lost its foggy vagueness and unnatural gleam, and its contours and colours sharpened. The sorceresses could now look at the shape on the other side of the table even more closely. Triss bit her lip and winked at Keira conspiratorially.

The woman in the projection had a pale face with poor complexion, dull, expressionless eyes, thin bluish lips and a somewhat hooked nose. She was wearing a strange, conical and slightly crumpled hat. Dark, not very fresh-looking hair fell from

beneath the soft brim. The impressions of unattractiveness and seediness were complemented by her shapeless, black, baggy robes, embroidered on the shoulders with frayed silver thread. The embroidery depicted a half-moon within a circle of stars. It was the only decoration worn by the Nilfgaardian sorceress.

Philippa Eilhart stood up, trying not display her jewellery, lace or cleavage too ostentatiously.

‘Mistress Assire,’ she said. ‘Welcome to Montecalvo. We are immensely pleased that you have agreed to accept our invitation.’

‘I did it out of curiosity,’ the sorceress from Nilfgaard said, in an unexpectedly pleasant and melodious voice, straightening her hat involuntarily. Her hand was slim, marked by yellow spots, her fingernails broken and uneven, and clearly bitten.

‘Only out of curiosity,’ she repeated. ‘The consequences of which may yet prove catastrophic for me. I would ask for an explanation.’

‘I shall provide one forthwith,’ Philippa nodded, giving a sign to the other sorceresses. ‘But first, however, allow me to call forth projections of the other participants of this gathering and make some introductions. Please be patient for a moment.’

The sorceresses linked hands again and together began the incantations once more. The air in the chamber hummed like a taut wire as a glowing fog flowed down from behind the panels on the ceiling, filling the room with a shimmer of shadows. Spheres of pulsing light hung above three of the unoccupied chairs and the outlines of shapes became visible. The first one to appear was Sabrina Glevissig, in a turquoise dress with a provocatively plunging neckline and a large, lace, standing-up collar, beautifully framing her coiffured hair, which was held in a diamond tiara. Next to her Sheala de Tancarville emerged from the hazy light of the projection, dressed in black velvet sewn with pearls and with her neck draped with silver fox furs. The enchantress from Nilfgaard nervously licked her thin lips.

Just you wait for Francesca, thought Triss. *When you see Francesca, you black rat, your eyes will pop out of your head.*

Francesca Findabair did not disappoint. Not by her lavish dress, the colour of bull’s blood, nor with her majestic hairstyle, nor her ruby necklace, nor her doe eyes ringed with provocative elven make-up.

‘Welcome, ladies,’ Philippa said, ‘to Montecalvo Castle, whither I have invited you to discuss certain issues of considerable

importance. I bemoan the fact that we are meeting in the form of teleprojection. But neither the time, nor the distances dividing us, nor the situation we all find ourselves in permitted a face-to-face meeting. I am Philippa Eilhart, the lady of this castle. As the initiator of this meeting and the hostess, I shall perform the introductions. On my right is Margarita Laux-Antille, the rectoress of the academy in Aretuza. On my left is Triss Merigold of Maribor and Keira Metz of Carreras. Continuing, Sabrina Glevissig of Ard Carraigh. Sheala de Tancarville of Creyden in Kovir. Francesca Findabair, also known as Enid an Gleanna, the present queen of the Valley of Flowers. And finally Assire var Anahid of Vicovaro the Nilfgaardian Empire. And now—'

'And now I bid farewell!' Sabrina Glevissig screamed, pointing a heavily beringed hand at Francesca. 'You have gone too far, Philippa! I have no intention of sitting at the same table as that bloody elf – even as an illusion! The blood on the walls and floors of Garstang has not even faded! And she spilt that blood! She and Vilgefortz!'

'I would request you observe etiquette,' Philippa said, gripping the edge of the table with both hands. 'And keep calm. Listen to what I have to say, I ask for nothing more. When I finish, each of you shall decide whether to stay or leave. The projection is voluntary, it may be interrupted at any moment. All I ask is that those who decide to leave keep this meeting secret.'

'I knew it!' Sabrina jumped up so suddenly that for a moment she moved out of the projection. 'A secret meeting! Clandestine arrangements! To put it bluntly: a conspiracy! And it's quite clear against whom it is directed. Are you mocking us, Philippa? You demand that we keep a secret from our kings and comrades, whom you did not condescend to invite. And there sits Enid Findabair – reigning in Dol Blathanna by the grace of Emhyr var Emreis – the queen of the elves, who are actively providing Nilfgaard with armed support. If that were not enough, I notice with astonishment that we are joined by a Nilfgaardian sorceress. Since when did the mages of Nilfgaard stop professing blind obedience and slavish servility to imperial rule? Secrets? What secrets, I am asking! If she is here, it is with the permission of Emhyr! By his order! As his eyes and ears!'

'I repudiate that,' Assire var Anahid said calmly. 'No one knows that I am taking part in this meeting. I was asked to keep it secret, which I have done and will continue to do. For my own sake, as much as yours. For were it to come to light, I would not survive.

That's the servility of the Empire's mages for you. We have the choice of servility or the scaffold. I took a risk. I did not come here as a spy. I can only prove it in one way: through my own death. It would be sufficient for the secrecy that our hostess is appealing for to be broken. It would be sufficient for news of our meeting to go beyond these walls, for me to lose my life.'

'Betrayal of the secret could have unpleasant consequences for me, too,' Francesca said, smiling charmingly. 'You have a wonderful opportunity for revenge, Sabrina.'

'My revenge will come about in other ways, elf,' said Sabrina, and her black eyes flashed ominously. 'Should the secret come to light, it won't be through my fault or through my carelessness. By no means mine!'

'Are you suggesting something?'

'Of course,' interrupted Philippa Eilhart. 'Of course Sabrina is. She is subtly reminding you about my collaboration with Sigismund Dijkstra. As though she didn't have any contact with King Henselt's spies!'

'There is a difference,' Sabrina barked. 'I wasn't Henselt's lover for three years! Nor that of his spies, for that matter!'

'Enough of this! Be quiet!'

'I concur,' Sheala de Tancarville suddenly said in a loud voice. 'Be quiet, Sabrina. That's enough about Thanedd, enough about spying and extramarital affairs. I did not come here to take part in arguments or to listen to old grudges and insults being bandied about. Nor am I interested in being your mediator. And if I was invited with that intention, I declare that those efforts were in vain. Indeed, I have my suspicions that I am participating in vain and without purpose, that I am wasting time, which I only wrested with difficulty from my scholarly work. I shall, however, refrain from presuppositions. I propose that we give the floor to Philippa Eilhart. Let us discover the aim of this gathering. Let us learn the roles we are expected to play here. Then we shall decide – without unnecessary emotion – whether to continue with the performance or let the curtain fall. The discretion we have been asked for binds us all. Along with the measures that I, Sheala de Tancarville, will personally take against the indiscreet.'

None of the sorceresses moved or spoke. Triss did not doubt Sheala's warning for a second. The recluse from Kovir was not one to make hollow threats.

‘We give you the floor, Philippa. And I ask the honourable assembly to remain quiet until she indicates that she has finished.’

Philippa Eilhart stood up, her dress rustling.

‘Distinguished sisters,’ she said. ‘Our situation is grave. Magic is under threat. The tragic events on Thanedd, to which my thoughts return with regret and reluctance, proved that the effects of hundreds of years of apparently peaceful cooperation could be laid waste in an instant, as self-interest and inflated ambitions came to the fore. We now have discord, disorder, mutual hostility and mistrust. Events are beginning to get out of control. In order to regain control, in order to prevent a cataclysm happening, the helm of this storm-tossed ship must be grasped by strong hands. Mistress Laux-Antille, Mistress Merigold, Mistress Metz and I have discussed the matter and we are in agreement. It is not enough to re-establish the Chapter and the Council, which were destroyed on Thanedd. In any case, there is no one left to rebuild the two institutions, no guarantee that should they be rebuilt they would not be infected with the disease that destroyed the previous ones. An utterly new, secret organisation should be founded which will exclusively serve matters of magic. Which will do everything to prevent a cataclysm. For if magic were to perish, our world would perish with it. Just as happened many centuries ago, the world without magic and the progress it brings with it will be plunged into chaos and darkness; will drown in blood and barbarity. We invite the ladies present here to take part in our initiative: to actively participate in the work proposed by this secret assembly. We took the decision to summon you here in order to hear your opinions on this matter. With this, I have finished.’

‘Thank you,’ Sheala de Tancarville said, nodding. ‘If you will allow, ladies, I shall begin. My first question, dear Philippa, is: why me? Why have I been summoned here? Many times have I refused to have my candidature to the Chapter put forward, and I resigned my seat on the Council. Firstly, my work absorbs me. Secondly, I am ever of the opinion that there are others in Kovir, Poviss and Hengfors more worthy of these honours. So I ask why *I* have been invited here, and not Carduin. Not Istredd of Aedd Gynvael, not Tugdual or Zangenis?’

‘Because they are men,’ replied Philippa. ‘This organisation will consist exclusively of women. Mistress Assire?’

‘I withdraw my question,’ the Nilfgaardian enchantress smiled. ‘It was coincident with the substance of Mistress De Tancarville’s. The answer satisfies me.’

‘It smacks to me of female chauvinism,’ Sabrina Glevissig said with a sneer. ‘Particularly coming from your lips, Philippa, after your change in . . . sexual orientation. I have nothing against men. I’d go further; I adore men and I cannot imagine life without them. But . . . after a moment’s reflection . . . Yours is actually a reasonable proposal. Men are psychologically unstable, too prone to emotions; not to be relied upon in moments of crisis.’

‘That’s right,’ Margarita Laux-Antille admitted calmly. ‘I often compare the results of the novices from Aretuza with those of the boys from the school in Ban Ard, and the comparisons are invariably to the girls’ credit. Magic requires patience, delicacy, intelligence, prudence, and perseverance, not to mention the humble, but calm, endurance of defeat and failure. Ambition is the undoing of men. They always want what they know to be impossible and unattainable. And they are unaware of the attainable.’

‘Enough, enough, enough,’ Sheala interrupted her, making no effort to hide a smile. ‘There is nothing worse than chauvinism underpinned by scholarship. You ought to be ashamed, Rita. Nonetheless . . . Yes, I also consider the proposed single-sex structure of this . . . convent or perhaps, if you will, this lodge, justified. As we have heard, it concerns the future of magic, and magic is too important a matter to entrust its fate to men.’

‘If I may,’ came the melodious voice of Francesca Findabair, ‘I should like to cut these digressions about the natural and undeniable domination of our sex short for a moment, and focus on matters concerning the proposed initiative, the goal of which is still not entirely clear to me. For the moment chosen is not accidental and gives food for thought. A war is being waged. Nilfgaard has crushed the northern kingdoms and nailed them down. Is there not then, concealed beneath the vague slogans I have heard here, the understandable desire to reverse that state of affairs? To crush and nail down Nilfgaard? And then to tan the hides of the insolent elves? If that is so, my dear Philippa, we shall not find common grounds for agreement.’

‘Is that the reason I have been invited here?’ Assire var Anahid asked. ‘I do not pay much attention to politics, but I know that the imperial army is seizing the advantage over your armies in this war. Apart from Mistresses Francesca and de Tancarville, who represents a neutral kingdom, all of you ladies represent kingdoms which are hostile to the Nilfgaardian Empire. How am I to understand these words of magical solidarity? As an incitement to treachery? I’m

sorry, but I cannot see myself in such a role.'

On finishing her speech, Assire leant forward, as though touching something which was outside the frame of the projection. It seemed to Triss she could hear miaowing.

'She's even got a cat,' Keira Metz whispered. 'And I bet it's black . . .'

'Quiet,' hissed Philippa. 'My dear Francesca, most esteemed Mistress Assire. Our initiative is intended to be utterly apolitical; that is its fundamental premise. We shall not be guided by interests of race, kingdoms, kings or imperators, but by the interests of magic and its future.'

'While putting magic first,' Sabrina Glevissig said and smiled sneeringly, 'I hope we will not forget, though, about the interests of sorceresses. We know, after all, how sorcerers are treated in Nilfgaard. We can sit here chatting away apolitically, but when Nilfgaard triumphs and we end up under imperial rule, we shall all look like . . .'

Triss shifted anxiously, Philippa sighed almost inaudibly. Keira lowered her head, Sheala pretended to be straightening her boa. Francesca bit her lip. Assire var Anahid's face did not twitch, but a faint blush appeared on it.

'It will be bad for all of us, is what I meant to say,' Sabrina finished quickly. 'Philippa, Triss and I, all three of us were on Sodden Hill. Emhyr will seek revenge for that defeat, for Thanedd, for all our activities. But that is only one of the reservations that the declared political neutrality of this convent arouses in me. Does participation in it mean immediate resignation from the active – and indeed political – service we presently offer to our kings? Or are we to remain in that service and serve two masters: magic and kingly rule?'

'When someone tells me he is politically neutral,' Francesca smiled, 'I always ask which politics he specifically has in mind.'

'And I know he definitely isn't thinking about the one he engages in,' Assire var Anahid added, looking at Philippa.

'I am politically neutral,' Margarita Laux-Antille chimed in, lifting her head, 'and my school is politically neutral. I have in mind every type, kind and class of politics which exists!'

'Dear ladies,' Sheala said, having remained silent for some time. 'Remember you are the dominant sex. So don't behave like little

girls, fighting over a tray of sweetmeats. The principium proposed by Philippa is clear, at least to me, and I still have too little cause to consider you any less intelligent. Outside this chamber be who you want, serve who you wish, as faithfully as you want. But when the convent meets, we shall focus exclusively on magic and its future.'

'That is precisely how I imagine it,' Philippa Eilhart agreed. 'I know there are many problems, and that there are doubts and uncertainties. We shall discuss them during the next meeting, in which we shall all participate; not in the form of projections or illusions, but in person. Your presence will be treated not as a formal act of accession to the convent, but as a gesture of good will. We shall decide together whether a convent of this kind will be founded at all, then. Together. All of us. With equal rights.'

'All of us?' Sheala repeated. 'I see empty seats and I presume they were not put here inadvertently.'

'The convent ought to number twelve sorceresses. I would like the candidate for one of those empty seats to be proposed and presented to us at our next meeting by Mistress Assire. There must be at least one more worthy sorceress in the Nilfgaardian Empire. I leave the second place for you to fill, Francesca, so that you will not feel alone as the only pureblood elf. The third . . .'

Enid an Gleanna raised her head.

'I would like two places. I have two candidates.'

'Do any of you have any objections to this request? If not, then I concur. Today is the fifth day of August, the fifth day after the new moon. We shall meet again on the second day after the full moon, sisters dear, in fourteen days.'

'Just a moment,' Sheala de Tancarville interrupted. 'One place still remains empty. Who is to be the twelfth sorceress?'

'That is precisely the first problem the lodge will have to solve,' Philippa said, smiling mysteriously. 'In two weeks' time I shall tell you who ought to take their place in the twelfth seat. And then we shall ponder over how to get that person to take it up. My choice will astonish you. Because it is not an ordinary person, most esteemed sisters. It is death or life, destruction or rebirth, chaos or order. Depending on how you look at it.'

The entire village had poured out of their houses to watch the gang pass through. Tuzik also joined them. He had work to do, but he

couldn't resist it. In recent days, people had been talking a great deal about the Rats. A rumour was even going around that they had all been caught and hanged. The rumour had been false, though, the evidence of which was ostentatiously and unhurriedly parading in front of the whole village at this very moment.

'Impudent scoundrels,' someone behind Tuzik whispered, and it was a whisper full of admiration. 'Ambling down the main street . . .'

'Decked out like wedding guests . . .'

'And what horses! You don't even see Nilfgaardians with horses like that!'

'Ha, they're nicked. Nobody's horses are safe from them. And you can offload them everywhere nowadays. But they keep the best for 'emselves . . .'

'That one up the front, look, that's Giselher . . . Their leader.'

'And next to him, on the chestnut, it's that she-elf . . . they call her Iskra . . .'

A cur came scuttling out from behind a fence, barking furiously, scurrying around near the fore hooves of Iskra's mare. The elf shook her luxurious mane of dark hair, turned her horse around, leant down to the ground and lashed the dog with a knout. The cur howled and spun on the spot three times, as Iskra spat on it. Tuzik muttered a curse between clenched teeth.

The people standing close by continued to whisper, discreetly pointing out the various Rats as they passed through the village. Tuzik listened, because he had to. He knew the gossip and tales as well as the others, and easily recognised the one with the long, tousled, straw-coloured hair, eating an apple, as Kayleigh, the broad-shouldered one as Asse, and the one in the embroidered sheepskin jerkin as Reef.

Two girls, riding side by side and holding hands, brought up the rear of the procession. The taller of the two, riding a bay, had her hair shorn as though recovering from the typhus, her jacket was unbuttoned, her lacy blouse gleamed white beneath it, and her necklace, bracelets and earrings flashed brightly.

'That shaven-headed one is Mistle . . .' someone near Tuzik said. 'Dripping with trinkets, just like a Yule tree.'

'They say she's killed more people than she's seen springs . . .'

'And the other one? On the roan? With the sword across her

back?'

'Falka, they call her. She's been riding with the Rats since the summer. She also s'pposed to be a nasty piece of work . . .'

That nasty piece of work, Tuzik guessed, wasn't much older than his daughter, Milena. The flaxen hair of the young bandit tumbled from beneath her velvet beret decorated with an impudently jiggling bunch of pheasant feathers. Around her neck glowed a poppy-red silk kerchief, tied up in a fanciful bow.

A sudden commotion had broken out among the villagers who had poured out in front of their cottages. For Giselher, the one riding at the head of the gang, had reined in his horse, and with a careless gesture thrown a clinking purse at the foot of Granny Mykita, who was standing leaning on a cane.

'May the Gods protect you, gracious youth!' wailed Granny Mykita. 'May you enjoy good health, O our benefactor, may you—'

A peal of laughter from Iskra drowned out the crone's mumbling. The elf threw a jaunty leg over her pommel, reached into a pouch and vigorously scattered a handful of coins among the crowd. Reef and Asse followed her lead, a veritable silver rain showering down on the dusty road. Kayleigh, giggling, threw his apple core into the figures scrambling to gather up the money.

'Our benefactors!'

'Our bold young hawks!'

'May fate be kind to you!'

Tuzik didn't run after the others, didn't drop to his knees to scrabble in the sand and chicken shit for coins. He stood by the fence, watching the girls pass slowly by.

The younger of the two, the one with the flaxen hair, noticed his gaze and expression. She let go of the short-haired girl's hand, spurred her horse and rode straight for him, pressing him against the fence and almost getting her stirrup caught. Her green eyes flashed and he shuddered, seeing so much evil and cold hatred in them.

'Let him be, Falka,' the other girl called, needlessly.

The green-eyed bandit settled for pushing Tuzik against the fence, and rode off after the Rats, without even looking back.

'Our benefactors!'

'Young hawks!'

Tuzik spat.

In the early evening, men in black uniforms arrived in the village. They were forbidding-looking horsemen from the fort near Fen Aspra. Their hooves thudded, their horses neighed and their weapons clanked. When asked, the village headman and other peasants lied through their teeth, and sent the pursuers on a false trail. No one asked Tuzik. Fortunately.

When he returned from the pasture and went into his garden, he heard voices. He recognised the twittering of Zgarba the carter's twin girls, the cracking falsettos of his neighbour's adolescent boys. And Milena's voice. *They're playing*, he thought. He turned the corner beyond the woodshed. And froze in his tracks.

'Milena!'

Milena, his only surviving daughter, the apple of his eye, had hung a piece of wood across her back on a string, like a sword. She'd let her hair down, attached a cockerel's feather to her woollen hat, and tied her mother's kerchief around her neck. In a bizarre, fanciful bow.

Her eyes were green.

Tuzik had never beaten his daughter before, never raised his hand against her.

That was the first time.

Lightning flashed on the horizon and thunder rumbled. A gust of wind raked across the surface of the Ribbon.

There's going to be a storm, thought Milva, *and after the storm the rain will set in. The chaffinches weren't mistaken*.

She urged her horse on. She would have to hurry if she wanted to catch up with the Witcher before the storm broke.

I have met many military men in my life. I have known marshals, generals, commanders and governors, the victors of numerous campaigns and battles. I've listened to their stories and recollections. I've seen them poring over maps, drawing lines of various colours on them, making plans, thinking up strategies. In those paper wars everything worked, everything functioned, everything was clear and everything was in exemplary order. That's how it has to be, explained the military men. The army represents discipline and order above all. The army cannot exist without discipline and order.

So it is all the stranger that real wars – and I have seen several real wars – have as much in common with discipline and order as a whorehouse with a fire raging through it.

Dandelion, *Half a Century of Poetry*

Chapter Two

The crystalline clear water of the Ribbon brimmed over the edge of the drop in a smooth, gentle arc, falling in a soughing and frothing cascade among boulders as black as onyx. It broke up on them and vanished in a white foam, from where it spilt into a wide pool which was so transparent that every pebble and every green strand of waterweed swaying in the current could be seen in the variegated mosaic of the riverbed.

Both banks were overgrown with carpets of knotgrass, through which dippers bustled, proudly flashing the white ruffles on their throats. Above the knotgrass, bushes shimmered green, brown and ochre against spruce trees which looked as though they had been sprinkled with silver.

'Indeed,' Dandelion sighed. 'It's beautiful here.'

A large, dark bull trout attempted to jump the lip of the waterfall. For a moment it hung in the air, flexing its fins and flicking its tail, and then fell heavily into the seething foam.

The darkening sky to the south was split by a forked ribbon of lightning and the dull echo of distant thunder rumbled over the wall of trees. The Witcher's bay mare danced, jerked her head and bared her teeth, trying to spit out the bit. Geralt tugged the reins hard and the mare skittered backwards, dancing hooves clattering on the stones.

'Whoa! Whoaaa! Do you see her, Dandelion? Damned ballerina! I'm getting rid of this bloody beast the first chance I get! Strike me down, if I don't swap her for a donkey!'

'See that happening anytime soon?' said the poet, scratching the itching mosquito bites on the nape of his neck. 'This valley's savage landscape indeed offers unparalleled aesthetic impressions, but for a change I'd be happy to gaze on a less aesthetic tavern. I've spent almost a week admiring nothing but romantic nature, breathtaking panoramas and distant horizons. I miss the indoors. Particularly the kind where they serve warm victuals and cold beer.'

'You'll have to carry on missing them a bit longer,' said the Witcher, turning around in the saddle. 'That I miss civilisation a little too may alleviate your suffering. As you know, I was stuck in Brokilon for exactly thirty-six days . . . and nights too, when romantic nature was freezing my arse, crawling across my back and sprinkling dew on my nose— Whoaaa! Pox on you! Will you stop

sulking, you bloody nag?'

'It's the horseflies biting her. The bugs are getting vicious and bloodthirsty, because a storm's approaching. The thunder and lightning's getting more frequent to the south.'

'So I see,' the Witcher said, looking at the sky and reining in his skittish horse. 'And the wind's coming from a different direction, too. It smells of the sea. The weather's changing, without a doubt. Let's ride. Urge on that fat gelding of yours, Dandelion.'

'My steed is called Pegasus.'

'Of course, what else? Know what? Let's think up a name for my elven nag. Mmm . . .'

'Why not Roach?' mocked the troubadour.

'Roach,' agreed the Witcher. 'Nice.'

'Geralt?'

'Yes.'

'Have you ever had a horse that wasn't called Roach?'

'No,' answered the Witcher after a moment's thought. 'I haven't. Spur on that castrated Pegasus of yours, Dandelion. We've a long road ahead of us.'

'Indeed,' grunted the poet. 'Nilfgaard . . . How many miles away, do you reckon?'

'Plenty.'

'Will we make it before winter?'

'We'll ride to Verden first. We have to discuss . . . certain matters there.'

'What matters? You'll neither discourage me nor get rid of me. I'm coming along! That is my last word.'

'We shall see. As I said, we ride to Verden.'

'Is it far? Do you know these lands?'

'Yes I do. We are at Ceann Treise Falls and in front of us there's a place called Seventh Mile. Those are the Owl Hills beyond the river.'

'And we're heading south, downriver? The Ribbon joins the Yaruga near the stronghold at Bodrog . . .'

'We're heading south, but along the other bank. The Ribbon

bends towards the west and we'll go through the forest. I want to get to a place called Drieschot, or the Triangle. The borders of Verden, Brugge and Brokilon meet there.'

'And from there?'

'Along the Yaruga. To the mouth. And to Cintra.'

'And then?'

'And then we'll see. If at all possible, force that idle Pegasus of yours to go a little quicker.'

A downpour caught them as they were crossing, right in the middle of the river. First a strong wind got up, with hurricane-force gusts blowing their hair and mantles around and lashing their faces with leaves and branches torn from the trees along the banks. They urged on their horses with shouts and kicks of their heels, stirring up the water as they headed for the bank. Then the wind suddenly dropped and they saw a grey curtain of rain gliding towards them. The surface of the Ribbon turned white and boiling, as though someone were hurling great handfuls of gravel at the river.

Having reached the bank, drenched to the skin, they hurried to hide in the forest. The branches created a dense, green roof over their heads, but it was not a roof capable of protecting them from such a downpour. The rain lashed intensely and forced down the leaves, and was soon pouring on them almost as hard as it had in the open.

They wrapped themselves up in their mantles, put up their hoods and kept moving. It became dark among the trees, the only light coming from the increasingly frequent flashes of lightning. The thunder followed, with long, deafening crashes. Roach shied, stamped her hooves and skittered around. Pegasus remained utterly calm.

'Geralt!' Dandelion yelled, trying to outshout a peal of thunder which was crashing through the forest like a gigantic wagon. 'We have to stop! Let's shelter somewhere!'

'Where?' he shouted back. 'Ride on!'

And they rode on.

After some time the rain visibly eased off, the strong wind once again soughed in the branches, and the crashes of thunder stopped boring into their ears. They rode out onto a track among a dense alder grove, then into a clearing. A towering beech tree stood in the

middle. Beneath its boughs, on a thick, wide carpet of brown leaves and beechnuts, stood a wagon harnessed to a pair of mules. A wagoner sat on the coachman's seat pointing a crossbow at them. Geralt swore. His curse was drowned out by a clap of thunder.

'Put the bow down, Kolda,' said a short man in a straw hat, turning from the trunk of a beech tree, hopping on one leg and fastening his trousers. 'They're not the ones we're waiting for. But they are customers. Don't frighten away customers. We don't have much time, but there's always time to trade!'

'What the bloody hell?' muttered Dandelion behind Geralt's back.

'Over here, Master Elves!' the man in the hat called over. 'Don't you worry, no harm will come your way. N'ess a tearth! Va, Seidhe. Ceadmil! We're mates, right? Want to trade? Come on, over here, under this tree, out of the rain!'

Geralt wasn't surprised by the wagoner's mistake. Both he and Dandelion were wrapped in grey elven mantels. He was also wearing a jerkin decorated with the kind of leafy pattern elves favoured, given to him by the dryads, was riding a horse with typical elven trappings and a decorated bridle. His face was partially hidden by his hood. As far as the foppish Dandelion was concerned, he was regularly mistaken for an elf or half-elf, particularly since he had begun wearing his hair shoulder-length and taken up the habit of occasionally curling it with tongs.

'Careful,' Geralt muttered, dismounting. 'You're an elf. So don't open your trap if you don't have to.'

'Why?'

'Because they're hawkers.'

Dandelion hissed softly. He knew what that meant.

Money made the world go round, and supply was driven by demand. The Scoia'tael roaming the forests gathered saleable booty that was useless to them, while suffering from a shortage of equipment and weapons themselves. That was how forest trading began. And how a class of humans who earned their living from this kind of trade sprang up. The wagons of profiteers who traded with the Squirrels began appearing clandestinely on forest tracks, paths, glades and clearings. The elves called them *hav'caaren*, an untranslatable word, but one which was associated with rapacious greed. Among humans the term 'hawker' became widespread, and the connotations were even more hideous than usual, because the traders themselves were so awful. Cruel and ruthless, they stopped

at nothing, not even killing. A hawker caught by the army could not count on mercy. Hence he was not in the habit of showing it himself. If they came across anyone who might turn them in, hawkers would reach for a crossbow or a knife without a second thought.

So they were out of luck. It was fortunate the hawkers had taken them for elves. Geralt pulled his hood down over his eyes and began to wonder what would happen if the hav'caaren saw through the masquerade.

'What foul weather,' said the trader, rubbing his hands. 'It's pouring like the sky was leaking! Awful tedd, ell'ea? But what to do, there's no bad weather for doing business. There's only bad goods and bad money, innit! You know what I'm saying?'

Geralt nodded. Dandelion grunted something from under his hood. Luckily for them, the elves' contemptuous dislike of conversing with humans was generally known and came as no surprise. The wagoner did not put the crossbow down, however, which was not a good sign.

'Who are you with? Whose commando?' the hawker asked, unconcerned, as any serious trader would be, by the reticence of his customers. 'Coinneach Dá Reo's? Or Angus Bri-Cri's? Or maybe Riordain's? I heard Riordain put some royal bailiffs to the sword. They were travelling home after they'd done their duty, collecting a levy. And they had it in coinage, not grain. I don't take wood tar nor grain in payment, nor blood-stained clothing, and if we're talking furs, only mink, sable or ermine. But what I like most is common coinage, precious stones and trinkets! If you have them we can trade! I only have first-class goods! Evelienn; vara en ard scedde, ell'ea, you know what I mean? I've got everything. Take a look.'

The trader went over to the wagon and pulled back the edge of the wet tarpaulin. They saw swords, bows, bunches of arrows and saddles. The hawker rooted around among them and took out an arrow. The arrowhead was serrated and sawn through.

'You won't find any other traders selling this,' he said boastfully. 'They'd shit themselves if they were to touch 'em. You'd be torn apart by horses if you were caught with arrows like that. But I know what you Squirrels like. Customer comes first, and you've got to take a risk when you barter, as long as there's a profit from it! I've got barbed arrowheads at . . . nine orens a dozen. Naev'de aen tvedeane, ell'ea, got it, Seidhe? I swear I'm not fleecing you, I don't

make much myself, I swear on my little children's heads. And if you take three dozen straight away, I'll knock a bit off the price. It's a bargain, I swear, a sheer bargain— Hey, Seidhe, hands off my wagon!'

Dandelion nervously withdrew his hand from the tarpaulin and pulled his hood further down over his face. Once again, Geralt quietly cursed the bard's irrepressible curiosity.

'Mir'me vara,' mumbled Dandelion, raising his hand in a gesture of apology. 'Squaess'me.'

'No harm done,' said the hawker, grinning. 'But no looking in there, because there's other goods in the wagon too. Not for sale, those, not for Seidhe. A special order, ha, ha. But that's enough rabbiting . . . Show us the colour of your money.'

Here we go, thought Geralt, looking at the wagoner's nocked crossbow. He had reason to believe the quarrel's tip was barbed too – just like the arrows he'd been so proudly shown moments before – and would, after entering the belly, exit through the back in three or sometimes four places, turning the victim's internal organs into a very messy goulash.

'N'ess tedd,' he said, trying to speak in a singsong way. 'Tearde. Mireann vara, va'en vort. We'll trade when we return from the commando. Ell'ea? Understood, Dh'oine?'

'Understood,' the hawker said, spitting. 'Understood that you're skint. You'd like the goods, you just don't have the readies. Be off with you! And don't come back, because I'm meeting important parties here. It'll be safer if they don't clap eyes on you. Go to—'

He broke off, hearing the snorting of a horse.

'Damn it!' he snarled. 'It's too late! They're here! Hoods down, elves! Don't move and button your lips! Kolda, you ass, put that crossbow down and fast!'

The heavy rain, thunder and the carpet of leaves had dampened the thudding of hooves, which meant the riders had been able to ride up undetected and surround the beech tree in an instant. They weren't Scoia'tael. Squirrels didn't wear armour, and the metal helmets, spaulders and hauberks of the eight horsemen surrounding the tree were glistening in the rain.

One of the horsemen approached at a walk and towered over the hawker like a mountain. He was of impressive height and was mounted on a powerful warhorse. A wolf skin was draped over his

armoured shoulders and his face was obscured by a helmet with a broad, protruding nose-guard reaching down to his lower lip. The stranger was holding a menacing-looking war hammer.

'Rideaux!' he called huskily.

'Faoiltiarna!' replied the trader in a slightly quavering voice.

The horseman came even closer and leant forward. Water poured down from his steel nose-guard straight onto his vambrace and the balefully glistening point of the hammer.

'Faoiltiarna!' the hawker repeated, bowing low. He removed his hat and the rain immediately plastered his thinning hair to his head. 'Faoiltiarna! I'm your man; I know the password and the countersign . . . I've been with Faoiltiarna, Your Lordship . . . Here I am, as arranged . . .'

'And those men, who are they?'

'My escort,' the hawker said, bowing even lower. 'You know, elves . . .'

'The prisoner?'

'On the wagon. In a coffin.'

'In a coffin?' The thunder partially drowned the furious roar of the horseman. 'You won't get away with this! Viscount de Rideaux gave clear instructions that the prisoner was to be handed over alive!'

'He's alive, he's alive,' the trader gibbered hurriedly. 'As per orders . . . Shoved into a coffin, but alive . . . The coffin wasn't my idea, Your Lordship. It was Faoiltiarna's . . .'

The horseman rapped the hammer against his stirrup, as a sign. Three other horsemen dismounted and pulled the tarpaulin off the wagon. When they had thrown various saddles, blankets and bunches of harnesses onto the ground, Geralt actually saw a coffin made of fresh pine, lit by a flash of lightning. He didn't look too closely, however. He felt a tingling in the tips of his fingers. He knew what was about to happen.

'What's all this, Your Lordship?' the hawker said, looking at the goods lying on the wet leaves. 'You're chucking all my gear out of the wagon.'

'I'll buy it all. Along with the horse and cart.'

'Aaah,' a repulsive grin crept over the trader's bristly face. 'Now you're talking. That'll be . . . Let me think . . . Five hundred, if

you'll excuse me, Your Nobleness, if we're talking Temerian currency. If it's your florins, then it'll be forty-five.'

'That's cheap,' snorted the horseman, smiling eerily behind his nose-guard. 'Come closer.'

'Watch out, Dandelion,' hissed the Witcher, imperceptibly unfastening the buckle of his mantle. It thundered once more.

The hawker approached the horseman, naively counting on the deal of his life. And in a way it was the deal of his life, not the best, perhaps, but certainly the last. The horseman stood in his stirrups and drove the point of the hammer down with great force onto the hawker's bald crown. The trader dropped without a sound, shuddered, flapped his arms and scraped the wet carpet of leaves with his heels. One of the men rummaging around on the wagon threw a leather strap around the wagoner's neck and pulled it tight; the other leapt forward and stabbed him with a dagger.

One of the horsemen raised his crossbow quickly to his shoulder and took aim at Dandelion. But Geralt already had a sword – one of those thrown from the wagon – in his hand. Seizing the weapon halfway down the blade, he flung it like a javelin and hit the crossbowman, who fell off the horse with an expression of utter astonishment on his face.

'Run, Dandelion!'

Dandelion caught up with Pegasus and leapt for the saddle with a desperate bound. The jump was a tad too desperate, however, and the poet was a tad too inexperienced. He didn't hang onto the pommel and tumbled to the ground on the other side of the horse. And that saved his life, as the blade of the attacking horseman's sword cut through the air above Pegasus's ears with a hiss. The gelding shied, jerked, and collided with the attacker's horse.

'They aren't elves!' yelled the horseman in the helmet with the nose-guard, drawing his sword. 'Take them alive! Alive!'

One of the men who had jumped down from the wagon hesitated on hearing the order. Geralt, however, had already drawn his own sword and didn't hesitate for a second. The fervour of the other two men was somewhat cooled by the fountain of blood which spurted over them. He took advantage of the situation and cut one of them down. But the horsemen were already charging at him. He ducked under their swords, parried their blows, dodged aside and suddenly felt a piercing pain in his right knee. He could feel himself keeling over. He wasn't hurt; the injured leg, which had been treated in

Brokilon, had simply crumpled under him without warning.

The foot soldier aiming for him with the butt of a battle-axe suddenly groaned and lurched forward, as though someone had shoved him hard in the back. Before he fell, the Witcher saw an arrow with long fletchings sticking out of his assailant's side, driven in to halfway up the shaft. Dandelion yelled; a thunderclap drowned out his cry.

Geralt, who was hanging on to one of the cartwheels, saw a fair-haired girl with a drawn bow dashing out of an alder grove. The horsemen saw her too. They couldn't fail to see her, because at that moment one of them tumbled backwards over his horse's croup, his throat transformed into a scarlet pulp by an arrow. The remaining three, including the leader in the helmet with the nose-guard, assessed the danger immediately and galloped towards the archer, hiding behind their horses' necks. They thought the horses' necks represented sufficient protection against the arrows. They were mistaken.

Maria Barring, also known as Milva, drew her bow. She took aim calmly, the bowstring pressed against her cheek.

The first of her attackers screamed and slid off his horse. One foot caught in the stirrup and he was trampled beneath the horse's iron-shod hooves. Another arrow hurled the second from his saddle. The third man, the leader, who was already close, stood in the saddle and raised his sword to strike. Milva did not even flinch. Fearlessly looking straight at her attacker, she bent her bow and shot an arrow right into his face from a distance of five paces, striking just to the side of the steel nose-guard and jumping aside as she shot. The arrow passed right through his skull, knocking off his helmet. The horse did not slow its gallop. The horseman, now lacking a helmet and a considerable part of his skull, remained in the saddle for a few seconds, then slowly tipped over and crashed into a puddle. The horse neighed and ran on.

Geralt struggled to his feet and massaged his leg which, though painful, for a wonder seemed to be functioning normally. He could stand on it without difficulty and walk. Next to him, Dandelion hauled himself up, throwing off the corpse with a mutilated throat which was weighing down on him. The poet's face was the colour of quicklime.

Milva came closer, pulling an arrow from a dead man as she approached.

'Thank you,' the Witcher said. 'Dandelion, say thank you. This is

Maria Barring, or Milva. It's thanks to her we're alive.'

Milva yanked an arrow from another of the dead bodies and examined the bloody arrowhead. Dandelion mumbled incoherently, bent over in a courtly – but somewhat quavering – bow, then dropped to his knees and vomited.

'Who's that?' the archer asked, wiping the arrowhead on some wet leaves and replacing it in her quiver. 'A comrade of yours, Witcher?'

'Yes. His name's Dandelion. He's a poet.'

'A poet,' Milva watched the troubadour wracked by attacks of dry retching and then looked up. 'That I can understand. But I don't quite understand why he's puking here, instead of writing rhymes in a quiet spot somewhere. But I suppose that's none of my business.'

'It is yours, in a sense. You saved his skin. And mine too.'

Milva wiped her rain-splashed face, with the imprint of the bowstring still visible on it. Although she had shot several arrows, there was only one imprint; the bowstring pressed against the same place each time.

'I was already in the alder grove when you started talking to the hawker,' she said. 'I didn't want the scoundrel to see me, for there was no need. And then those others arrived and the slaughter began. You messed a few of them up very nicely. You know how to swing a sword, I'll give you that. Even if you are a cripple. You should have stayed in Brokilon till your peg healed instead of making it worse. You might limp for the rest of your life. You realise that, don't you?'

'I'll survive.'

'I reckon you will, too. I followed you to warn you, and to make you turn back. Your quest won't come to anything. There's a war raging in the south. The Nilfgaardian Army are marching on Brugge from Drieschot.'

'How do you know?'

'Just look at them,' the girl said, making a sweeping gesture and pointing at the bodies and the horses. 'I mean, they're Nilfgaardians! Can't you see the suns on their helmets? The embroidery on their saddlecloths? Pack up your things, and we'll take to our heels; more of them may arrive any moment. These were mounted scouts.'

‘I don’t think they were just scouts,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘They were after something.’

‘What might that be, just out of interest?’

‘That,’ he said, pointing at the pinewood coffin lying in the wagon, now darkened from the rain. It wasn’t raining as hard as it had been during the short battle, and it had stopped thundering. The storm was moving north. The Witcher picked up his sword from among the leaves and jumped onto the wagon, quietly cursing because his knee still hurt.

‘Help me get it open.’

‘What do you want with a stiff . . . ?’ Milva broke off, seeing the holes bored into the lid. ‘Bloody hell! Was the hawker lugging a live person around in here?’

‘It’s some kind of prisoner,’ Geralt said, levering the lid open. ‘The trader was waiting for these Nilfgaardians, to hand him over to them. They exchanged passwords and countersigns . . .’

The lid tore off with the sound of splitting wood, revealing a man with a gag over his mouth, his arms and legs fastened to the sides of the coffin by leather straps. The Witcher leant over. He took a good look. And again, this time more intently. And swore.

‘Well I never,’ he drawled. ‘What a surprise. Who would have thought it?’

‘Do you know him, Witcher?’

‘By sight.’ He smiled hideously. ‘Put the knife away, Milva. Don’t cut his bonds. It seems this is an internal Nilfgaardian matter. We shouldn’t get involved. Let’s leave him as he is.’

‘Am I hearing right?’ Dandelion asked, joining in from behind. He was still pale, but curiosity had overcome his other emotions. ‘Are you planning to leave him tied up in the forest? I’m guessing you’ve recognised someone you have a bone to pick with, but he’s a prisoner, by the Gods! He was the prisoner of the men who jumped us and almost killed us. And the enemy of our enemy . . .’

He broke off, seeing the Witcher removing a knife from his boot-top. Milva coughed quietly. The captive’s dark blue eyes, previously screwed up against the rain, widened. Geralt leant over and cut the strap fastened around the prisoner’s left arm.

‘Look, Dandelion,’ he said, seizing the captive’s wrist and raising his now-free arm. ‘Do you see the scar on his hand? Ciri did that. On the Isle of Thanedd, a month ago. He’s a Nilfgaardian. He came

to Thanedd specifically to abduct Ciri and she wounded him, defending herself from being captured.'

'But it all came to nothing anyway,' muttered Milva. 'I sense something doesn't add up here. If he kidnapped your Ciri for Nilfgaard, how did he end up in this coffin? Why was that hawker handing him over to the Nilfgaardians? Take that gag off him, Witcher. Perhaps he'll tell us something.'

'I have no desire to listen to him,' he said flatly. 'My hand is itching to stab him through the heart, with him lying there looking at me. It's all I can do to restrain myself. And if he opens his mouth, I know I won't be able to hold back. I haven't told you everything.'

'Don't hold back then.' Milva shrugged her shoulders. 'Stick him, if he's such a villain. But do it quickly, because time's getting on. As I said, the Nilfgaardians will be here soon. I'm going to get my horse.'

Geralt straightened up and released the captive's hand. The man immediately loosened the gag and spat it out of his mouth. But he said nothing. The Witcher threw his knife onto the man's chest.

'I don't know what sins you committed for them to trap you in this chest, Nilfgaardian,' he said. 'And I don't care. I'll leave you this blade. Free yourself. Wait here for your own people, or escape into the forest, it's up to you.'

The captive said nothing. Tied up and lying in that wooden crate, he looked even more miserable and defenceless than he had on Thanedd – and Geralt had seen him there on his knees, wounded and trembling with fear in a pool of blood. He also looked considerably younger now. The Witcher wouldn't have put him at more than twenty-five.

'I spared your life on the island,' he said. 'And I'm doing it again. But it's the last time. The next time we meet I'll kill you like a dog. Remember that. If you persuade your comrades to pursue us, take the coffin with you. It'll come in useful. Let's go, Dandelion.'

'Make haste!' Milva shouted, turning away at full gallop from the westward track. 'But not that way! Into the trees, by thunder, into the trees!'

'What's going on?'

'A large group of riders are heading towards us from the Ribbon! It's Nilfgaard! What are you staring at? To horse, before they're upon us!'

The battle for the village had been going on for an hour and wasn't showing any signs of finishing soon. The infantry, holding out behind stone walls, fences and upturned wagons, had repulsed three attacks by the cavalry, who came charging at them from the causeway. The width of the causeway did not permit the horsemen to gain enough momentum for a frontal attack, but allowed the foot soldiers to concentrate their defence. As a result, waves of cavalry repeatedly foundered on the barricades, behind which the desperate but fierce soldiers were shooting a hail of quarrels and arrows into the mounted throng. The cavalry seethed and teemed under this assault, and then the defenders rushed out at them in a rapid counterattack, fighting furiously with battle-axes, guisarmes and studded flails. The cavalry retreated to the ponds, leaving human and equine corpses behind, while the infantry concealed themselves among the barricades and hurled filthy insults at the enemy. After a while, the cavalry formed up and attacked once again.

And again.

'Who do you think's fighting whom?' Dandelion asked once more, but indistinctly, as he was trying to soften and chew a piece of hard tack he had scrounged from Milva.

They were sitting on the very edge of the cliff, well hidden among juniper shrubs. They were able to watch the battle without being afraid anyone would notice them. Actually, they could do nothing but watch. They had no choice: a battle was raging in front of them and a forest fire was raging behind them.

'It's easy to identify them,' Geralt said, reluctantly responding to Dandelion's question. 'They're Nilfgaardian horsemen.'

'And the infantry?'

'The infantry aren't Nilfgaardian.'

'The horsemen are regular cavalrymen from Verden,' said Milva, until then sombre and strangely taciturn. 'They have the Verdenian checkerboard emblem sewn onto their tunics. And the ones in the village are the Bruggian regular infantry. You can tell by their banners.'

Indeed, encouraged by another small victory, the infantrymen raised their green standard – with a white cross moline – above the entrenchment. Geralt had been watching intently, but hadn't noticed the standard before. It must have gone missing at the start of the battle.

‘Are we staying here for much longer?’ Dandelion asked.

‘Oh dear,’ muttered Milva ‘Here he goes. Take a look around! Whichever way you turn, it looks pretty shitty, doesn’t it?

Dandelion didn’t have to look or turn around. The entire horizon was striped with columns of smoke. It was thickest to the north and the west, where the armies had set fire to the forests. Smoke was also rising into the sky in many places to the south, where they had been heading when the battle had barred their way. And during the hour they had spent on the hill, smoke had also started rising to the east.

‘However,’ the archer began a moment later, looking at Geralt, ‘I’d really like to know what you intend doing now, Witcher. Behind us we’ve got Nilfgaard and a burning forest, and you can see for yourself what’s in front of us. So what are your plans?’

‘My plans haven’t changed. I’ll wait for this scrap to finish and then I’ll head south. Towards the Yaruga.’

‘I think you’ve lost your mind.’ Milva scowled. ‘Can’t you see what’s happening? It’s as clear as the nose on your face that it’s not some leaderless band of mercenaries, but something called war. Nilfgaard and Verden are on the march. They’re sure to have crossed the Yaruga in the south and probably the whole of Brugge and possibly Sodden are in flames—’

‘I have to get to the Yaruga.’

‘Excellent. And what then?’

‘I’ll find a boat, I’ll sail downstream and try to make it to the delta. Then a ship— I mean, hell, some ships must still sail from there—’

‘To Nilfgaard?’ she snorted. ‘So the plans haven’t changed?’

‘You don’t have to go with me.’

‘No, I don’t. And praise the Gods for that, because I don’t have a death wish. I’m not afraid, but mind you: getting yourself killed is no claim to fame.’

‘I know,’ he replied calmly. ‘I know from experience. I wouldn’t be heading that way if I didn’t have to. But I have to, so I’m going. Nothing’s going to stop me.’

‘Ah,’ she said, looking him up and down. ‘Listen to this hero, his voice like someone scraping a sword across a shield. If Imperator Emhyr could hear you, I’m sure he’d be shitting his britches in

terror. “To my side, guards, to my side, my imperial regiments, oh woe is me, the Witcher’s heading for Nilfgaard in a rowing boat, soon he’ll be here to take my crown and life from me! I’m doomed!” ’

‘Give over, Milva.’

‘I won’t! It’s time someone finally told you the truth to your face. Fuck me with a mangy rabbit if I’ve ever seen a stupider clod! You’re going to snatch your maid from Emhyr? The same maid Emhyr has got lined up as his Imperatoress? The girl he snatched from Thanedd? Emhyr’s got long hands. They don’t let go of what they seize. The kings stand no chance against him, but still you fancy yours?’

He didn’t answer.

‘You’re heading for Nilfgaard,’ Milva repeated, shaking her head in mock sympathy. ‘To fight the Imperator and rescue his fiancée. But have you thought about what might happen? When you get there, when you find Ciri in her imperial apartments, all dressed in gold and silk, what will you say to her? Follow me, my darling. What do you want with an imperial throne? We’ll live together in a shack and eat bark during the lean season. Look at yourself, you lame scruff. You even got your coat and boots from the dryads, stripped from some elf who died of his wounds in Brokilon. And do you know what’ll happen when your maid sees you? She’ll spit in your eye and scorn you. She’ll order the imperial guard to throw you out on your ear and set the dogs on you!’

Milva was speaking louder and louder and she was almost shouting by the end of her tirade. Not only from anger, but also to be heard over the intensifying noise of battle. Down below, scores – or even hundreds – of throats were roaring. Another attack descended on the Bruggian infantry. But this time from two sides simultaneously. Verdenians dressed in greyish-blue tunics adorned with a chequered pattern galloped along the causeway, while a powerful cavalry force in black cloaks dashed out from behind the ponds, striking the defenders’ flank.

‘Nilfgaard,’ said Milva tersely.

This time the Bruggian infantry had no chance. The cavalry forced their way through the barricades and ripped the defenders apart with their swords. The standard with the cross fell. Some of the infantrymen laid down their arms and surrendered; others tried to escape towards the trees. But as they ran a third unit emerged from the trees and attacked; a mixed band of light cavalry.

‘The Scoia’tael,’ Milva said, getting to her feet. ‘Now do you understand what’s going on, Witcher? Do you get it? Nilfgaard, Verden and the Squirrels all at once. War. Like it was in Aedirn a month ago.’

‘It’s a raid,’ Geralt said, shaking his head. ‘A plundering raid. Only horsemen, no infantry . . .’

‘The infantry are capturing forts and their garrisons. Where do you think those plumes of smoke are coming from? Smokehouses?’

The bestial, dreadful screams of people fleeing only to be caught and slaughtered by the Squirrels drifted up from the village. Smoke and flames belched from the roofs of the cottages. A strong wind was swiftly spreading the fire from one thatched roof to another.

‘Look at that village going up in smoke,’ muttered Milva. ‘And they’d only just finished rebuilding it after the last war. They sweated for two years to put up the foundations and it’ll burn down in a few seconds. That’s a lesson to be learned!’

‘What lesson would that be?’ asked Geralt brusquely.

She didn’t answer. The smoke from the burning village rose up to the top of the cliff, stung their eyes and made them water. They could hear the screams from the inferno. Dandelion suddenly went as white as a sheet.

The captives were driven into a huddle, surrounded by a ring of soldiers. On the order of a knight in a black-plumed helmet the horsemen began to slash and stab the unarmed villagers. They were trampled by horses as they fell. The ring tightened. The screams which reached the cliff top no longer resembled sounds made by humans.

‘And you want to travel south?’ asked the poet, looking meaningfully at the Witcher. ‘Through these fires? Where these butchers come from?’

‘Seems to me,’ Geralt replied reluctantly, ‘that we don’t have a choice.’

‘Yes, we do,’ Milva said. ‘I can lead you through the forests to the Owl Hills and back to Ceann Treise. And Brokilon.’

‘Through those burning forests? Through more skirmishes like this?’

‘It’s safer than the road south. It’s no more than fourteen miles to Ceann Treise and I know which paths to take.’

The Witcher looked down at the village perishing in the flames. The Nilfgaardians had dealt with the captives and the cavalry had formed up in marching order. The motley band of Scoia'tael set off along the highway leading east.

'I'm not going back,' he retorted. 'But you can escort Dandelion to Brokilon.'

'No!' the poet protested, although he still hadn't regained his normal colour. 'I'm going with you.'

Milva shrugged, picked up her quiver and bow, took a step towards the horses and then suddenly turned around.

'Devil take it!' she snapped. 'I've been saving elves from death for too long. I can't just let someone go to his death! I'll lead you to the Yaruga, you crazy fools. But by the eastern route, not the southern one.'

'The forests are burning there too.'

'I'll lead you through the fire. I'm used to it.'

'You don't have to, Milva.'

'Too right I don't. Now to horse! And get a bloody move on!'

They didn't get far. The horses had difficulty moving through the undergrowth and along the overgrown tracks, and they didn't dare use roads; the hoofbeats and clanking could be heard everywhere, betraying the presence of armed forces. Dusk surprised them among brush-covered ravines, so they stopped for the night. It wasn't raining and the sky was bright from the glow of fires.

They found a fairly dry place, wrapped themselves in their mantles and blankets and sat down. Milva went off to search the surrounding area. As soon as she moved away, Dandelion gave vent to the long-suppressed curiosity that the Brokilonian archer had aroused in him.

'That's a comely girl if ever there was one,' he murmured. 'You're lucky when it comes to the female of the species, Geralt. She's tall and curvaceous, and walks as though she were dancing. A little too slim in the hips for my taste, and a little too sturdy in the shoulders, but she's very womanly . . . And those two little apples in the front, ho, ho . . . Almost bursting out of her blouse—'

'Shut it, Dandelion.'

'I happened to bump against her by accident on the road,' the

poet dreamed on. ‘A thigh, I tell you, like marble. Methinks you weren’t bored during that month in Brokilon—’

Milva, who had just returned from her patrol, heard his theatrical whispering and noticed their expressions.

‘Are you talking about me, poet? What are you staring at as soon as my back’s turned? Has a bird shat on me?’

‘We’re amazed by your archery skills.’ Dandelion grinned. ‘You wouldn’t find much competition at an archery tournament.’

‘Yes, yes, I’ve heard it all before, and the rest.’

‘I’ve read,’ Dandelion said, winking tellingly at Geralt, ‘that the best archeresses can be found among the Zerrikanian steppe clans. I gather that some even cut off their left breast, so it won’t interfere when they draw the bow. Their breast, they say, gets in the way of the bowstring.’

‘Some poet must have dreamed that up,’ Milva snorted. ‘He sits down and writes twaddle like that, dipping his quill in a chamber pot, and foolish people believe it. Think I use my tits to shoot with, do you? You pull the bowstring back to your kisser, standing side on, like this. Nothing snags on the bowstring. All that talk of cutting off a tit is hogwash, thought up by some layabout with nothing but women’s bodies on the brain.’

‘Thank you for your kind words about poets and poetry. And the archery lesson. Good weapon, a bow. You know what? I think the arts of war will develop in that direction. People are going to fight at a distance in the wars of the future. They’ll invent a weapon with such a long range that the two sides will be able to kill each other while completely out of eyeshot.’

‘Twaddle,’ Milva said bluntly. ‘A bow’s a good thing, but war’s all about man against man, a sword’s length apart, the stouter one smashing the weaker one’s head in. That’s how it’s always been and that’s how it’ll always be. And once that finishes, all wars will finish. But for now, you’ve seen how wars are fought. You saw it in that village, by the causeway. And that’s enough idle talk. I’m going to have another look around. The horses are snorting as though a wolf was sniffing around . . .’

‘Comely, oh yes.’ Dandelion followed her with his gaze. ‘Mmm . . . Going back to the village by the causeway and what she told you when we were sitting on the cliff— Don’t you think there’s something in what she says?’

‘About?’

‘About . . . Ciri,’ the poet stammered slightly. ‘Our beautiful, sharp-shooting wench seems not to understand the relationship between you and Ciri, and thinks, it seems to me, that you intend to woo her away from the Nilfgaardian Imperator. That that’s the real motive behind your expedition to Nilfgaard.’

‘So in that regard she’s totally wrong. But what’s she right about?’

‘Take it easy, keep your cool. Nonetheless stare the truth in the face. You took Ciri under your wing and consider yourself her guardian, but she’s no ordinary girl. She’s a princess, Geralt. Without beating about the bush, she’s in line for the throne. For the palace. And the crown. Maybe not necessarily the Nilfgaardian crown. I don’t know if Emhyr is the best husband for her—’

‘Precisely. You don’t know.’

‘And do *you*?’

The Witcher wrapped himself up in a blanket.

‘You’re heading, quite naturally, towards a conclusion,’ he said. ‘But don’t bother; I know what you’re thinking. “There’s no point saving Ciri from a fate she’s been doomed to since the day of her birth. Because Ciri, who doesn’t need saving at all, will be quite ready to order the imperial guard to throw us down the stairs. Let’s forget about her.” Right?’

Dandelion opened his mouth, but Geralt didn’t let him speak.

‘ “After all,’ he continued in an even harsher voice, ‘the girl wasn’t abducted by a dragon or an evil wizard, nor did pirates seize her for the ransom money. She’s not locked in a tower, a dungeon or a cage; she’s not being tortured or starved. Quite the opposite; she sleeps on damask, eats from silverware, wears silks and lace, is bedecked with jewellery and is just waiting to be crowned. In short, she’s happy. Meanwhile some witcher who, by some unfortunate fate happened upon her, has taken it upon himself to disrupt, spoil, destroy and crush that happiness beneath the rotten old boots he pulled off some dead elf.” Right?’

‘That’s not what I was thinking,’ Dandelion muttered.

‘He wasn’t talking to you,’ Milva said, suddenly looming up from the darkness and after a moment’s hesitation sitting down beside the Witcher. ‘That was for me. It was my words that upset him. I spoke in anger, without thinking . . . Forgive me, Geralt. I know what it’s like when a claw scratches an open wound. Come on, don’t

fret. I won't do it any more. Do you forgive me? Or should I say sorry by kissing you?'

Not waiting either for an answer or permission she grabbed him powerfully by the neck and kissed him on the cheek. He squeezed her shoulder hard.

'Slide nearer.' He coughed. 'And you too, Dandelion. We'll be warmer together.'

They said nothing for a long time. Clouds scudded across a sky bright with firelight, obscuring the twinkling stars.

'I want to tell you something,' Geralt said at last. 'But promise you won't laugh.'

'Out with it.'

'I had some strange dreams. In Brokilon. At first I thought they were ravings; something wrong with my head. You know, I got a good beating on Thanedd. But I keep having the same dream. Always the same one.'

Dandelion and Milva said nothing.

'Ciri,' he began a moment later, 'isn't sleeping in a palace beneath a brocade canopy. She's riding a horse through a dusty village . . . the villagers are pointing at her. They're calling her by a name I don't recognise. Dogs are barking. She's not alone. There are others with her. There's a crop-haired girl, who's holding Ciri's hand . . . and Ciri's smiling at her but I don't like that smile. I don't like her heavy make-up . . . But the thing I like least is that she leaves a trail of death.'

'So where is the girl?' Milva mused, snuggling up to him like a cat. 'Not in Nilfgaard?'

'I don't know,' he said with difficulty. 'But I've had the same dream several times. The problem is I don't believe in dreams like that.'

'Well, you're a fool. I do.'

'I don't *know* it,' he repeated. 'But I can *feel* it. There's fire ahead of her and death behind her. I have to make haste.'

It began to rain at dawn. Not like the previous day, when the storm had been accompanied by a brief but strong downpour. The sky turned grey and took on a leaden patina. It began to spit with rain; a fine, even and drenching drizzle.

They rode east. Milva led the way. When Geralt pointed out to her that the Yaruga was to the south, the archer growled and reminded him she was the guide and knew what she was doing. He said nothing after that. After all, the most important thing was that they were under way. The direction wasn't so important.

They rode in silence, wet, chilled to the bone, and hunched over their saddles. They kept to footpaths, stole along forest tracks, cut across highways. They disappeared into the undergrowth at the sound of thudding hooves of cavalry tramping along the roads. They gave a wide berth to the uproar of battle. They rode past villages engulfed in flames, past smoking and glowing rubble, and past settlements and hamlets which had been razed to black squares of burnt earth and the acrid stench of rain-soaked charred embers. They startled flocks of crows feeding on corpses. They passed groups and columns of peasants bent beneath bundles, fleeing from war and conflagration, dazed, responding to questions with nothing but a fearful, uncomprehending and mute raising of their eyes, emptied by misfortune and horror.

They rode east, amidst fire and smoke, amidst drizzle and fog, and the tapestry of war unfolded in front of their eyes. So many sights.

There was a black silhouette of a crane projecting among the ruins of a burnt-out village, with a naked corpse dangling from it head downwards. Blood from the mutilated crotch and belly dripped down onto its chest and face, to hang like icicles from its hair. The Rune of Ard was visible on its back. Carved with a knife.

'An'givare,' Milva said, throwing her wet hair off her neck. 'The Squirrels were here.'

'What does an'givare mean?'

'Informer.'

There was a grey horse, saddled in a black caparison. It was walking unsteadily around the edge of the battlefield, wandering between piles of corpses and broken spears stuck into the ground, whinnying quietly and pitifully, dragging its entrails behind it, dangling from its mutilated belly. They couldn't finish it off, for on the battlefield – apart from the horse – there were also marauders robbing corpses.

There was a spread-eagled girl, lying near a burnt-out farmyard, naked, bloody, staring at the sky with glazed eyes.

'They say war's a male thing,' Milva growled. 'But they have no

mercy on women; they have to have their fun. Fucking heroes; damn them all.'

'You're right. But you won't change it.'

'I already have. I ran away from home. I didn't want to sweep the cottage and scrub the floors. I wasn't going to wait until they arrived and put the cottage to the torch, spread me out on the very same floor and . . .' She broke off, and spurred her horse forward.

And later there was a tar house. Here Dandelion puked up everything he'd eaten that day: some hard tack and half a stockfish.

In the tar house some Nilfgaardians – or perhaps Scoia'tael – had dealt with a group of captives. It was impossible even to guess at the exact size of the group. Because during the carnage they had not only used arrows, swords and lances, but also woodmen's tools they'd found there: axes, drawknives and crosscut saws.

There were other scenes of war, but Geralt, Dandelion and Milva didn't remember them. They had discarded them from their memories.

They had become indifferent.

Over the next two days they didn't even cover twenty miles. It continued to rain. The earth, absorbent after the summer drought, sucked up water like a sponge, and the forest tracks were transformed into muddy slides. Fog and haze prevented them from spotting the smoke from fires, but the stench of burning buildings told them the armies were still close at hand and were still setting light to anything that would catch fire.

They didn't see any fugitives. They were alone in the forest. Or so they thought.

Geralt was the first to hear the snorting of the horse following in their tracks. With a stony countenance, he turned Roach back. Dandelion opened his mouth, but Milva gestured him to remain silent, and removed her bow from where it hung by her saddle.

The rider following them emerged from the brush. He saw they were waiting for him and reined back his horse, a chestnut colt. They stood in a silence broken only by the beating of the rain.

'I forbade you from riding after us,' the Witcher finally said.

The Nilfgaardian, whom Dandelion had last seen lying in a coffin, looked down at his horse's wet mane. The poet barely recognised

him, as he was now dressed in a hauberk, leather tunic and cloak, no doubt stripped from one of the horsemen killed by the wagon. However, he remembered the young face, which hadn't grown much more stubble since the adventure under the beech tree.

'I forbade it,' the Witcher repeated.

'You did,' the young man finally agreed. He spoke without a Nilfgaardian accent. 'But I must.'

Geralt dismounted, handing the reins to the poet. And drew his sword.

'Get down,' he said calmly. 'You've equipped yourself with some hardware, I see. Good. There was no way I could kill you then, while you were unarmed. Now it's different. Dismount.'

'I'm not fighting you. I don't want to.'

'So I imagine. Like all your fellow countrymen, you prefer another kind of fight. Like in that tar house, which you must have ridden past, following our trail. Dismount, I said.'

'I am Cahir Mawr Dyffryn aep Ceallach.'

'I didn't ask you to introduce yourself. I ordered you to dismount.'

'I will not. I don't want to fight you.'

'Milva.' The Witcher nodded at the archer. 'Be so kind as to shoot his horse from under him.'

'No!' the Nilfgaardian raised an arm, before Milva had time to nock her arrow. 'Please don't. I'm dismounting.'

'That's better. Now draw your sword, son.'

The young man folded his arms across his chest.

'Kill me, if you want. If you prefer, order the she-elf to shoot me. I'm not fighting you. I am Cahir Mawr Dyffryn . . . son of Ceallach. I want . . . I want to join you.'

'I must have misheard. Say that again.'

'I want to join you. You're riding to search for the girl. I want to help you. I have to help you.'

'He's a madman.' Geralt turned to Milva and Dandelion. 'He's taken leave of his senses. We're dealing with a madman.'

'He'd suit the company,' muttered Milva. 'He'd suit it perfectly.'

'Think his proposition over, Geralt,' Dandelion mocked. 'After all, he's a Nilfgaardian nobleman. Perhaps with his help it'll be easier

for us to get to—'

'Keep your tongue in check,' the Witcher interrupted the poet sharply. 'As I said, draw your sword, Nilfgaardian.'

'I am not going to fight. And I am not a Nilfgaardian. I come from Vicovaro, and my name is—'

'I'm not interested in your name. Draw your weapon.'

'No.'

'Witcher.' Milva leant down from the saddle and spat on the ground. 'Time's flying and the rain's falling. The Nilfgaardian doesn't want to fight, and although you're pulling a stern face, you won't cut him to pieces in cold blood. Do we have to hang about here all fucking day? I'll stick an arrow in his chestnut's underbelly and let's be on our way. He won't catch up on foot.'

Cahir, son of Ceallach, was by his chestnut colt in one bound, jumped into the saddle and galloped back the way he'd come, yelling at his steed to go faster. The Witcher watched him riding off for a moment then mounted Roach. In silence. Without looking back.

'I'm getting old,' he mumbled some time later, after Roach had caught up with Milva's black. 'I'm starting to develop scruples.'

'Aye, it can happen with old 'uns,' said the archer, looking at him in sympathy. 'A decoction of lungwort can help. But for now put a cushion on your saddle.'

'Scruples,' Dandelion explained gravely, 'are not the same as piles, Milva. You're confusing the terms.'

'Who could understand your smart-arsed chatter? You never stop jabbering, it's the only thing you know! Come on, let's ride!'

'Milva,' the Witcher asked a moment later, protecting his face from the rain, which stabbed against it as they galloped. 'Would you have killed the horse under him?'

'No,' she confessed reluctantly. 'The horse hadn't done anything. But that Nilfgaardian— Why in hell is he stalking us? Why does he say he has to?'

'Devil take me if I know.'

It was still raining when the forest suddenly came to an end and they rode onto a highway winding between the hills from the south

to the north. Or the other way around, depending on your point of view. What they saw on the highway didn't surprise them. They had already seen similar sights. Overturned and gutted wagons, dead horses, scattered bundles, saddlebags and baskets. And ragged shapes, which not long before had been people, frozen into strange poses.

They rode closer, without fear, because it was apparent that the slaughter had not taken place that day. They had come to recognise such things; or perhaps to sense them with a purely animalistic instinct, which the last days had awoken and sharpened in them. They had also learned to search through battlefields, because occasionally – though not often – they had managed to find a little food or a sack of fodder among the scattered objects.

They stopped by the last wagon of a devastated column. It had been pushed into the ditch, and was resting on the hub of a shattered wheel. Beneath the wagon lay a stout woman with an unnaturally twisted neck. The collar of her tunic was covered with rain-washed streaks of coagulated blood from her torn ear, from which an earring had been ripped. The sign on the tarpaulin pulled over the wagon read: 'Vera Loewenhaupt and Sons'. There was no sign of the sons.

'They weren't peasants,' Milva said through pursed lips. 'They were traders. They came from the south, wending from Dillingen towards Brugge, and were caught here. It's not good, Witcher. I thought we could turn south at this point, but now I truly have no idea what to do. Dillingen and the whole of Brugge is sure to be in Nilfgaardian hands, so we won't make it to the Yaruga this way. We'll have to go east, through Turlough. There are forests and wildernesses there, the army won't go that way.'

'I'm not going any further east,' Geralt protested. 'I have to get to the Yaruga.'

'You'll get there,' she replied, unexpectedly calm. 'But by a safer route. If we head south from here, you'll fall right into the Nilfgaardians' jaws. You won't gain anything.'

'I'll gain time,' he snapped, 'by heading east I'm just wasting it. I told you, I can't afford to—'

'Quiet,' Dandelion said suddenly, steering his horse around. 'Be quiet for a moment.'

'What is it?'

'I can hear . . . singing.'

The Witcher shook his head. Milva snorted.

‘You’re hearing things, poet.’

‘Quiet! Shut up! I’m telling you, someone’s singing! Can’t you hear it?’

Geralt lowered his hood; Milva also strained to listen and a moment later glanced at the Witcher and nodded silently.

The troubadour’s musical ear hadn’t let him down. What had seemed impossible turned out to be true. Here they were, standing in the middle of a forest, in the drizzle, on a road strewn with corpses, and they could hear singing. Someone was approaching from the south, singing jauntily and gaily.

Milva tugged the reins of her black, ready to flee, but the Witcher gestured to her to wait. He was curious. Because the singing they could hear wasn’t the menacing, rhythmic, booming, massed singing of marching infantry, nor a swaggering cavalry song. The singing, which was becoming louder all the time, didn’t arouse any anxiety.

Quite the opposite.

The rain drummed on the foliage. They began to make out the words of the song. It was a merry song, which seemed strange, unnatural and totally out of place in this landscape of death and war.

Look how the wolf dances in the holt.

Teeth bared, tail waving, leaping like a colt.

Oh, why does he prance like one bewitched?

The frolicking beast simply hasn’t been hitched!

Oom-pah, oom-pah, oom-pah-pah!

Dandelion suddenly laughed, took his lute from under his wet mantle, and – ignoring the hissing from the Witcher and Milva – strummed the strings and joined in at the top of his voice:

Look how the wolf is dragging his paws.

Head drooping, tail hanging, clenching his jaws.

Oh, why is the beast in such a sorry state?

He's either proposed or he's married his mate!

'Ooh-hoo-ha!' came the roared response from many voices close by.

Thunderous laughter burst out, then someone whistled piercingly through their fingers, after which a strange but colourful company came walking around a bend in the highway, marching in single file, splashing mud with rhythmic steps of their heavy boots.

'Dwarves,' Milva said under her breath. 'But they aren't Scoia'tael. They don't have plaited beards.'

There were six of them, dressed in short, hooded capes, shimmering with countless shades of grey and brown, the kind which were usually worn by dwarves in foul weather. Capes like that, as Geralt knew, had the quality of being totally waterproof, which was achieved by the impregnation of wood tar over many years, not to mention dust from the highway and the remains of greasy food. These practical garments passed from fathers to oldest sons; as a result they were used exclusively by mature dwarves. And a dwarf attains maturity when his beard reaches his waist, which usually occurs at the age of fifty-five.

None of the approaching dwarves looked young. But none looked old either.

'They're leading some humans,' muttered Milva, indicating to Geralt with a movement of her head a small group emerging from the forest behind the company of dwarves, 'who must be fugitives, because they're laden down with goods and chattels.'

'The dwarves aren't exactly travelling light themselves,' Dandelion added.

Indeed, each dwarf was heaving a load that many humans and horses would soon have collapsed under. In addition to the ordinary sacks and saddlebags, Geralt noticed iron-bound chests, a large copper cauldron and something that looked like a small chest of drawers. One of them was even carrying a cartwheel on his back.

The one walking at the front wasn't carrying anything. He had a small battle-axe in his belt, on his back was a long sword in a scabbard wrapped in tabby cat skins, and on his shoulder sat a green parrot with wet, ruffled feathers. The dwarf addressed them.

'Greetings!' he roared, after coming to a halt in the middle of the road and putting his hands on his hips. 'These days it's better to

meet a wolf in the forest than a human. And if you do have such bad luck, you're more likely to be greeted with an arrow in the chest than a kind word! But whoever greets someone with a song or music must be a sound fellow! Or a sound wench; my apologies to the good lady! Greetings. I'm Zoltan Chivay.'

'I'm Geralt,' the Witcher introduced himself after a moment's hesitation. 'The singer is Dandelion. And this is Milva.'

''Kin' 'ell!' the parrot squawked.

'Shut your beak,' Zoltan Chivay growled at the bird. 'Excuse me. This foreign bird is clever but vulgar. I paid ten thalers for the freak. He's called Field Marshal Windbag. And while I'm at it, this is the rest of my party. Munro Bruys, Yazon Varda, Caleb Stratton, Figgis Merluzzo and Percival Schuttenbach.'

Percival Schuttenbach wasn't a dwarf. From beneath his wet hood, instead of a matted beard, stuck out a long, pointed nose, unerringly identifying its owner as one of the old and noble race of gnomes.

'And those,' Zoltan Chivay said, pointing at the small group of humans, who had stopped and were huddled together, 'are fugitives from Kernow. As you can see, they're women and children. There were more, but Nilfgaard seized them and their fellows three days ago, put some of them to the sword and scattered the others. We came across them in the forest and now we're travelling together.'

'It's bold of you,' the Witcher ventured, 'to be marching along the highway, singing as you go.'

'I don't reckon,' the dwarf said, wiggling his beard, 'that weeping as we go would be any better. We've been marching through the woods since Dillingen, quietly and out of sight, and after the army passed we joined the highway to make up time.' He broke off and looked around the battlefield.

'We've grown accustomed to sights like this,' he said, pointing at the corpses. 'Beyond Dillingen and the Yaruga there's nothing but dead bodies on the roads . . . Were you with this lot?'

'No. Nilfgaard put some traders to the sword.'

'Not Nilfgaard,' said the dwarf, shaking his head and looking at the dead with an indifferent expression. 'Scoia'tael. The regular army don't bother pulling arrows out of corpses. And a good arrowhead costs half a crown.'

'He knows his prices,' Milva muttered.

‘Where are you headed?’

‘South,’ Geralt answered immediately.

‘I advise you against it,’ Zoltan Chivay said, and shook his head again. ‘It’s sheer hell, fire and slaughter there. Dillingen is taken for sure, the Nilfgaardians are crossing the Yaruga in greater and greater numbers; any moment now they’ll flood the whole valley on the right bank. As you see, they’re also in front of us, to the north. They’re heading for the city of Brugge. So the only sensible direction to escape is east.’

Milva glanced knowingly at the Witcher, who refrained from comment.

‘And that’s where we’re headed; east,’ Zoltan Chivay continued. ‘The only chance is to hide behind the frontline, and wait until the Temerian Army finally start out from the River Ina in the east. Then we plan to march along forest tracks until we reach the hills. Turlough, then the Old Road to the River Chotla in Sodden, which flows into the Ina. We can travel together, if you wish. If it doesn’t bother you that we make slow progress. You’re mounted and I realise our refugees slow the pace down.’

‘It doesn’t seem to bother you, though,’ Milva said, looking at him intently. ‘A dwarf, even fully laden, can march thirty miles a day. Almost the same as a mounted human. I know the Old Road. Without those refugees you’d reach the Chotla in about three days.’

‘They are women and children,’ Zoltan Chivay said, sticking out his beard and his belly. ‘We won’t leave them to their fate. Would you suggest we do anything else, eh?’

‘No,’ the Witcher said. ‘No, we wouldn’t.’

‘I’m pleased to hear it. That means my first impressions didn’t deceive me. So what’s it to be? Do we march as one company?’

Geralt looked at Milva and the archer nodded.

‘Very well,’ Zoltan Chivay said, noticing the nod. ‘So let’s head off, before some raiding party chances upon us on the highway. But first— Yazon, Munro, search the wagons. If you find anything useful there, get it stowed away, and pronto. Figgis, check if our wheel fits that little wagon, it’ll be just right for us.’

‘It fits!’ yelled the one who’d been lugging the cartwheel. ‘Like it was made for it!’

‘You see, muttonhead? And you were so surprised when I made you take that wheel and carry it! Put it on! Help him, Caleb!’

In an impressively short time the wagon of the dead Vera Loewenhaupt had been equipped with a new wheel, stripped of its tarpaulin and inessential elements, and pulled out of the ditch and onto the road. All their goods were heaved onto it in an instant. After some thought, Zoltan Chivay also ordered the children to be loaded onto the wagon. The instruction was carried out reluctantly; Geralt noticed that the children's mothers scowled at the dwarves and tried to keep their distance from them.

With visible distaste, Dandelion watched two dwarves trying on articles of clothing removed from some corpses. The remaining dwarves rummaged around among the wagons, but didn't consider anything to be worth taking. Zoltan Chivay whistled through his fingers, signalling that the time for looting was over, and then he looked over Roach, Pegasus and Milva's black with an expert eye.

'Saddle horses,' he said, wrinkling his nose in disapproval. 'In other words: useless. Figgis and Caleb, to the shaft. We'll be hauling in turn. Maaaaarch!'

Geralt was certain the dwarves would quickly discard the wagon the moment it got well and truly stuck in soft, boggy ground, but he was mistaken. They were as strong as oxen, and the forest tracks leading east turned out to be grassy and not too swampy, even though it continued to rain without letting up. Milva became gloomy and grumpy, and only broke her silence to express the conviction that the horses' softened hooves would split at any moment. Zoltan Chivay licked his lips in reply, examined the hooves in question and declared himself a master at roasting horsemeat, which infuriated Milva.

They kept to the same formation, the core of which was formed by the wagon hauled on a shift system. Zoltan marched in front of the wagon. Next to him, on Pegasus, rode Dandelion, bantering with the parrot. Geralt and Milva rode behind them, and at the back trudged the six women from Kernow.

The leader was usually Percival Schuttenbach, the long-nosed gnome. No match for the dwarves in terms of height or strength, he was their equal in stamina and considerably superior in agility. During the march he never stopped roaming around and rummaging in bushes; then he would pull ahead and disappear, only to appear and with nervous, monkey-like gestures signal from a considerable distance away that everything was in order and that they could continue. Occasionally he would return and give a rapid

report about the obstacles on the track. Whenever he did, he would have a handful of blackberries, nuts or strange – but clearly tasty – roots for the four children sitting on the wagon.

Their pace was frightfully slow and they spent three days marching along forest tracks. They didn't happen upon any soldiers; they saw no smoke or the glow of fires. They were not alone, however. Every so often Percival spotted groups of fugitives hiding in the forests. They passed several such groups, hurriedly, because the expressions of the peasants armed with pitchforks and stakes didn't encourage them to try to make friends. There was nonetheless a suggestion to try to negotiate and leave the women from Kernow with one of the groups, but Zoltan was against it and Milva backed him up. The women were in no hurry at all to leave the company either. This was all the stranger since they treated the dwarves with such obvious, fearful aversion and reserve, hardly ever spoke, and kept out of the way during every stop.

Geralt ascribed the women's behaviour to the tragedy they had experienced a short time before, although he suspected that their aversion may have been due to the dwarves' casual ways. Zoltan and his company cursed just as filthily and frequently as the parrot called Field Marshal Windbag, but had a wider repertoire. They sang dirty songs, which Dandelion enthusiastically joined in with. They spat, blew their noses on their fingers and gave thunderous farts, which usually prompted laughs, jokes and competition. They only went into the bushes for major bodily needs; with the minor ones they didn't even bother moving very far away. This finally enraged Milva, who gave Zoltan a good telling-off when one morning he pissed on the still warm ashes of the campfire, totally oblivious to his audience. Having been dressed down, Zoltan was unperturbed and announced that shamefully concealing that kind of activity was only common among two-faced, perfidious people who were likely to be informers, and could be identified as such by doing just that. This eloquent explanation made no impression on the archer. The dwarves were treated to a rich torrent of abuse, with several very specific threats, which was effective, since they all obediently began to go into the bushes. To avoid laying themselves open to the appellation of 'perfidious informers', however, they went in a group.

The new company, nevertheless, changed Dandelion utterly. He got on famously with the dwarves, particularly when it turned out that some of them had heard of him and even knew his ballads and couplets. Dandelion dogged Zoltan's company. He wore a quilted

jacket he had weaselled out of the dwarves, and his crumpled hat with a feather was replaced by a swashbuckling marten-fur cap. He sported a broad belt with brass studs, into which he had stuck a cruel-looking knife he had been given. This knife pricked him in the side each time he tried to lean over. Fortunately, he quickly mislaid it and wasn't given another.

They wandered through the dense forests covering the hillsides of Turlough. The forests seemed deserted; there were no traces of any wild animals, for they had apparently been frightened away by the armies and fugitives. There was nothing to hunt, but they weren't immediately threatened by hunger. The dwarves were lugging along a large quantity of provisions. As soon as they were finished, however – and that occurred quickly, because there were many mouths to feed – Yazon Varda and Munro Bruys vanished soon after dark, taking an empty sack with them. When they returned at dawn, they had two sacks, both full. In one was fodder for the horses, in the other barley groats, flour, beef jerky, an almost entire cheese, and even a huge haggis: a delicacy in the form of a pig's stomach stuffed with offal and pressed between two slats, the whole resembling a pair of bellows.

Geralt guessed where the haul had come from. He didn't comment right away, but bided his time until a moment when he was alone with Zoltan, and then asked him politely if he saw nothing indecent in robbing other fugitives, who were no less hungry than them, after all, and fighting for survival just like them. The dwarf answered gravely that indeed, he was very ashamed of it, but unfortunately, such was his character.

'Unbridled altruism is a huge vice of mine,' he explained. 'I simply have to do good. I am a sensible dwarf, however, and know that I'm unable to do everyone good. Were I to attempt to be good to everyone, to the entire world and to all the creatures living in it, it would be a drop of fresh water in the salt sea. In other words, a wasted effort. Thus, I decided to do specific good; good which would not go to waste. I'm good to myself and my immediate circle.'

Geralt asked no further questions.

At one of the camps, Geralt and Milva chatted at length with Zoltan Chivay, the incorrigible and compulsive altruist. The dwarf was well informed about how the military activities were proceeding. At least, he gave that impression.

‘The attack,’ he said, frequently quietening down Field Marshal Windbag, who was screeching obscenities, ‘came from Drieschot, and began at dawn on the seventh day after Lammas. Nilfgaard marched with its allies, the Verdenian Army, since Verden, as you know, is now an imperial protectorate. They moved swiftly, putting all the villages beyond Drieschot to the torch and wiping out the Bruggian Army which was garrisoned there. The Nilfgaardian infantry marched on the fortress in Dillingen from the other side of the Yaruga. They crossed the river in a totally unexpected place. They built a pontoon bridge. Only took them half a day, can you believe it?’

‘It’s possible to believe anything,’ muttered Milva. ‘Were you in Dillingen when it started?’

‘Thereabouts,’ the dwarf replied evasively. ‘When news of the attack reached us, we were already on the way to the city of Brugge. The highway was an awful shambles, it was teeming with fugitives, some of them fleeing from the south to the north, others from the north to the south. They jammed up the highway, so we got stuck. And Nilfgaard, as it turned out, were both behind us and in front of us. The forces that had left Drieschot must have split up. I reckon a large cavalry troop had headed north-east, towards Brugge.’

‘So the Nilfgaardians are already north of Turlough. It appears we’re stuck between two forces, right in the middle. And safe.’

‘Right in the middle, yes,’ the dwarf agreed. ‘But not safe. The imperial troops are flanked by the Squirrels, Verdenian volunteers and various mercenaries, who are even worse than the Nilfgaardians. It was them as burnt down Kernow and almost seized us later; we barely managed to leg it into the woods. So we shouldn’t poke our noses out of the forest. And we should remain on guard. We’ll make it to the Old Road, then downstream by the River Chotla to the Ina, and at the Ina we’re sure to bump into the Temerian Army. King Foltest’s men must have shaken off their surprise and begun standing up to the Nilfgaardians.’

‘If only,’ Milva said, looking at the Witcher. ‘But the problem is that urgent and important matters are driving us on to the south. We pondered heading south from Turlough, towards the Yaruga.’

‘I don’t know what matters are driving you to those parts,’ Zoltan said, glowering suspiciously at them. ‘They must indeed be greatly urgent and important to risk your necks for them.’

He paused and waited, but neither of them was in a hurry to

explain. The dwarf scratched his backside, hawked and spat.

‘It wouldn’t surprise me,’ he said finally, ‘if Nilfgaard had both banks of the Yaruga right up to the mouth of the Ina in their grasp. And where exactly on the Yaruga do you need to be?’

‘Nowhere specific,’ Geralt decided to reply. ‘As long as we reach the river. I want to take a boat up to the delta.’

Zoltan looked at him and laughed. Then stopped immediately when he realised it hadn’t been a joke.

‘I have to admit,’ he said a moment later, ‘you’ve got quite some route in mind. But get rid of those pipe dreams. The whole of south Brugge is in flames. They’ll impale you before you reach the Yaruga, or drive you to Nilfgaard in fetters. However, were you by some miracle to reach the river, there’d be no chance of sailing to the delta. That pontoon bridge spanning the river from Cintra to the Bruggian bank? They guard it day and night; nothing could get through that part of the river, except perhaps a salmon. Your urgent and important matters will have to lose their urgency and importance. You haven’t got a prayer. That’s how I see it.’

Milva’s glance testified that she shared his opinion. Geralt didn’t comment. He felt terrible. The slowly healing bone in his left forearm and his right knee still gnawed with the invisible fangs of a dull, nagging pain, made worse by effort and the constant damp. He was also being troubled by overwhelming, disheartening, exceptionally unpleasant feelings, alien feelings he had never experienced before and was unable to deal with.

Helplessness and resignation.

After two days, it stopped raining and the sun came out. The forests breathed forth mists and quickly dissipating fog, and birds began to vigorously make up for the silence forced on them by the constant rain. Zoltan cheered up and ordered a long break, after which he promised a quicker march and that they would reach the Old Road in a day at most.

The women from Kernow draped all the surrounding branches with the black and grey of drying clothing, and then, dressed only in their shifts, hid shamefacedly in the bushes and prepared food. The children charged around naked, disturbing the dignified calm of the steaming forest in elaborate ways. Dandelion slept off his tiredness. Milva vanished.

The dwarves took their rest seriously. Figgis Merluzzo and Munro Bruys went off hunting mushrooms. Zoltan, Yazon Varda, Caleb Stratton and Percival Schuttenbach sat down near the wagon and without taking a breather played Barrel, their favourite card game, which they devoted every spare minute to, including the previous wet evenings.

The Witcher occasionally sat down to join them and watch them play, as he did during this break. He was still unable to understand the complicated rules of this typical dwarven game, but was fascinated by the amazing, intricate workmanship of the cards and the drawings of the figures. Compared to the cards humans played with, the dwarves' cards were genuine works of art. Geralt was once again convinced that the advanced technology of the bearded folk was not limited to the fields of mining and metallurgy. The fact that in this specific, card-playing field the dwarves' talents hadn't helped them to monopolise the market was because cards were still less popular among humans than dice, and human gamblers attached little importance to aesthetics. Human card players, whom the Witcher had had several opportunities to observe, always played with greasy cards, so dirty that before cards were placed on the table they had to be laboriously peeled away from the fingers. The court cards were painted so carelessly that distinguishing the lady from the knave was only possible because the knave was mounted on a horse. Which actually looked more like a crippled weasel.

Mistakes of that kind were impossible with the dwarves' cards. The crowned king was really regal, the lady comely and curvaceous, and the halberd-wielding knave jauntily moustachioed. The colour cards were called, in Dwarven Speech, the *hraval*, *vaina* and *ballet*, but Zoltan and company used the Common Speech and human names when they played.

The sun shone warmly, the forest steamed, and Geralt watched.

The fundamental principle of dwarven Barrel was something resembling an auction at a horse fair, both in its intensity and the volume of the bidders' voices. The pair declaring the highest 'price' would endeavour to win as many tricks as possible, which the rival pair had to impede at all costs. The game was played noisily and heatedly, and a sturdy staff lay beside each player. These staffs were seldom used to beat an opponent, but were often brandished.

'Look what you've done! You plonker! You bonehead! Why did you open with spades instead of hearts? Think I was leading hearts just for the fun of it? Why, I ought to take my staff and knock some sense into you!'

‘I had four spades up to the knave, so I was planning to make a good contract!’

‘Four spades, ’course you did! Including your own member, which you counted when you looked down at your cards. Use your loaf, Stratton, we’re not at university! We’re playing cards here! And remember that when the fool has the cards and doesn’t blunder, he’ll even beat the sage, by thunder. Deal, Varda.’

‘Contract in diamonds.’

‘A small slam in diamonds!’

‘The king led diamonds, but lost his crown, fled the kingdom with his trousers down. A double in spades!’

‘Barrel!’

‘Wake up, Caleb. That was a double with a Barrel! What are you bidding?’

‘A big slam in diamonds!’

‘No bid. Aaagh! What now? No one’s Barrelling? Chickened out, laddies? You’re leading, Varda. Percival, if you wink at him again, I’ll whack you so hard in the kisser your eyes’ll be screwed up till next winter.’

‘Knave.’

‘Lady!’

‘And the king on the lady! The lady’s shafted! I’ll take her and, ha, ha, I’ve got another heart, kept for a rainy day! Knave, a ten and another—’

‘And a trump! If you can’t play a trump, you’d better take a dump. And diamonds! Zoltan? Grabbed you where it hurts!’

‘Do you see him, fucking gnome. Pshaw, I’m gonna take my staff to him . . .’

Before Zoltan could use his stick, a piercing cry was heard from the forest.

Geralt was the first to his feet. He swore as he ran, pain shooting through his knee. Zoltan Chivay rushed after him, seizing his sword wrapped in tabby cat skins from the wagon. Percival Schuttenbach and the rest of the dwarves ran after them, armed with sticks, while Dandelion, who’d been woken by the screaming, brought up the rear. Figgis and Munro leapt out of the forest from one side. Throwing down their baskets of mushrooms, the two dwarves

gathered up the scattering children and pulled them away. Milva appeared from nowhere, drawing an arrow from her quiver while running and showing the Witcher where the scream had come from. There was no need. Geralt saw and heard, and now knew what it was all about.

One of the children was screaming. She was a freckled, little girl with plaits, aged about nine. She stood petrified, a few paces from a pile of rotten logs. Geralt was with her in an instant. He seized her under the arms, interrupting her terrified shrieking, and watched the movement among the logs out of the corner of his eye. He quickly withdrew and bumped into Zoltan and his dwarves. Milva, who had also seen something moving, nocked her arrow and took aim.

'Don't shoot,' Geralt hissed. 'Get this kid out of here, fast. And you, get back. But nice and easy. Don't make any sudden movements.'

At first it seemed to them that the movement had come from one of the rotten logs, as though it was intending to crawl out of the sunlit woodpile and look for shade among the trees. It was only when they looked closer that they saw features which were atypical for a log: in particular, four pairs of thin legs with knobbly joints sticking up from the furrowed, speckled, segmented crayfish-like shell.

'Easy does it,' Geralt said quietly. 'Don't provoke it. Don't let its apparent sluggishness deceive you. It isn't aggressive, but it moves like lightning. If it feels threatened it may attack and there's no antidote for its venom.'

The creature slowly crawled onto a log. It looked at the humans and the dwarves, slowly turning its eyes, which were set on stalks. It was barely moving. It cleaned the ends of its legs, lifting them up one by one and carefully nibbling them with its impressive-looking, sharp mandibles.

'There was such an uproar,' Zoltan declared emotionlessly, appearing beside the Witcher, 'I thought it was something really worrying. Like a cavalryman from a Verdenian reserve troop. Or a military prosecutor. And what is it? Just an overgrown creepy-crawly. You have to admit, nature takes on some pretty curious forms.'

'Not any longer,' Geralt replied. 'The thing that's sitting there is an eyehead. A creature of Chaos. A dying, post-conjunction relic, if you know what I'm talking about.'

‘Of course I do,’ the dwarf said, looking him in the eyes. ‘Although I’m not a witcher, nor an authority on Chaos and creatures like that. Well, I’m very curious to see what the Witcher will do with this post-conjunction relic. Or to be more precise, I’m wondering *how* the Witcher will do it. Will you use your sword or do you prefer my sihil?’

‘Nice weapon,’ Geralt said, glancing at the sword, which Zoltan had drawn from its lacquered scabbard wrapped in tabby cat skins. ‘But it won’t be necessary.’

‘Interesting,’ Zoltan repeated. ‘So are we just going to stand here looking at each other? Just wait until that relic feels threatened? Or should we withdraw and ask some Nilfgaardians for help? What do you suggest, monster slayer?’

‘Fetch the ladle and the cauldron lid from the wagon.’

‘What?’

‘Don’t question his authority, Zoltan,’ Dandelion chipped in.

Percival Schuttenbach scurried off to the wagon and soon returned with the requested objects. The Witcher winked at the company and then began to beat the ladle against the lid with all his strength.

‘Stop it! Stop it!’ Zoltan Chivay screamed a moment later, covering his ears with his hands. ‘You’ll break the fucking ladle! The beast’s run off! He’s gone, for pox’s sake!’

‘Oh yes,’ Percival said, delighted. ‘Did you see him? On my life, he showed a clean pair of heels! Not that he has any!’

‘The eyehead,’ Geralt explained calmly, handing back the slightly dented kitchen utensils to the dwarves, ‘has remarkably delicate, sensitive hearing. It doesn’t have any ears, but hears, so to speak, with its entire body. In particular it can’t bear metallic noises. It feels them as a pain . . .’

‘Even in the arse,’ Zoltan interrupted. ‘I know, because it pained me too when you started whacking that lid. If the monster has more sensitive hearing than I do, he has my sympathy. Sure he won’t be back? He won’t rustle up some mates?’

‘I don’t imagine many of its mates are left on this earth. That specimen is certain not to be back in these parts for a long time. There’s nothing to be afraid of.’

‘I’m not going to talk about monsters,’ the dwarf said, looking glum. ‘But your concerto for brass instruments must have been

heard as far away as the Skellige Islands, so it's possible some music lovers might be heading this way. And we'd better not be around when they come. Strike camp, boys! Hey, ladies, get clad and count up the children! We're moving out, and quickly!'

When they stopped for the night, Geralt decided to clear up a few issues. This time Zoltan Chivay hadn't sat down to play Barrel, so there was no difficulty leading him away to a secluded place for a frank, man-to-man conversation. He got straight to the point.

'Out with it. How do you know I'm a witcher?'

The dwarf winked at him and smiled slyly.

'I might boast about my perspicacity. I could say I noticed your eyes changing after dusk and in full sunlight. I could show that I'm a dwarf-of-the-world and that I've heard this and that about Geralt of Rivia. But the truth is much more banal. Don't scowl. You can keep things to yourself, but your friend the bard sings and jabbers; he never shuts his trap. That's how I know about your profession.'

Geralt refrained from asking another question. And rightly so.

'It's like this,' Zoltan continued. 'Dandelion told me everything. He must have sensed we value sincerity, and, after all, he didn't have to sense our friendly disposition to you, because we don't hide our dispositions. So in short: I know why you're in a hurry to go south. I know what important and urgent matters are taking you to Nilfgaard. I know who you're planning to seek. And not just from the poet's gossip. I lived in Cintra before the war and I heard tales of the Child of Destiny and the white-haired witcher to whom the child was granted.'

Geralt did not respond this time either.

'The rest,' the dwarf said, 'is just a question of observation. You let that crusty monstrosity go, even though you're a witcher and it's your professional duty to exterminate monsters like that. But the beast didn't do your Surprise any harm, so you spared it and just drove it away by banging on a cauldron lid. Because you're no longer a witcher; you're a valiant knight, who is hastening to rescue his kidnapped and oppressed maiden.

'Why don't you stop glaring at me,' he added, still not hearing an answer or an explanation. 'You're constantly sniffing out treachery; fearful of how this secret – now it's out – may turn against you. Don't fret. We're all going to the Ina, helping each other, supporting

each other. The challenge you have in front of you is the same one we face: to survive and stay alive. In order for this noble mission to continue. Or live an ordinary life, but so as not to be ashamed at the hour of death. You think you've changed. That the world has changed. But look; the world's the same as it's always been. Quite the same. And you're the same as you used to be. Don't fret.

'But drop your idea about heading off alone,' Zoltan continued his monologue, unperturbed by the Witcher's silence, 'and about a solo journey south, through Brugge and Sodden to the Yaruga. You'll have to search for another way to Nilfgaard. If you want, I can advise you—'

'Don't bother,' Geralt said, rubbing his knee, which had been hurting incessantly for several days. 'Don't bother, Zoltan.'

He found Dandelion watching the Barrel-playing dwarves. He took the poet by the sleeve and led him off to the forest. Dandelion realised at once what it was all about; one glance at the Witcher's face was enough.

'Babbler,' Geralt said quietly. 'Windbag. Bigmouth. I ought to shove your tongue in a vice, you blockhead. Or put a bit between your teeth.'

The troubadour said nothing, but his expression was haughty.

'When news got out that I'd started to associate with you,' the Witcher continued, 'some sensible people were surprised by our friendship. It astonished them that I let you travel with me. They advised me to abandon you in a desert, to rob you, strangle you, throw you into a pit and bury you in dung. Indeed, I regret I didn't follow their advice.'

'Is it such a secret who you are and what you're planning to do?' Dandelion suddenly said, losing his temper. 'Are we to keep the truth from everybody and pretend all the time? Those dwarves . . . We're all one company now . . .'

'I don't have a company,' the Witcher snapped. 'I don't have one, and I don't want to have one. I don't need one. Do you get it?'

'Of course he gets it,' Milva said from behind him. 'And I get it too. You don't need anyone, Witcher. You show it often enough.'

'I'm not fighting a private war,' he said, turning around suddenly. 'I don't need a company of daredevils, because I'm not going to Nilfgaard to save the world or to bring down an evil empire. I'm going to get Ciri. And that's why I can go alone. Forgive me if that

sounds unkind, but the rest of it doesn't concern me. And now leave me. I want to be alone.'

When he turned around a moment later, he discovered that only Dandelion had walked away.

'I had that dream again,' he said abruptly. 'Milva, I'm wasting time. I'm wasting time! She needs me. She needs help.'

'Talk,' she said softly. 'Get it out. No matter how frightening it is, get it out.'

'It wasn't frightening. In my dream . . . She was dancing. She was dancing in some smoky barn. And she was – hell's bells – happy. There was music playing, someone was yelling . . . The entire barn was shaking from shouting and music . . . And she was dancing, dancing, clicking her heels . . . And on the roof of that bloody barn, in the cold, night air . . . death was dancing too. Milva . . . Maria . . . She needs me.'

Milva turned her face away.

'Not just her,' she whispered. Quietly, so he wouldn't hear.

At the next stop, the Witcher demonstrated his interest in Zoltan's sword, the sihil, which he had glanced at during the adventure with the eyehead. Without hesitation, the dwarf unwrapped the weapon from its catskins and drew it from its lacquered scabbard.

The sword measured a little over three feet, but didn't weigh much more than two pounds. The blade, which was decorated along much of its length with mysterious runes, had a bluish hue and was as sharp as a razor. In the right hands, it could have been used to shave with. The twelve-inch hilt, wound around with criss-crossed strips of lizard skin, had a cylindrical brass cap instead of a spherical pommel and its crossguard was very small and finely crafted.

'A fine piece of work,' Geralt said, making a quick, hissing moulinet followed by a thrust from the left and then a lightning transition to a high seconde parry and then laterally into prime. 'Indeed, a nice bit of ironmongery.'

'Phew!' Percival Schuttenbach snorted. 'Bit of ironmongery! Take a better look at it, because you'll be calling it a horseradish root next.'

'I had a better sword once.'

‘I don’t dispute that,’ Zoltan said, shrugging his shoulders. ‘Because it was sure to have come from our forges. You witchers know how to wield a sword, but you don’t make them yourselves. Swords like that are only forged by dwarves, in Mahakam under Mount Carbon.’

‘Dwarves smelt the steel,’ Percival added, ‘and forge the laminated blades. But it’s us, the gnomes, who do the finishing touches and the sharpening. In our workshops. Using our own, gnomish technology, as we once made our gwyhyrs, the best swords in the world.’

‘The sword I wield now,’ Geralt said, baring the blade, ‘comes from the catacombs of Craag An in Brokilon. It was given to me by the dryads. It’s a first-class weapon, but it’s neither dwarven nor gnomish. It’s an elven blade, at least one or maybe two hundred years old.’

‘He doesn’t know what he’s talking about!’ the gnome called, picking up the sword and running his fingers over it. ‘The details are elven, I give you that. The hilt, crossguard and pommel. The etching, engraving, chasing and other decorative elements. But the blade was forged and sharpened in Mahakam. And it’s true that it was made several centuries ago, because it’s obvious that the steel is mediocre and the workmanship primitive. Now, hold Zoltan’s sihil against it; do you see the difference?’

‘Yes I do. And I have the impression mine’s just as well made.’

The gnome snorted and waved a hand. Zoltan smiled superciliously.

‘The blade,’ he explained in a patronising voice, ‘should cut, not make an impression, and it shouldn’t be judged on first impressions either. The point is that your sword is a typical composition of steel and iron, while my sihil’s blade was forged from a refined alloy containing graphite and borax . . .’

‘It’s a modern technique!’ Percival burst out, a little excited, since the conversation was moving inevitably towards his field of expertise. ‘The blade’s construction and composition, numerous laminates in its soft core, edged with hard – not soft – steel . . .’

‘Take it easy,’ the dwarf said, reining him in. ‘You won’t make a metallurgist out of him, Schuttenbach, so don’t bore him with details. I’ll explain it in simple terms. It’s incredibly difficult to sharpen good, hard, magnetite steel, Witcher. Why? Because it’s hard! If you don’t have the technology, as we dwarves once did not,

and you humans still don't have, but you want a sharp sword, you forge soft steel edges, which are more malleable, onto a hardened core. Your Brokilonian sword is made using just such a simplified method. Modern dwarven blades are made the opposite way around: with a soft core and hard edges. The process is time-consuming and, as I said, demands advanced technology. But as a result you get a blade which will cut a batiste scarf tossed up in the air.'

'Is your sihil capable of a trick like that?'

'No' The dwarf smiled. 'The swords sharpened to that degree are few and far between, and not many of them ever left Mahakam. But I guarantee that the shell of that knobbly old crab wouldn't have put up much resistance against it. You could have sliced him up without breaking a sweat.'

The discussion about swords and metallurgy continued for some time. Geralt listened with interest, shared his own experiences, added some extra information, asked about this and that and then examined and tried out Zoltan's sihil. He had no idea that the following day he would have the opportunity to add practice to the theory he had acquired.

The first indication that humans were living in the area was the neatly stacked cord of firewood standing among woodchips and tree bark by the track, spotted by Percival Schuttenbach, who was walking at the head of the column.

Zoltan stopped the procession and sent the gnome ahead to scout. Percival vanished and after half an hour hurried back, excited and out of breath and gesticulating from a long way off. He reached them, but instead of giving his report, grabbed his long nose in his fingers and blew it powerfully, making a sound resembling a shepherd's horn.

'Don't frighten away the game,' Zoltan Chivay barked. 'And talk. What lies ahead of us?'

'A settlement,' the gnome panted, wiping his fingers on the tails of his many-pocketed kaftan. 'In a clearing. Three cottages, a barn, a few mud and straw huts . . . There's a dog running around in the farmyard and the chimney's smoking. Someone's preparing food there. Porridge. And made with milk.'

'You mean you went into the kitchen?' Dandelion laughed. 'And peered into the pot? How do you know it's porridge?'

The gnome looked at him with an air of superiority and Zoltan snarled angrily.

'Don't insult him, poet. He can sniff out grub a mile away. If he says it's porridge, it's porridge. Still, I don't like the sound of this.'

'Why's that? I like the sound of porridge. I'd be happy to try some.'

'Zoltan's right,' Milva said. 'And you keep quiet, Dandelion, because this isn't poetry. If the porridge is made with milk that means there's a cow. And a peasant who sees fires burning will take his cow and disappear into the forest. Why didn't this one? Let's duck into the forest and give it a wide berth. There's something fishy about this.'

'Not so fast, not so fast,' the dwarf muttered. 'There'll be plenty of time to flee. Perhaps the war's over. Perhaps the Temerian Army has finally moved out. What do we know, stuck in this forest? Perhaps the decisive battle's over, perhaps Nilfgaard's been repulsed, perhaps the front's already behind us, and the peasants are returning home with their cows. We ought to examine this and find out what's behind it. Figgis and Munro; you two stay here and keep your eyes peeled. We'll do a bit of reconnaissance. If it's safe, I'll make a call like a sparrow hawk.'

'Like a sparrow hawk?' said Munro Bruys, anxiously moving his chin. 'Since when did you know anything about mimicking bird calls, Zoltan?'

'That's the whole point. If you hear a strange, unrecognisable sound, you'll know it's me. Percival, lead on. Geralt, will you come with us?'

'We'll all go,' Dandelion said, dismounting. 'If it's a trap we'll be safer in a bigger group.'

'I'll leave you the Field Marshal,' Zoltan said, removing the parrot from his shoulder and passing him to Figgis Merluzzo. 'This ugly bird might suddenly start effing and blinding at the top of his voice and then our silent approach will go to fuck. Let's go.'

Percival quickly led them to the edge of the forest, into dense elder shrubs. The ground fell away slightly beyond the shrubs, where they saw a large pile of uprooted tree stumps. Beyond them there was a broad clearing. They peered out cautiously.

The gnome's account had been accurate. There really were three cottages, a barn and several sod-roofed mud and straw huts in the

middle of the clearing. A huge puddle of muck glistened in the farmyard. The buildings and a small, untended plot were surrounded by a low, partly fallen down fence, on the other side of which a scruffy dog was barking. Smoke was rising from the roof of one of the cottages, creeping lazily over the sunken turfs.

'Indeed,' Zoltan whispered, sniffing, 'that smoke smells good. Particularly since my nostrils are used to the stench of burnt-down houses. There are no horses or guards around, which is good, because I bore in mind that some rabble might be resting up and cooking a meal here. Mmm, I'd say it's safe.'

'I'll take a look,' volunteered Milva.

'No,' the dwarf protested. 'You look too much like a Squirrel. If they see you they might get frit, and humans can be unpredictable when they're startled. Yazon and Caleb will go. But keep your bow at the ready; you can cover them if needs be. Percival, leg it over to the others. You lot be prepared, in case we have to sound the retreat.'

Yazon Varda and Caleb Stratton cautiously left the thicket and headed towards the buildings. They walked slowly, looking around intently.

The dog smelled them right away, started barking furiously, then ran around the farmyard, not reacting to the dwarves' clucking and whistling. The door to the cottage opened. Milva raised her bow and drew back the bowstring in a single movement. And then immediately slackened it.

A short, stout girl with long plaits came rushing out. She shouted something, waving her arms. Yazon Varda spread his arms and shouted something back. The girl continued to bawl something. They could hear the sound but were unable to make out what she was saying.

But the words must have reached Yazon and Caleb, who made an about-turn and hurried back towards the elder shrubs. Milva drew her bow again and swept around with the arrowhead, searching for a target.

'What the devil's going on?' Zoltan rasped. 'What's happening? What are they running away from? Milva?'

'Shut your trap,' the archer hissed, still taking aim at each cottage and hut in turn. But she couldn't find anyone to shoot. The girl with the plaits disappeared into her cottage and shut the door behind her.

The dwarves were sprinting as though the Grim Reaper was on their heels. Yazon yelled something – or possibly cursed. Dandelion suddenly blanched.

'He's saying . . . Oh, Gods!'

'What . . .' Zoltan broke off, for Yazon and Caleb had made it back, red in the face. 'What is it? Spit it out!'

'The plague . . .' Caleb gasped. 'Smallpox . . .'

'Did you touch anything?' Zoltan Chivay asked, stepping back nervously and almost knocking Dandelion over. 'Did you touch anything in the farmyard?'

'No . . . The dog wouldn't let us near . . .'

'May the fucking mutt be praised,' Zoltan said, raising his eyes heavenwards. 'May the Gods give it a long life and a heap of bones higher than Mount Carbon. That girl, the plump one, did she have blisters?'

'No. She's healthy. The infected ones are in the last cottage, her in-laws. And a lot of people have already died, she said. Blimey, Zoltan, the wind was blowing right towards us!'

'That's enough teeth chattering,' Milva said, lowering her bow. 'If you didn't touch any infected people, you've got nothing to worry about. If it's true what she says about the pox. Maybe the girl just wanted to scare you away.'

'No,' Yazon replied, still breathing heavily. 'There was a pit behind the hut . . . with bodies in it. The girl doesn't have the strength to bury the dead, so she throws them into the pit . . .'

'Well,' Zoltan said, sniffing. 'That's your porridge, Dandelion. But I've slightly lost my appetite for it. Let's get out of here; and fast.'

The dog in the farmyard began barking again.

'Get down,' the Witcher hissed, dropping into a crouch.

A group of horsemen came riding out from a gap in the trees on the other side of the clearing. Whistling and whooping, they circled the farmstead at a gallop and then burst into the yard. The riders were armed, but weren't in identical uniforms. Quite the contrary, in fact – they were all dressed differently and haphazardly, and their weaponry and tackle gave the impression of being assembled at random. And not in an armoury, but on a battlefield.

'Thirteen,' Percival Schuttenbach said, making a quick tally.

‘Who are they?’

‘Neither Nilfgaard, nor any other regulars,’ came Zoltan’s assessment. ‘Not Scoia’tael. I think they’re volunteers. A random mob.’

‘Or marauders.’

The horsemen were yelling and cavorting around the farmyard. One of them hit the dog with a spear shaft and it bolted. The girl with the plaits ran outside, shouting. But this time her warning had no effect or wasn’t taken seriously. One of the horseman galloped up, seized the girl by one of her plaits, pulled her away from the doorway and dragged her through the puddle of muck. The others jumped off their horses to assist the first, dragging the girl to the end of the farmyard. They tore her shift off her and threw her down onto a pile of rotten straw. The girl fought back ferociously, but she had no chance. Only one of the marauders didn’t join in the fun; he guarded the horses, which were tied to the fence. The girl gave a long, piercing scream. Then a short, pained one. They heard nothing after that.

‘Warriors!’ Milva said, jumping to her feet. ‘Fucking heroes!’

‘They aren’t afraid of the pox,’ Yazon Varda said, shaking his head.

‘Fear,’ Dandelion muttered, ‘is a human quality. There’s nothing human in them any longer.’

‘Apart from their innards,’ Milva rasped, carefully nocking an arrow, ‘which I shall now prick.’

‘Thirteen,’ Zoltan Chivay repeated gravely. ‘And they’re all mounted. You’ll knock off one or two and the rest will have us surrounded. And anyway, it might be an advance party. The devil knows what kind of bigger force they belong to.’

‘Do you expect me to stand by and watch?’

‘No,’ Geralt said, straightening his headband and the sword on his back. ‘I’ve had enough of standing by and watching. I’m fed up with my own helplessness. But first we have to stop them from getting away. See the one holding the horses? When I get there, knock him out of the saddle. And if you can, take out another. But only when I get down there.’

‘That leaves eleven,’ the archer said, turning to face him.

‘I can count.’

‘You’ve forgotten about the smallpox,’ Zoltan Chivay muttered. ‘If you go down there, you’ll come back infected . . . Bollocks to that, Witcher! You’re putting us all at risk . . . For fuck’s sake, *she’s* not the girl you’re looking for!’

‘Shut up, Zoltan. Go back to the wagon and hide in the forest.’

‘I’m coming with you,’ Milva declared hoarsely.

‘No. Cover me from here, you’ll be helping more if you do that.’

‘What about me?’ Dandelion asked. ‘What should I do?’

‘The same as usual. Nothing.’

‘You’re insane . . .’ Zoltan snarled. ‘Taking on the entire band? What’s got into you? Want to play the hero, rescuing fair maidens?’

‘Shut up.’

‘Go to hell! No, wait. Leave your sword. There’s a whole bunch of them, so it’d be better if you didn’t have to swing twice. Take my sihil. One blow is enough.’

The Witcher took the dwarf’s weapon without a word or a moment’s hesitation. He pointed out the marauder guarding the horses one more time. And then hopped over the tree stumps and moved quickly towards the cottages.

The sun was shining. Grasshoppers scattered in front of him.

The man guarding the horses saw him and pulled a spear from its place by his saddle. He had very long, unkempt hair, falling onto a torn hauberk, patched up with rusty wire. He was wearing brand-new – clearly stolen – boots with shiny buckles.

The guard yelled and another marauder appeared from behind the fence. He was carrying a sword slung from a belt around his neck and was just buttoning his britches. Geralt was quite close by now. He could hear the guffawing of the men amusing themselves with the girl on the pile of straw. He took some deep breaths and each one intensified his blood lust. He could have calmed himself down, but didn’t want to. He wanted to have some fun himself.

‘And who might you be? Stop!’ the long-haired man shouted, hefting the spear in his hand. ‘What do you want here?’

‘I’ve done enough standing and watching.’

‘Whaaat?’

‘Does the name Ciri mean anything to you?’

‘I’ll—’

The marauder was unable to finish his sentence. A grey-fletched arrow hit him in the middle of his chest and threw him from the saddle. Before he hit the ground, Geralt could hear the next arrow whistling. The second soldier caught the arrowhead in the abdomen, low, right between the hands buttoning up his fly. He howled like an animal, bent double and lurched back against the fence, knocking over and breaking some of the pickets.

Before the others had managed to come to their senses and pick up their weapons, the Witcher was among them. The dwarven blade glittered and sang. There was a savage craving for blood in the song of the feather-light, razor-sharp steel. The bodies and limbs offered almost no resistance. Blood splashed onto his face; he had no time to wipe it off.

Even if the marauders were thinking about putting up a fight, the sight of falling corpses and blood gushing in streams effectively discouraged them. One of them, who had his trousers around his knees since he hadn't even had time to pull them up, was slashed in the carotid artery and tumbled onto his back, comically swinging his still unsatisfied manhood. The second, nothing but a stripling, covered his head with both hands, which the sihil severed at the wrists. The remaining men took flight, dispersing in various directions. The Witcher pursued them, softly cursing the pain that was once again pulsing through his knee. He hoped the leg wouldn't buckle under him.

He managed to pin two of them against the fence. They tried to defend themselves by holding up their swords. Paralysed by terror, their defence was woeful. The Witcher's face was once again spattered with blood from arteries slashed open by the dwarven blade. But the remaining men made use of the time and managed to get away; they were already mounted. One of them fell, however, hit by an arrow, wriggling and squirming like a fish emptied from a net. The last two spurred their horses into a gallop. But only one of them managed to escape, because Zoltan Chivay had suddenly appeared in the farmyard. The dwarf swung his axe around his head and threw it, hitting one of the fleeing men in the centre of the back. The marauder screamed and tumbled from the saddle, legs kicking. The last one pressed himself tight to his horse's neck, cleared the pit full of dead bodies and galloped towards the gap in the trees.

'Milva!' the Witcher and the dwarf both yelled.

The archer was already running towards them. Now she stopped, frozen, with legs apart. She let her nocked bow fall and then began

to lift it up slowly, higher and higher. They didn't hear the twang of the bowstring, neither did Milva change her position or even twitch. They only saw the arrow when it dipped and hurtled downwards. The horseman lurched sideways out of the saddle, the feathered shaft protruding from a shoulder. But he didn't fall. He straightened up and with a cry urged his horse into a faster gallop.

'What a bow,' Zoltan Chivay grunted in awe. 'What a shot!'

'What a shot, my arse,' the Witcher said, wiping blood from his face. 'The whoreson's got away and he'll be back with a bunch of his mates.'

'She hit him! And it must have been two hundred paces!'

'She could have aimed at the horse.'

'The horse isn't guilty of anything,' Milva panted with anger, walking over to them. She spat and watched the horseman disappear into the forest. 'I missed the good-for-nothing, because I was a mite out of breath . . . Ugh, you rat, running away with my arrow! I hope it brings you bad luck!'

The neighing of a horse could be heard from the gap in the trees, and immediately afterwards the dreadful cry of a man being killed.

'Ho, ho!' Zoltan said, looking at the archer in awe. 'He didn't get very far! Your arrows are damned effective! Poisoned? Or enchanted perhaps? Because even if the good-for-nothing had caught the smallpox, the plague wouldn't have taken its toll so quickly!'

'It wasn't me,' Milva said, looking knowingly at the Witcher. 'Nor the smallpox. But I think I know who it was.'

'I think I do too,' the dwarf said, chewing his moustache with a canny smile on his face. 'I've noticed you keep looking back, and I know someone's secretly following us. On a chestnut colt. I don't know who he is, but since it doesn't bother you . . . It's none of my business.'

'Particularly since a rearguard can have its uses,' Milva said, looking at Geralt meaningfully. 'Are you certain that Cahir's your enemy?'

The Witcher didn't reply. He gave Zoltan his sword back.

'Thanks. It cuts nicely.'

'In the right hands,' the dwarf said, grinning. 'I've heard tales about witchers, but to fell eight in less than two minutes . . .'

‘It’s nothing to brag about. They didn’t know how to defend themselves.’

The girl with the plaits raised herself onto her hands and knees, stood up, staggered, and then tried ineffectually to pull down her torn shift with trembling hands. The Witcher was astonished to see that she was in no way similar to Ciri, when a moment earlier he would have sworn they were twins. The girl wiped her face with an uncoordinated movement, and moved unsteadily towards the cottage. Straight through the puddle of muck.

‘Hey, wait,’ Milva called. ‘Hey, you . . . Need any help? Hey!’

The girl didn’t even look towards her. She stumbled over the threshold, almost falling, then grabbed the door jamb. And slammed the door behind her.

‘Human gratitude knows no boundaries,’ the dwarf commented. Milva jerked around, her face hardened.

‘What does she have to be grateful for?’

‘Exactly,’ the Witcher added. ‘What for?’

‘For the marauders’ horses,’ Zoltan said, not lowering his gaze. ‘She can slaughter them for their meat; she won’t have to kill the cow. She’s clearly resistant to smallpox and now she doesn’t have to fear hunger. She’ll survive. And in a few days, when she gathers her thoughts, she’ll understand that thanks to you she avoided a longer frolic and these cottages being burnt to the ground. Let’s get out of here before the plague blows our way . . . Hey, Witcher, where are you going? To get a token of gratitude?’

‘To get a pair of boots,’ Geralt said coldly, stooping down over the long-haired marauder, whose dead eyes stared heavenwards. ‘These look right for me.’

They ate horsemeat for several days. The boots with the shiny buckles were quite comfortable. The Nilfgaardian called Cahir was still riding in their tracks on his chestnut colt, but the Witcher had stopped looking back.

He had finally fathomed the arcana of Barrel and even played a hand with the dwarves. He lost.

They didn’t speak about the incident in the forest clearing. There was nothing to say.

Mandrake, or Love Apple, is a class of plant from the Mandragora *or nightshade family, a group including herbaceous, stemless plants with parsnip-like roots, in which a similarity to the human form may be observed; the leaves are arranged in a rosette.* **M.** autumnalis *or* officinalis, *is cultivated on a small scale in Vicovaro, Rowan and Ymlac, rarely found in the wild. Its berries, which are green and later turn yellow, are eaten with vinegar and pepper, while its leaves are consumed raw. The root of the* ***m.****, which is a valued ingredient in medicine and herb lore, long ago had great import in superstitions, particularly among the Nordlings; human effigies (called alruniks or alraunes) were carved from it and kept in homes as revered talismans. They were believed to offer protection from illnesses, to bring good fortune during trials, and to ensure fertility and uncomplicated births. The effigies were clad in dresses which were changed at each new moon.* ***M.*** *roots were bought and sold, with prices reaching as much as sixty florins. Bryony roots (q.v.) were used as substitutes. According to superstition,* ***m.*** *was used for making spells, magical philtres and poisons. This belief returned during the period of the witch hunts. The charge of the criminal use of* ***m.*** *was made, for example, during the trial of Lucretia Vigo (q.v.). The legendary Philippa Alhard (q.v.) was also said to have used* ***m.*** *as a poison.*

Effenberg and Talbot, *Encyclopaedia Maxima Mundi, Volume IX*

Chapter Three

The Old Road had changed somewhat since the last time the Witcher had travelled along it. Once a level highway paved with slabs of basalt, built by elves and dwarves centuries before, it had now become a potholed ruin. In some places the holes were so deep that they resembled small quarries. The pace of the march dropped since the dwarves' wagon wove between the potholes with extreme difficulty, frequently becoming stuck.

Zoltan Chivay knew the reason for the road's desperate state of disrepair. Following the last war with Nilfgaard, he explained, the need for building materials had increased tremendously. People had recalled that the Old Road was an almost inexhaustible source of dressed stone. And since the neglected road, built in the middle of nowhere and leading nowhere, had long ago lost its importance for transport and served few people, it was vandalised without mercy or restraint.

'Your great cities,' the dwarf complained, accompanied by the parrot's screeched expletives, 'were without exception built on dwarven and elven foundations. You built your own foundations for your smaller castles and towns, but you still use our stones for the walls. And yet you never stop repeating that it's thanks to you – humans – that the world progresses and develops.'

Geralt did not comment.

'But you don't even know how to destroy things wisely,' Zoltan griped, ordering yet another attempt to pull a wheel out of a hole. 'Why can't you remove the stones gradually, from the edges of the road? You're like children! Instead of eating a doughnut systematically, you gouge the jam out with a finger and then throw away the rest because it's not sweet any more.'

Geralt explained patiently that political geography was to blame for everything. The Old Road's western end lay in Brugge, the eastern end in Temeria and the centre in Sodden, so each kingdom destroyed its own section at its own discretion. In response, Zoltan obscenely stated where he'd happily shove all the kings and listed some imaginative indecencies he would commit regarding their politics, while Field Marshal Windbag added his own contribution to the subject of the kings' mothers.

The further they went, the worse it became. Zoltan's comparison with a jam doughnut turned out to be less than apt; the road was

coming to resemble a suet pudding with all the raisins gouged out. It looked as though the inevitable moment was approaching when the wagon would shatter or become totally and irreversibly stuck. They were saved, however, by the same thing that had destroyed the road. They happened upon a track heading towards the south-east, worn down and compacted by the heavy wagons which had been used to transport the pillaged stone. Zoltan brightened up, for he recognised that the track led unerringly to one of the forts on the Ina, on whose bank he was hoping to meet the Temerian Army. The dwarf solemnly believed that, as during the previous war, a crushing counter-attack by the northern kingdoms would be launched from Sodden on the far side of the Ina, following which the survivors of Nilfgaard's thoroughly decimated forces would scurry back across the Yaruga.

And indeed, the change in their trek's direction once again brought them closer to the war. During the night a great light suddenly flared up in front of them, while during the day they saw columns of smoke marking the horizon to the south and the east. Since they were still uncertain who was attacking and burning and who was being attacked and burnt they proceeded cautiously, sending Percival Schuttenbach far ahead to reconnoitre.

They were astonished one morning to be overtaken by a riderless horse, the chestnut colt. The green saddlecloth embroidered with Nilfgaardian symbols was stained with dark streaks of blood. There was no way of knowing if it was the blood of the horseman who had been killed near the hawker's wagon or if it had been spilt later, when the horse had acquired a new owner.

'Well, that takes care of the problem,' Milva said, glancing at Geralt. 'If it ever really was a problem.'

'The biggest problem is we don't know who knocked the rider from the saddle,' Zoltan muttered. 'And whether that someone is following our trail and the trail of our erstwhile, unusual rearguard.'

'He was a Nilfgaardian,' Geralt said between clenched teeth. 'He spoke almost without an accent, but runaway peasants could have recognised it . . .'

Milva turned to face him.

'You ought to have finished him off, Witcher,' she said softly. 'He would have had a kinder death.'

'He got out of that coffin,' Dandelion said, nodding, looking

meaningfully at Geralt, ‘just to rot in some ditch.’

And that was the epitaph for Cahir, son of Ceallach, the Nilfgaardian who insisted he wasn’t a Nilfgaardian. He was not talked about any longer. Since Geralt – in spite of repeated threats – seemed to be in no hurry to part with the skittish Roach, Zoltan Chivay mounted the chestnut. The dwarf’s feet didn’t reach the stirrups, but the colt was mild-mannered and let himself be ridden.

During the night the horizon was bright with the glow of fires and during the day ribbons of smoke rose into the sky, soiling the blue. They soon came upon some burnt-out buildings, with flames still creeping over the charred beams and ridges. Alongside the smouldering timbers sat eight ragged figures and five dogs, all busily gnawing the remains of the flesh from a bloated, partly charred horse carcass. At the sight of the dwarves the feasters fled in a panic. Only one man and one dog remained, who no threats were capable of tearing away from the carrion on the arched spine and ribs. Zoltan and Percival tried to question the man, but learned nothing. He only whimpered, trembled, tucked his head into his shoulders and choked on the scraps torn from the bones. The dog snarled and bared its teeth up to its gums. The horse’s carcass stank repulsively.

They took a risk and didn’t leave the road, and soon reached the next smouldering remains. A sizeable village had been burnt down and a skirmish must have taken place nearby, because they saw a fresh burial mound directly behind the smoking ruins. And at a certain distance beyond the mound a huge oak tree stood by the crossroads. The tree was hung with acorns.

And human corpses.

‘We ought to take a look,’ Zoltan Chivay decided, putting an end to the discussion about the risks and the danger. ‘Let’s go closer.’

‘Why the bloody hell,’ Dandelion asked, losing his temper, ‘do you want to look at those corpses, Zoltan? To despoil them? I can see from here they don’t even have boots.’

‘Fool. It’s not their boots I’m interested in but the military situation. I want to know of the developments in the theatre of war. What’s so funny? You’re just a poet, and you don’t know what strategy is.’

‘You’re in for a surprise. I do.’

‘Nonsense. You wouldn’t know strategy from your own arse, even if your life depended on it.’

‘Indeed, I wouldn’t. I’ll leave half-arsed strategies to dwarves. The same applies to strategies dangling from oak trees.’

Zoltan dismissed him with a wave and tramped over to the tree. Dandelion, who had never been able to rein in his curiosity, urged Pegasus on and trotted after him. A moment later Geralt decided to follow them. And then noticed that Milva was riding behind him.

The crows feeding on the carcasses took flight, cawing and flapping their wings noisily. Some of them flew off towards the forest, while others merely alighted on the mighty tree’s higher branches, intently observing Field Marshal Windbag, who was coarsely defaming their mothers from the dwarf’s shoulder.

The first of the seven hanged humans had a sign on his chest reading: ‘Traitor’. The second was described as a ‘Collaborator’, the third as an ‘Elven Nark’ and the fourth as a ‘Deserter’. The fifth was a woman in a torn and bloodied shift, described as a ‘Nilfgaardian Whore’. Two of the corpses weren’t bearing signs, which suggested at least some of the victims had been hanged by chance.

‘Look,’ Zoltan Chivay said cheerfully, pointing at the signs. ‘Our army passed by this way. Our brave boys have taken the initiative and repulsed the enemy. And they had time, as we can see, for relaxation and wartime entertainment.’

‘And what does that mean for us?’

‘That the front has moved and the Temerian Army are between us and the Nilfgaardians. We’re safe.’

‘And the smoke ahead of us?’

‘That’s our boys,’ the dwarf declared confidently. ‘They’re burning down villages where Squirrels were given rest or vittles. We’re behind the front line now, I’m telling you. The southern way heads from the crossroads to Armeria, a fortress lying in a fork of the Chotla and the Ina. The road looks decent, we can take it. We needn’t be afraid of Nilfgaardians now.’

‘Where there’s smoke, there’s fire,’ Milva said. ‘And where there’s fire you can get your fingers burnt. I reckon it’s stupid to head towards the flames. It’s also stupid to travel along a road, when the cavalry could be on us in an instant. Let’s disappear into the trees.’

‘The Temerians or an army from Sodden passed through here,’

the dwarf insisted. ‘We’re behind the front line. We can march along the highway without fear; if we come across an army it’ll be ours.’

‘Risky,’ said the archer, shaking her head. ‘If you’re such an old hand, Zoltan, you must know that Nilfgaard usually sends advance parties a long way ahead. Perhaps the Temerians were here. But we have no idea what’s in front of us. The sky’s black from smoke to the south. That fortress of yours in Armeria is probably burning right now. Which means we aren’t behind the front line, but right on it. We may run into the army, marauders, leaderless bands of rogues, or Squirrels. Let’s head for the Chotla, but along forest tracks.’

‘She’s right,’ Dandelion concurred. ‘I don’t like the look of that smoke either. And even if Temeria is on the offensive, there may still be advance Nilfgaardian squadrons in front of us. The Nilfgaardians are fond of long-distance raids. They attack the rear lines, link up with the Scoia’tael, wreak havoc and ride back. I remember what happened in Upper Sodden during the last war. I’m also in favour of travelling through the forest. We have nothing to fear there.’

‘I wouldn’t be so sure,’ Geralt said, pointing to the last corpse who, although he was dangling high up, had bloody stumps instead of feet. They looked like they had been raked by talons until all that was left was protruding bones. ‘Look. That’s the work of ghouls.’

‘Ghouls?’ Zoltan Chivay said, retreating and spitting on the ground. ‘Flesh-eaters?’

‘Naturally. We have to beware in the forest at night.’

‘Fuuuckiiin’ ’ell!’ Field Marshal Windbag screeched.

‘You took the words right out of my mouth, birdie,’ Zoltan Chivay said, frowning. ‘Well, we’re in a pretty pickle. What’s it to be, then? Into the forest, where there’s ghouls, or along the road, where there’s armies and marauders?’

‘Into the forest,’ Milva said with conviction. ‘The denser the better. I prefer ghouls to humans.’

They marched through the forest, at first cautious, on edge, reacting with alarm to every rustle in the undergrowth. Soon, however, they regained their poise, their good humour and their previous speed. They didn’t see any ghouls, or the slightest trace of their presence.

Zoltan joked that spectres and any other demons must have heard about the approaching armies, and if the fiends had happened to see the marauders and Verdenian volunteers in action, then – seized with terror – they would have hidden in their most remote and inaccessible lairs, where they were now cowering and trembling, fangs chattering.

'And they're guarding the she-ghouls, their wives and their daughters,' Milva snapped. 'The monsters know that a soldier on the march won't even pass up a sheep. And if you hung a woman's shift on a willow tree, a knothole would be enough for those heroes.' She looked pointedly at the women and children from Kernow, who were still with the group.

Dandelion, who had been full of vigour and good humour for quite some time, tuned his lute and began to compose a fitting couplet about willows, knotholes and lascivious warriors, and the dwarves and the parrot outdid each other in supplying ideas for rhymes.

'O,' Zoltan stated.

'What? Where?' Dandelion asked, standing up in his stirrups and looking down into the ravine in the direction the dwarf was pointing. 'I can't see anything!'

'O.'

'Don't drivel like your parrot! What do you mean "oh"?'

'It's a stream,' Zoltan calmly explained. 'A right-bank tributary of the Chotla. It's called the O.'

'Ey . . .'

'Not a bit of it!' Percival Schuttenbach laughed. 'The A joins the Chotla upstream, some way from here. That's the O, not the A.'

The ravine, along the bottom of which flowed the stream with the uncomplicated name, was overgrown with nettles taller than the marching dwarves, smelled intensively of mint and rotten wood and resounded with the unremitting croaking of frogs. It also had steep sides, which turned out to be fatal. Vera Loewenhaupt's wagon, which from the beginning of the journey had valiantly born the adversities of fate and overcome every obstacle, lost out in its clash with the stream by the name of 'O'. It slipped from the hands of the dwarves leading it downwards, bounced on down to the very bottom of the ravine and was smashed to matchwood.

‘’Kin’ . . . ’ell!’ Field Marshal Windbag squawked, a counterpoint to the massed cry of Zoltan and his company.

‘To tell the truth,’ Dandelion concluded, scrutinising the remains of the vehicle and the scattered possessions, ‘perhaps it’s for the best. That bloody wagon of yours only slowed down the march. There were constant problems with it. Look at it realistically, Zoltan. We were just lucky that no one was following us. If we’d had to suddenly run for it we’d have had to abandon the wagon along with all of your belongings, which we can now at least salvage.’

The dwarf seethed and grunted angrily into his beard, but Percival Schuttenbach unexpectedly backed up the troubadour. The support, as the Witcher observed, was accompanied by several conspiratorial winks. The winks were meant to be surreptitious, but the lively expression of the gnome’s little face revealed everything.

‘The poet’s right,’ Percival repeated, contorting his face and winking. ‘We’re a muddy stone’s throw from the Chotla and the Ina. Fen Carn’s in front of us; not a road to be seen. It would have been arduous with a wagon. And should we meet the Temerian Army by the Ina, with our load . . . we might be in trouble.’

Zoltan pondered this, sniffing.

‘Very well,’ he said finally, looking at the remains of the wagon being washed by the O’s lazy current. ‘We’ll split up. Munro, Figgis, Yazon and Caleb will stay here. The rest of us will continue on our way. We’ll have to saddle the horses with our sacks of vittles and small tackle. Munro, do you know what to do? Got spades?’

‘Yes.’

‘Just don’t leave the merest trace! And mark the spot well and remember it!’

‘Rest assured.’

‘You’ll catch up with us easily,’ Zoltan said, throwing his rucksack and sihil over his shoulder and adjusting the battle-axe in his belt. ‘We’ll be heading down the O and then along the Chotla to the Ina. Farewell.’

‘I wonder,’ Milva mumbled to Geralt when the depleted unit had set off, sent on its way by the waving of the four dwarves who were remaining behind, ‘I wonder what they have in those chests that needs burying in secret.’

‘It’s not our business.’

‘I can’t imagine,’ Dandelion said, *sotto voce*, cautiously steering Pegasus between the fallen trees, ‘that there were spare trousers in those chests. They’re pinning their hopes on that load. I talked with them enough to work out how the land lies and what might be concealed in those coffers.’

‘And what might be concealed in them, in your opinion?’

‘Their future,’ the poet said, looking around to check no one could hear. ‘Percival’s a stone polisher and cutter by trade, and wants to open his own workshop. Figgis and Yazon are smiths, they’ve been talking about a forge. Caleb Stratton plans to marry, but his fiancée’s parents have already driven him away once as a penniless bum. And Zoltan . . .’

‘That’s enough, Dandelion. You’re gossiping like an old woman. No offence, Milva.’

‘None taken.’

The trees thinned out beyond the stream and the dark, boggy strip of ancient woodland. They rode into a clearing with low birch woods and dry meadows. In spite of that they made slow progress. Following the example of Milva, who right away had lifted the freckled girl with the plaits onto her saddle, Dandelion also put a child on Pegasus, while Zoltan put a couple on his chestnut colt and walked alongside, holding the reins. But the pace didn’t increase, since the women from Kernow were unable to keep up.

It was almost evening when, after nearly an hour of roaming through ravines and gorges, Zoltan Chivay stopped, exchanged a few words with Percival Schuttenbach, and then turned to the rest of the company.

‘Don’t yell and don’t laugh at me,’ he said, ‘but I reckon we’re lost. I don’t bloody know where we are or which way to go.’

‘Don’t talk drivel,’ Dandelion said, irritated. ‘What do you mean you don’t know? After all, we’re following the course of the river. And down there in the ravine is your O. Right?’

‘Right. But look which way it’s flowing.’

‘Oh bugger. That’s impossible!’

‘No, it’s not,’ Milva said gloomily, patiently pulling dry leaves and pine needles from the hair of the freckled girl who was riding in front of her. ‘We’re lost among the ravines. The stream twists and turns. We’re on a meander.’

‘But it’s still the O,’ Dandelion insisted. ‘If we follow the river, we can’t get lost. Little rivers are known to meander, I admit, but ultimately they all invariably flow into something bigger. That is the way of the world.’

‘Don’t play the smart-arse, singer,’ Zoltan said, wrinkling his nose. ‘And shut your trap. Can’t you see I’m thinking?’

‘No. There’s nothing to suggest it. I repeat, let’s keep to the course of the stream, and then . . .’

‘That’ll do,’ Milva snapped. ‘You’re a townie. Your world is bounded by walls. Perhaps your worldly wisdom is of some use there. Take a look around! The valley’s furrowed by ravines with steep, overgrown banks. How do you think we’ll follow the course of the stream? Down the side of a gorge into thickets and bogs, up the other side and down again and up again, pulling our horses by the reins? After two ravines you’ll be so short of breath you’ll be flat on your back halfway up a slope. We’re leading women and children, Dandelion. And the sun’ll be setting directly.’

‘I noticed. Very well, I’ll keep quiet. And listen to what the experienced forest trackers come up with.’

Zoltan Chivay cuffed the cursing parrot around the head, twisted a tuft of his beard around a finger and tugged it in anger.

‘Percival?’

‘We know the rough direction,’ the gnome said, squinting up at the sun, which was suspended just above the treetops. ‘So the first conception is this: blow the stream, turn back, leave these ravines for dry land and go through Fen Carn, between the rivers, all the way to the Chotla.’

‘And the second conception?’

‘The O’s shallow. Even though it’s carrying more water than usual after the recent rains, it can be forded. We’ll cut off the meanders by wading through the stream each time it blocks our way. By holding a course according to the sun, we’ll come right out at the fork of the Chotla and the Ina.’

‘No,’ the Witcher suddenly broke in. ‘I suggest we drop the second idea right away. Let’s not even think about it. On the far bank we’ll end up in one of the Mealybug Moors sooner or later. It’s a vile place, and I strongly advise we keep well away from it.’

‘Do you know these parts, then? Ever been there before? Do you know how we can get out of here?’

The Witcher remained silent for a while.

'I've only been there once,' he said, wiping his forehead. 'Three years ago. But I entered from the other side. I was heading for Brugge and wanted to take a short cut. How I got out I don't remember. I was carried out on a wagon half-dead.'

The dwarf looked at him for a while, but asked no more questions.

They returned in silence. The women from Kernow had difficulty walking. They were stumbling and using sticks for support, but none of them uttered a word of complaint. Milva rode alongside the Witcher, holding up the girl with the plaits, who was asleep on the saddle in front of her.

'I think,' she suddenly began, 'that you got carved up in that wilderness, three years ago. By some monster, I understand. You have a dangerous job, Geralt.'

'I don't deny it.'

'I remember what happened then,' Dandelion boasted from behind. 'You were wounded, some merchant got you out and then you found Ciri in Riverdell. Yennefer told me about it.'

At the sound of that name Milva smiled faintly. It did not escape Geralt's notice. He decided to give Dandelion a good dressing down at the next camp for his untrammelled chatter. Knowing the poet, he couldn't count on any results, particularly since Dandelion had probably already blabbed everything he knew.

'Perhaps it wasn't such a good idea,' said the archer after a while, 'that we didn't cross to the far bank, towards the wilderness. If you found the girl then . . . The elves say that sometimes lightning can strike twice. They call it . . . Bugger, I've forgotten. The noose of fate?'

'The loop,' he corrected her. 'The loop of fate.'

'Uurgh!' Dandelion said, grimacing. 'Can't you stop talking about nooses and loops? A she-elf once divined that I would say farewell to this vale of tears on the scaffold, with the help of the deathsman. Admittedly I don't believe in that type of tawdry fortune-telling, but a few days ago I dreamed I was being hanged. I awoke in a muck sweat, unable to swallow or catch my breath. So I listen with reluctance to discussions about gibbets.'

'I'm not talking to you, I'm talking to the Witcher,' Milva riposted. 'So don't flap your ears and nothing horrible will fall into

them. Well then, Geralt? What have you got to say about that loop of fate? If we go to the wilderness, perhaps time will repeat itself.'

'That's why it's good we've turned back,' he replied brusquely. 'I don't have the slightest desire to repeat that nightmare.'

'There's no two ways about it.' Zoltan nodded, looking around. 'You've led us to a pretty charming place, Percival.'

'Fen Carn,' the gnome muttered, scratching the tip of his long nose. 'Meadow of the Barrows . . . I've always wondered how it got its name . . .'

'Now you know.'

The broad valley in front of them was already shrouded in evening mist from which, as far as the eye could see, protruded thousands of burial mounds and moss-covered monoliths. Some of the boulders were ordinary, shapeless lumps of stone. Others, smoothly hewn, had been sculpted into obelisks and menhirs. Still others, standing closer to the centre of this stone forest, were formed into dolmens, cairns and cromlechs, in a way that ruled out any natural processes.

'Indeed,' the dwarf repeated, 'a charming place to spend the night. An elven cemetery. If my memory doesn't fail me, Witcher, some time ago you mentioned ghouls. Well, you ought to know, I can sense them among these kurgans. I bet there's everything here. Ghouls, graveirs, spectres, wights, elven spirits, wraiths, apparitions; the works. They're hunkered down there and do you know what they're whispering? "We won't have to go looking for supper, because it's come right to us." '

'Perhaps we ought to go back,' Dandelion suggested in a whisper. 'Perhaps we should get out of here, while there's still some light.'

'That's what I think too.'

'The womenfolk can't go any further,' Milva said angrily. 'The kids are ready to drop. The horses have stopped. You were the one driving us on, Zoltan. "Let's keep going, just another half a mile," you kept repeating. "Just another furlong," you said. And now what? Two more furlongs back the way we came? Crap. Cemetery or no cemetery, we're stopping for the night, the first place we find.'

'That's right,' the Witcher said in support, dismounting. 'Don't panic. Not every necropolis is crawling with monsters and

apparitions. I've never been to Fen Carn before, but if it were really dangerous I'd have heard about it.'

No one, not even Field Marshal Windbag, commented. The women from Kernow retrieved their children and sat down in a tight group, silent and visibly frightened. Percival and Dandelion tethered the horses and let them graze on the lush grass. Geralt, Zoltan and Milva approached the edge of the meadow, to look at the burial ground drowning in the fog and the gathering gloom.

'To cap it all, the moon's completely full,' the dwarf muttered. 'Oh dear, there'll be a ghastly feast tonight, I can feel it, oh, the demons will make our lives miserable . . . But what's that glow to the south? A fire?'

'What else? Of course it is,' the Witcher confirmed. 'Someone's torched someone else's roof over their head again. Know what, Zoltan? I think I feel safer here in Fen Carn.'

'I'll feel like that too, but only when the sun comes up. As long as the ghouls let us see out the night.'

Milva rummaged in her saddlebag and took out something shiny.

'A silver arrowhead,' she said. 'Kept for just such an occasion. It cost me five crowns at the market. That ought to kill a ghoul, right, Witcher?'

'I don't think there are any ghouls here.'

'You said yourself,' Zoltan snapped, 'that ghouls had been chewing that corpse on the oak tree. And where there's a cemetery, there are ghouls.'

'Not always.'

'I'll take your word for it. You're a witcher, a specialist; so you'll defend us, I hope. You chopped up those marauders pretty smartly . . . Is it harder fighting ghouls than marauders?'

'Incomparably. I said stop panicking.'

'And will it be any good for a vampire?' Milva asked, screwing the silver arrowhead onto a shaft and checking it for sharpness with her thumb. 'Or a spectre?'

'It may be.'

'An ancient dwarven incantation in ancient dwarven runes is engraved on my sihil,' Zoltan growled, drawing his sword, 'If just one ghoul approaches at a blade's length, it won't forget me. Right here, look.'

‘Ah,’ Dandelion, who had just joined them, said with interest. ‘So those are some of the famous secret runes of the dwarves. What does the engraving say?’

‘ “Confusion to the whores’ sons!” ’

‘Something moved among the stones,’ Percival Schuttenbach suddenly yelled. ‘It’s a ghoul, it’s a ghoul!’

‘Where?’

‘Over there! It’s hid itself among the boulders!’

‘One?’

‘I saw one!’

‘He must be seriously hungry, since he’s trying to get his teeth into us before nightfall,’ the dwarf said, spitting on his hands and gripping the hilt of his sihil tightly. ‘Ha! He’ll soon find out gluttony will be his ruin! Milva, you stick an arrow in his arse and I’ll cut his gizzard open!’

‘I can’t see anything there,’ Milva hissed, with the fletchings already touching her chin. ‘Not a single weed between the stones is trembling. Sure you weren’t seeing things, gnome?’

‘Not a chance,’ Percival protested. ‘Do you see that boulder that looks like a broken table? The ghoul hid behind it.’

‘You lot stay here,’ Geralt said, quickly drawing his sword from the scabbard on his back. ‘Guard the womenfolk and keep an eye on the horses. If the ghouls attack, the animals will panic. I’ll go and find out what it was.’

‘You aren’t going by yourself,’ Zoltan firmly stated. ‘Back there in the clearing I let you go alone. I chickened out because of the smallpox. And two nights running I haven’t slept for shame. Never again! Percival, where are you off to? To the rear? You claim to have seen the phantom, so now you’re going in the vanguard. Don’t be afeared, I’m coming with you.’

They headed off cautiously between the barrows, trying not to disturb the weeds – which were knee-high to Geralt and waist-high to the dwarf and the gnome. As they approached the dolmen that Percival had pointed out they artfully split up, cutting off the ghoul’s potential escape route. But the strategy turned out to be unnecessary. As Geralt had expected, his witcher medallion didn’t even quiver; betrayed no sign of anything monstrous nearby.

‘There’s no one here,’ Zoltan confirmed, looking around. ‘Not a

soul. You must have imagined it, Percival. It's a false alarm. You put the wind up us for no reason. You truly deserve my boot up your arse for that.'

'I saw it!' the gnome said indignantly. 'I saw it hopping about among the stones! It was skinny and dressed all in black like a tax collector . . .'

'Be quiet, you foolish gnome, or I'll . . .'

'What's that strange odour?' Geralt suddenly asked. 'Can you smell it?'

'Indeed,' the dwarf said, nose extended like a pointer. 'What a pong.'

'Herbs,' Percival said, sniffling with his sensitive, two-inch-long nose. 'Wormwood, basil, sage, aniseed . . . Cinnamon? What the blazes?'

'What do ghouls smell of, Geralt?'

'Rotting corpses,' the Witcher said, taking a quick look around and searching for footprints in the grass. Then with a few swift steps he returned to the sunken dolmen and tapped gently against the stone with the flat of his sword.

'Get out,' he said through clenched teeth. 'I know you're in there. Be quick, or I'll poke a hole in you.'

A soft scraping could be heard from a cleverly concealed cavity beneath the stones.

'Get out,' Geralt repeated. 'You're perfectly safe.'

'We won't touch a hair on your head,' Zoltan added sweetly, raising his sihil above the hollow and rolling his eyes menacingly. 'Out with you!'

Geralt shook his head and made a clear sign for the dwarf to withdraw. Once again there was a scratching from the cavity under the dolmen and once again they were aware of the intense aroma of herbs and spices. A moment later they saw a grizzled head and then a face embellished with a nobly aquiline nose, belonging by no means to a ghoul but to a slim, middle-aged man. Percival hadn't been wrong. The man did indeed somewhat resemble a tax collector.

'Is it safe to come out?' he asked, raising black eyes beneath slightly greying eyebrows towards Geralt.

'Yes, it is.'

The man scrambled out of the hole, brushed down his black robes – which were tied around the waist with some kind of apron – and straightened a linen bag, causing another wave of the herbal aroma.

'I suggest you put away your weapons, gentlemen,' he declared in a measured voice, running his eyes over the group of wanderers surrounding him. 'They won't be necessary. I, as you can see, bear no blade. I never do. Neither do I have anything on me that might be termed attractive booty. My name is Emiel Regis. I come from Dillingen. I'm a barber-surgeon.'

'Indeed,' Zoltan Chivay grimaced a little. 'A barber-surgeon, alchemist or herbalist. No offence, my dear sir, but you smell seriously like an apothecary's shop.'

Emiel Regis smiled strangely, with pursed lips, and spread his arms apologetically.

'The scent betrayed you, master barber-surgeon,' Geralt said, replacing his sword in its sheath. 'Did you have any particular reason to hide from us?'

'Any particular reason?' the man asked, turning his black eyes towards him. 'No. I was just taking general precautions. I was simply afraid of you. These are difficult times.'

'True.' The dwarf nodded and pointed towards the glow of fire lighting up the sky. 'Difficult times. I surmise that you are a fugitive, as we are. It intrigues me, however, that although you've fled far from your native Dillingen, you're hiding all alone among these kurgans. Well, people's fates are various, particularly during difficult times. We were afraid of you and you of us. Fear makes one imagine things.'

'You have nothing to fear from me,' the man who was claiming to be Emiel Regis said, without taking his eyes off them, 'I hope I can count on reciprocity.'

'My, my,' Zoltan said, grinning broadly. 'You don't take us for robbers, do you? We, master barber-surgeon, are fugitives. We are travelling to the Temerian border. You may join us if you wish. The more the merrier . . . and safer, and a physician may come in handy. We have women and children in the party. Among the stinking medicaments I can smell about you, would you have a remedy for blisters?'

'I ought to have something,' the barber-surgeon said softly. 'Glad to be of assistance. But as far as travelling together is concerned . . . Thank you for the offer, but I'm not running away, gentlemen. I

wasn't fleeing from Dillingen to escape the war. I live here.'

'Come again?' the dwarf said, frowning and taking a step back. 'You live here? Here, in this burial ground?'

'In the burial ground? No. I have a cottage not far from here. Apart from my house and shop in Dillingen, you understand. But I spend my summers here every year, from June to September, from Midsummer to the Equinox. I gather healing herbs and roots, from which I distil medicines and elixirs in my cottage . . .'

'But you know about the war in spite of your reclusive solitude far from the world and people.' Geralt pointed out. 'Who do you get your news from?'

'From the refugees who pass this way. There's a large camp less than two miles from here, by the River Chotla. A good few hundred fugitives – peasants from Brugge and Sodden – are gathered there.'

'And what about the Temerian Army?' Zoltan asked with interest. 'Are they on the move?'

'I know nothing about that.'

The dwarf swore and then glowered at the barber-surgeon.

'So you simply live here, Master Regis,' he drawled, 'and stroll among the graves of an evening. Aren't you afraid?'

'What ought I to be afraid of?'

'This here gentleman,' Zoltan pointed at Geralt, 'is a witcher. He saw evidence of ghouls not long ago. Corpse eaters, get it? And you don't have to be a witcher to know that ghouls hang around in cemeteries.'

'A witcher,' the barber-surgeon said, and looked at Geralt with obvious interest. 'A monster killer. Well, well. Fascinating. Didn't you explain to your comrades, Master Witcher, that this necropolis is over five hundred years old? Ghouls aren't fussy about what they eat, but they don't chew five-hundred-year-old bones. There aren't any ghouls here.'

'I feel a lot better knowing that,' Zoltan Chivay said, looking around. 'Well, master physician, come over to our camp. We have some cold horsemeat. You won't refuse it, will you?'

Regis looked at him long and hard.

'My thanks,' he said finally. 'But I have a better idea. Come to my place. My summer abode is more of a shack than a cottage, and a small one at that. You'll have no choice but to sleep under the stars.

But there's a spring nearby and a hearth where you can warm up your horsemeat.'

'We'll gladly take you up on your invitation,' the dwarf said, bowing. 'Perhaps there really aren't any ghouls here, but the thought of spending a night in the burial ground doesn't do much for me. Let's go, I'll introduce you to the rest of our company.'

When they reached the camp the horses snorted and stamped their hooves on the ground.

'Stand a little downwind, Master Regis,' Zoltan Chivay said, casting the physician a telling glance. 'The smell of sage frightens our horses, and in my case, I'm ashamed to admit, reminds me unpleasantly of teeth being pulled.'

'Geralt,' Zoltan muttered, as soon as Emiel Regis had disappeared behind the flap covering the entrance to the cottage. 'Let's keep our eyes open. There's something fishy about that stinking herbalist.'

'Anything specific?'

'I don't like it when people spend their summers near cemeteries, never mind cemeteries a long way from human dwellings. Do herbs really not grow in more pleasant surroundings? That Regis looks like a grave robber to me. Barber-surgeons, alchemists and the like exhume corpses from boneyards, in order to perform various experiments on them.'

'Experiments. But fresh corpses are needed for practices of that kind. This cemetery is very old.'

'True,' the dwarf said, scratching his chin and watching the women from Kernow making their beds under some hagberry shrubs growing by the barber-surgeon's shack. 'So perhaps he steals buried treasure from these barrows?'

'Ask him,' Geralt said, shrugging. 'You accepted the invitation to stay at his homestead at once, without hesitation, and now you've suddenly become as suspicious as an old maid being paid a compliment.'

'Er . . .' Zoltan mumbled, somewhat tongue-tied. 'There's something in that. But I'd like to have a gander at what he keeps in that hovel of his. You know, just to be on the safe side . . .'

'So follow him in and pretend you want to borrow a fork.'

'Why a fork?'

‘Why not?’

The dwarf gave Geralt an old-fashioned look and finally made up his mind. He hurried over to the cottage, knocked politely on the door jamb and entered. He remained inside for some little time, and then suddenly appeared in the doorway.

‘Geralt, Percival, Dandelion, step this way. Come and see something interesting. Come on, without further ado, Master Regis has invited us in.’

The interior of the cottage was dark and dominated by a warm, intoxicating aroma that made the nose tickle, mainly coming from the bunches of herbs and roots hanging from all the walls. The only items of furniture were a simple cot – also strewn with herbs – and a rickety table cluttered with innumerable glass, pottery and ceramic vials. The room was illuminated by the dim glow of burning coals in a curious, pot-bellied stove, resembling a bulging hourglass. The stove was surrounded by a spidery lattice of shining pipes of various diameters, bent into curves and spirals. Beneath one of the pipes stood a wooden pail into which a liquid was dripping.

At the sight of the stove Percival Schuttenbach first stared goggle-eyed, then gaped, and finally sighed and leapt up in the air.

‘Ho, ho, ho!’ he called, unable to conceal his delight. ‘What do I see? That’s an absolutely authentic athanor coupled to an alembic! Equipped with a rectifying column and a copper condenser! A beautiful apparatus! Did you build it yourself, master barber-surgeon?’

‘Indeed,’ Emiel Regis admitted modestly. ‘My work involves producing elixirs, so I have to distil, extract the fifth essence, and also . . .’

He broke off, seeing Zoltan Chivay catching a drop falling from the end of the pipe and licking his finger. The dwarf sighed and a look of indescribable bliss appeared on his ruddy face.

Dandelion couldn’t resist and also had a go, tasting and moaning softly.

‘The fifth essence,’ he confirmed, smacking his lips. ‘And I suspect the sixth and even the seventh.’

‘Well . . .’ The barber-surgeon smiled faintly. ‘As I said: a distillate.’

‘Moonshine,’ Zoltan corrected him gently. ‘And what moonshine!

Try some, Percival.'

'But I'm not an expert in organic chemistry,' the gnome answered absentmindedly, examining the details of the alchemical furnace's construction. 'It's doubtful I would be familiar with the ingredients . . .'

'It is a distillate of mandrake,' Regis said, dispelling any doubt. 'Enriched with belladonna. And fermented starch mass.'

'You mean mash?'

'One could also call it that.'

'May I request a cup of some kind?'

'Zoltan, Dandelion,' the Witcher said, folding his arms on his chest. 'Are you deaf? It's mandrake. The moonshine is made of mandrake. Leave that copper alone.'

'But dear Master Geralt,' the alchemist said, digging a small graduated flask out from between some dust-covered retorts and demijohns, and meticulously polishing it with a rag. 'There's nothing to be afraid of. The mandrake is appropriately seasoned and the proportions carefully selected and precisely weighed out. I only add five ounces of mandrake to a pound of mash, and only half a dram of belladonna . . .'

'That's not the point,' the Witcher said, looking at Zoltan. The dwarf understood at once, grew serious and cautiously withdrew from the still. 'The point is not how many drams you add, Master Regis, but how much a dram of mandrake costs. It's too dear a tipple for us.'

'Mandrake,' Dandelion whispered in awe, pointing at the small heap of sugar beet-like roots piled up in the corner of the shack. 'That's mandrake? Real mandrake?'

'The female form' – the alchemist nodded – 'grows in large clumps in the very cemetery where we chanced to meet. Which is also why I spend my summers here.'

The Witcher looked knowingly at Zoltan. The dwarf winked. Regis gave a half-suppressed smile.

'Gentlemen, please, I warmly invite you to sample it, if you wish. I appreciate your moderation, but in the current situation there's little chance of me taking the elixirs to war-torn Dillingen. It all would have gone to waste anyway, so let's not talk about the price. My apologies, but I only have one drinking vessel.'

‘That should do,’ Zoltan said, picking up the flask and carefully scooping up moonshine from the pail. ‘Your good health, Master Regis. Ooooh . . .’

‘Please forgive me,’ the barber-surgeon said, smiling again. ‘The quality of the distillate probably leaves a lot to be desired . . . It’s actually unfinished.’

‘It’s the best unfinished product I’ve ever tasted,’ Zoltan said, gasping. ‘Your turn, poet.’

‘Aaaah . . . Oh, mother of mine! Excellent! Have a sip, Geralt.’

‘Give it to our host,’ the Witcher said, bowing slightly towards Emiel Regis. ‘Where are your manners, Dandelion?’

‘Please forgive me, gentlemen,’ the alchemist said, acknowledging the gesture, ‘but I never permit myself any stimulants. My health isn’t what it was. I’ve been forced to give up many . . . pleasures.’

‘Not even a sip?’

‘It’s a principle,’ Regis explained calmly. ‘I never break any principles once I’ve adopted them.’

‘I admire and envy you your resoluteness,’ Geralt said, sipping a little from the flask and then, after a moment’s hesitation, draining it in one. The tears trickling from his eyes interfered a little with the taste of the moonshine. An invigorating warmth spread through his stomach.

‘I’ll go and get Milva,’ he offered, handing the flask to the dwarf. ‘Don’t polish it all off before we get back.’

Milva was sitting near the horses, bantering with the freckled girl she had been carrying on her saddle all day. When she heard about Regis’s hospitality she initially shrugged, but in the end didn’t need much persuading.

When they entered the shack they found the company carrying out an inspection of the stored mandrake roots.

‘I’ve never seen it before,’ Dandelion confessed, turning a bulbous root around in his fingers. ‘Indeed, it does somewhat resemble a man.’

‘A man twisted by lumbago, perhaps,’ Zoltan added. ‘And that one’s the spitting image of a pregnant woman. And that one, if you’ll excuse me, looks just like a couple busy bonking.’

‘You lot only think of one thing,’ Milva sneered, boldly drinking from the full flask and then coughing loudly into a fist. ‘Bloody hell

. . . Powerful stuff, that hooch! Is it really made from love apples? Ha, so we're drinking a magic potion! That doesn't happen every day. Thank you, master barber-surgeon.'

'The pleasure is all mine.'

The flask, kept topped up, circulated around the company, prompting good humour, verve and garrulousness.

'The mandrake, I hear, is a vegetable with great magical powers,' Percival Schuttenbach said with conviction.

'Yes, indeed,' Dandelion confirmed. He then emptied the flask, shuddered and resumed talking. 'There's no shortage of ballads written on the subject. It's well known that sorcerers use mandrake in elixirs, which help them preserve their eternal youth and sorceresses make an ointment, which they call glamarye. If an enchantress applies such ointment she becomes so beautiful and enchanting it makes your eyes pop out of your head. You also ought to know that mandrake is a powerful aphrodisiac and is used in love magic, particularly to break down female resistance. That's the explanation of mandrake's folk name: love apple. It's a herb used to pander lovers.'

'Blockhead,' Milva commented.

'And I heard,' the gnome said, downing the contents of the flask, 'that when mandrake root is pulled from the ground the plant cries and wails as though it were alive.'

'Why,' Zoltan said, filling the flask from the pail, 'if it only wailed! Mandrake, they say, screams so horribly it can send you up the wall, and moreover it screams out evil spells and showers curses on whoever uproots it. You can pay with your life taking a risk like that.'

'That sounds like a cloth-headed fairy-tale,' Milva said, taking the flask from him and drinking deeply. She shuddered and added: 'It's impossible for a plant to have such powers.'

'It's an infallible truth!' the dwarf called heatedly. 'But sagacious herbalists have found a way of protecting themselves. Having found a mandrake, you must tie one end of a rope to the root and the other end to a dog . . .'

'Or a pig,' the gnome broke in.

'Or a wild boar,' Dandelion added gravely.

'You're a fool, poet. The whole point is for the mutt or swine to pull the mandrake out of the ground, for then the vegetable's curses

and spells fall on the said creature, while the herbalist – hiding safely, far away in the bushes – gets out in one piece. Well, Master Regis? Am I talking sense?'

'An interesting method,' the alchemist admitted, smiling mysteriously. 'Interesting mainly for its ingenuity. The disadvantage, however, is its extreme complexity. For in theory the rope ought to be enough, without the draught animal. I wouldn't suspect mandrake of having the ability of knowing who or what's pulling the rope. The spells and curses should always fall on the rope, which after all is cheaper and less problematic to use than a dog, not to mention a pig.'

'Are you jesting?'

'Wouldn't dream of it. I said I admire the ingenuity. Because although the mandrake, contrary to popular opinion, is incapable of casting spells or curses, it is – in its raw state – an extremely toxic plant, to the extent that even the earth around the root is poisonous. Sprinkling the fresh juice onto the face or on a cut hand, why, even breathing in its fumes, may all have fatal consequences. I wear a mask and gloves, which doesn't mean I have anything against the rope method.'

'Mmmm . . .' the dwarf pondered. 'But what about that horrifying scream the plucked mandrake makes? Is that true?'

'The mandrake doesn't have vocal chords,' the alchemist explained calmly, 'which is fairly typical for plants, is it not? However, the toxin secreted by the root has a powerful hallucinogenic effect. The voices, screams, whispers and other sounds are nothing more than hallucinations produced by the poisoned central nervous system.'

'Ha, I clean forgot,' Dandelion said, having just drained the flask and letting out a suppressed burp, 'that mandrake is extremely poisonous! And I was holding it! And now we're guzzling this tincture with abandon . . .'

'Only the fresh mandrake root is toxic,' Regis said, calming him down. 'Mine is seasoned and suitably prepared, and the distillate has been filtered. There is no need for alarm.'

'Of course there isn't,' Zoltan agreed. 'Moonshine will always be moonshine, you can even distil it from hemlock, nettles, fish scales and old bootlaces. Give us the glass, Dandelion, there's a queue forming here.'

The flask, kept topped up, circulated around the company.

Everybody was sitting comfortably on the dirt floor. The Witcher hissed and swore, and shifted his position, because the pain shot through his knee again as he sat. He caught sight of Regis looking at him intently. ‘Is that a fresh injury?’

‘Not really. But it’s tormenting me. Do you have any herbs capable of soothing the pain?’

‘That all depends on the class of pain,’ the barber-surgeon said, smiling slightly. ‘And on its causes. I can detect a strange odour in your sweat, Witcher. Were you treated with magic? Were you given magic enzymes and hormones?’

‘They gave me various medicaments. I had no idea they could still be smelled in my sweat. You’ve got a bloody sensitive nose, Regis.’

‘Everybody has their good points. To even out the vices. What ailment did they use magic to treat you with?’

‘I broke my arm and the shaft of my thighbone.’

‘How long ago?’

‘A little over a month.’

‘And you’re already walking? Remarkable. The dryads of Brokilon, I presume?’

‘How can you tell?’

‘Only the dryads have medicaments capable of rebuilding bone tissue so quickly. I can see dark marks on the backs of your hands. They’re the places where the tendrils of the conynhaela and the symbiotic shoots of knitbone entered. Only dryads know how to use conynhaela, and knitbone doesn’t grow outside Brokilon.’

‘Well done. Admirable deduction skills. Though something else interests me. My thighbone and forearm were broken, but the strong pain is in the knee and elbow.’

‘That’s typical,’ the barber-surgeon nodded. ‘The dryads’ magic reconstructed your damaged bone, but simultaneously caused a minor upheaval in your nerve trunks. It’s a side effect, felt most intensely in the joints.’

‘What do you advise?’

‘Unfortunately, nothing. You’ll continue to predict rainy weather unerringly for a long time to come. The pains will grow stronger in the winter. However, I wouldn’t recommend that you take powerful painkilling drugs. Particularly steer clear of narcotics. You’re a

witcher and in your case it's absolutely to be avoided.'

'I'll treat myself with your mandrake, then,' the Witcher said, raising the full flask, which Milva had just handed him. He took a deep swallow and hacked until tears filled his eyes. 'Bloody hell! I'm feeling better already.'

'I'm not certain,' Regis said, smiling through pursed lips, 'that you're treating the right illness. I'd also like to remind you that one should treat causes, not symptoms.'

'Not in the case of this witcher,' Dandelion snorted, now a little flushed and eavesdropping on their conversation. 'Booze is just right for him and his worries.'

'It ought to do you good, too,' Geralt said, giving the poet a chilling stare. 'Particularly if it paralyses your tongue.'

'I wouldn't especially count on that.' The barber-surgeon smiled again. 'Belladonna is one of the preparation's ingredients, which means a large number of alkaloids, including scopolamine. Before the mandrake puts you to sleep, you're all sure to give me a display of eloquence.'

'A display of what?' Percival asked.

'Talkativeness. My apologies. Let's use simpler words.'

Geralt mouth twisted into a fake smile.

'That's right,' he said. 'It's easy to adopt an affected style and start using words like that every day. Then people take the speaker for an arrogant buffoon.'

'Or an alchemist,' Zoltan Chivay said, filling the flask from the pail once more.

'Or a witcher,' Dandelion snorted, 'who's read a lot to impress a certain enchantress. Nothing attracts enchantresses like an elaborate tale, gentlemen. Am I right, Geralt? Go on, spin us a yarn . . .'

'Sit out your turn, Dandelion,' the Witcher cut in coldly. 'The alkaloids in this hooch are acting on you too quickly. They've loosened your tongue.'

'It's time you gave up your secrets, Geralt,' Zoltan grimaced. 'Dandelion hasn't told us much we didn't know. You can't help it if you're a walking legend. They re-enact stories of your adventures in puppet theatres. Like the story about you and an enchantress by the name of Guinevere.'

'Yennefer,' Regis corrected in hushed tones. 'I saw that one. It

was the story of a hunt for a genie, if my memory serves me correctly.'

'I was present during that hunt,' Dandelion boasted. 'We had some laughs, I can tell you . . .'

'Tell them all,' Geralt said, getting up. 'Tell them while you're sipping the moonshine and embellishing the story suitably. I'm taking a walk.'

'Hey,' the dwarf said, nettled. 'No need to get offended . . .'

'You misunderstand, Zoltan. I'm going to relieve my bladder. Why, it even happens to walking legends.'

The night was as cold as hell. The horses stamped and snorted, and steam belched from their nostrils. Bathed in moonlight, Regis's shack seemed utterly as if it could have come from a fairy-tale. It could have been a witch's cottage. Geralt fastened his trousers.

Milva, who had left soon after him, coughed hesitantly. Her long shadow drew level with his.

'Why are you delaying going back?' she asked. 'Did they really annoy you?'

'No,' he replied.

'Then why the hell are you standing here by yourself in the moonlight?'

'I'm counting.'

'Huh?'

'Twelve days have passed since I set out from Brokilon, during which I've travelled around sixty miles. Rumour has it that Ciri's in Nilfgaard, the capital of the Empire. Which is around two and half thousand miles from here. Simple arithmetic tells me that at this rate I'll get there in a year and four months. What do you say to that?'

'Nothing,' Milva said, shrugging and coughing again. 'I'm not as good at reckoning as you. I don't know how to read or write at all. I'm a foolish, simple country girl. No company for you. Nor someone to talk to.'

'Don't say that.'

'It's the truth, though,' she said, turning away abruptly. 'Why did you tally up the days and miles? For me to advise you? Cheer you

up? Chase away your fear, suppress the remorse that torments you worse than the pain in your broken peg? I don't know how! You need another. The one Dandelion was talking about. Intelligent, educated. Your beloved.'

'Dandelion's a prattler.'

'That he is. But he occasionally prattles sense. Let's go back, I want to drink some more.'

'Milva?'

'What?'

'You never told me why you decided to ride with me.'

'You never asked.'

'I'm asking now.'

'It's too late now. I don't know any more.'

'Oh, you're back at last,' Zoltan said, pleased to see them, his voice now sounding quite different. 'And we, just imagine, have decided that Regis will continue on our journey with us.'

'Really?' The Witcher looked intently at the barber-surgeon. 'What's behind this sudden decision?'

'Master Zoltan,' Regis said, without lowering his gaze, 'has made me aware that Dillingen has been engulfed by a much more serious war than I understood from the refugees' accounts. A return to those parts is totally out of the question, and remaining in this wilderness doesn't seem wise. Or travelling alone, for that matter.'

'And we, although you don't know us at all, look like people you could travel with safely. Was one glance enough for you?'

'Two,' the barber-surgeon replied with a faint smile. 'One at the women you're looking after. And the other at their children.'

Zoltan belched loudly and scraped the flask against the bottom of the pail.

'Appearances can be deceptive,' he sneered. 'Perhaps we intend to sell the women into slavery. Percival, do something with this apparatus. Loosen a valve a little or something. We want to drink more and it's taking for ever to drip out.'

'The condenser can't keep up. The liquor will be warm.'

'Not a problem. The night's cool.'

The lukewarm moonshine greatly stimulated the conversation. Dandelion, Zoltan and Percival were all ruddy-cheeked, and their voices had altered even more – in the case of the poet and the gnome one could now say that they were almost on the verge of gibbering. Ravenous, the company were chewing cold horsemeat and nibbling horseradish roots they had found in the cottage – which made their eyes water, because the horseradish was as bracing as the hooch. And added passion to the discussion.

Regis gave an expression of astonishment when it turned out that the final destination of the trek was not the enclave of the Mahakam massif, the eternal and secure home of the dwarves. Zoltan, who had become even more garrulous than Dandelion, declared that under no circumstances would he ever return to Mahakam, and unburdened himself of his animosity to its ruling regime, particularly regarding the politics and absolute rule of Brouver Hoog, the Elder of Mahakam and all the dwarven clans.

'The old fart!' he roared, and spat into the hearth of the furnace. 'To look at him you wouldn't know if he was alive or stuffed. He almost never moves, which is just as well, because he farts every time he does. You can't understand a word he's saying because his beard and whiskers are stuck together with dried borscht. But he lords it over everyone and everything, and everyone has to dance to his tune . . .'

'It would be difficult to claim, however, that Hoog's policies are poor,' Regis interrupted. 'For, owing to his decisive measures, the dwarves distanced themselves from the elves and don't fight alongside the Scoia'tael any more. And thanks to that the pogroms have ceased. Thanks to that there have been no punitive expeditions to Mahakam. Prudence in their dealings with humans is bearing fruit.'

'Bollocks,' Zoltan said, drinking from the flask. 'In the case of the Squirrels, the old fossil wasn't interested in prudence, it was because too many youngsters were abandoning work in the mines and the forges and joining the elves to sample freedom and manly adventures in the commandos. When the phenomenon grew to the size of a problem, Brouver Hoog took the punks in hand. He couldn't care less about the humans being killed by the Squirrels, and he made light of the repression falling on the dwarves because of that – including your infamous pogroms. He didn't give a damn and doesn't give a damn about them, because he considers the dwarves who've settled in the cities apostates. And as regards punitive expeditions to Mahakam – don't make me laugh, my dears.

There's no threat and never has been, because none of the kings would dare lay a finger on Mahakam. I'll go further: even the Nilfgaardians, were they to manage to take control of the valleys surrounding the massif, wouldn't dare touch Mahakam. Do you know why? I'll tell you: Mahakam is steel; and not just any old steel. There's coal there, there's magnetite ore, boundless deposits. Everywhere else it's just bog ore.'

'And they have expertise and technology in Mahakam,' Percival Schuttenbach interposed. 'Metallurgy and smelting! Enormous furnaces, not some pathetic smelteries. Trip hammers and steam hammers . . .'

'There you go, Percival, neck that,' Zoltan said, handing the gnome the now full flask, 'before you bore us to death with your technology and engineering. Everyone knows about it. But not everyone knows Mahakam exports steel. To the kingdoms, but to Nilfgaard too. And should anyone lay a finger on us, we'll wreck the workshops and flood the mines. And then you humans will continue fighting, but with oaken staves, flint blades and asses' jawbones.'

'You say you have it in for Brouver Hoog and the regime in Mahakam,' the Witcher observed, 'but you've suddenly started saying "we".'

'I certainly have,' the dwarf confirmed heatedly. 'There is something like solidarity, isn't there? I admit that pride also plays its part, because we're cleverer than those stuck-up elves. You can't deny it, can you? For a few centuries the elves pretended there weren't any humans at all. They gazed up at the sky, smelled the flowers, and at the sight of a human averted their vulgarly bedaubed eyes. But when that strategy turned out to be ineffective they suddenly roused themselves and took up arms. They decided to kill and be killed. And we? The dwarves? We adapted. No, we didn't subordinate ourselves to you, don't get that into your heads. We subordinated you. Economically.'

'To tell the truth,' Regis chipped in, 'it was easier for you to adapt than it was for the elves. Land and territory is what integrates elves. In your case it's the clan. Wherever your clan is, that's your homeland. Even if an exceptionally short-sighted king were to attack Mahakam, you'd flood the mines and head off somewhere else without any regrets. To other, distant mountains. Or perhaps to human cities instead.'

'And why not? It's not a bad life in your cities.'

'Even in the ghettoes?' Dandelion asked, gasping after a swig of

distillate.

‘And what’s wrong with living in a ghetto? I’d prefer to live among my own. What do I need with assimilation?’

‘As long as they let us near the guilds,’ Percival said, wiping his nose on his sleeve.

‘They will eventually,’ the dwarf said with conviction. ‘And if they don’t we’ll just bodge our way through, or we’ll found our own guilds; and healthy competition will decide.’

‘So it would be safer in Mahakam than in the cities, then,’ Regis observed. ‘The cities could go up in flames any second. It would be more judicious to see out the war in the mountains.’

‘Anyone who wishes to can do just that,’ Zoltan said, replenishing the flask from the pail. ‘Freedom is dearer to me, and you won’t find that in Mahakam. You have no idea how the old bugger governs. He recently took it upon himself to regulate what he calls “community issues”. For example: whether you can wear braces or not. Whether you should eat carp right away or wait until the jelly sets. Whether playing the ocarina is in keeping with our centuries-old dwarven traditions or is a destructive influence of rotten and decadent human culture. How many years you have to work before submitting an application for a permanent wife. Which hand you should wipe your arse with. How far away from the mines you’re allowed to whistle. And other issues of vital importance. No, boys, I’m not going to return to Mount Carbon. I have no desire to spend my life at the coalface. Forty years underground, assuming firedamp doesn’t blow you up first. But we’ve got other plans now, haven’t we, Percival? We’ve already secured ourselves a future . . .’

‘A future, a future . . .’ the gnome said and emptied the graduated flask. He cleared his nose and looked at the dwarf with a now slightly glazed expression. ‘Don’t count our chickens, Zoltan. Because they might still nab us and then our future’s the gibbet . . . Or Drakenborg.’

‘Shut your trap,’ the dwarf snapped, looking menacingly at him. ‘You’re blabbing!’

‘Scopolamine,’ Regis mumbled softly.

The gnome was rambling. Milva was gloomy. Zoltan, having forgotten that he’d already done so, told everyone about Hoog, the old fart and the Elder of Mahakam. Geralt listened, having forgotten

he'd already heard it once. Regis also listened and even added comments, utterly unperturbed by the fact that he was the only sober individual in a now very drunk party. Dandelion strummed away on his lute and sang.

No wonder that comely ladies are all so stuck-up

For the taller the tree, the harder it is to get up.

'Idiot,' Milva commented. Dandelion was undeterred.

Simply treat a maiden as you would a tree

Whip out your chopper and one-two-three . . .

'A cup . . .' Percival Schuttenbach jabbered. 'A goblet, I mean . . . Carved from a single piece of milk opal . . . This big. I found it on the summit of Montsalvat. Its rim was set with jasper and the base was of gold. A sheer marvel . . .'

'Don't give him any more spirits,' Zoltan Chivay said.

'Hold on, hold on,' Dandelion said, becoming interested, also slurring his words somewhat. 'What happened to that legendary goblet?'

'I exchanged it for a mule. I needed a mule, in order to transport a load . . . Corundum and crystalline carbon. I had . . . Err . . . Lots of it . . . Hic . . . A load, I mean, a heavy load, couldn't have moved it without a mule . . . Why the hell did I need that goblet?'

'Corundum? Carbon?'

'Yeah, what you call rubies and diamonds. Very . . . hic . . . handy . . .'

'So I imagine.'

'. . . for drill bits and files. For bearings. I had lots of them . . .'

'Do you hear, Geralt?' Zoltan said. He waved a hand and although seated, almost fell over. 'He's little, so he got pissed quickly. He's dreaming about a shitload of diamonds. Careful now, Percival, that your dream doesn't come true! Or at least half. And I don't mean the half about diamonds!'

'Dreams, dreams,' Dandelion mumbled once more. 'And you,

Geralt? Have you dreamed of Ciri again? Because you ought to know, Regis, that Geralt has prophetic dreams! Ciri is the Child of Destiny, and Geralt is bound to her by bonds of fate, which is why he sees her in his dreams. You also ought to know that we're going to Nilfgaard to take back Ciri from Imperator Emhyr, who abducted her and wants to marry her. But he can whistle for it, the bastard, because we'll rescue her before he knows it! I'd tell you something else, boys, but it's a secret. A dreadful, deep, dark secret . . . Not a word, understood? Not one!'

'I haven't heard anything,' Zoltan assured him, looking impudently at the Witcher. 'I think an earwig crawled into my ear.'

'There's a veritable plague of earwigs,' Regis agreed, pretending to be poking around in his ear.

'We're going to Nilfgaard . . .' Dandelion said, leaning against the dwarf to keep his balance, which turned out to be a bad idea. 'Which is a secret, just like I told you. It's a secret mission!'

'And ingeniously concealed indeed,' the barber-surgeon nodded, glancing at Geralt, who was now white with rage. 'Not even the most suspicious individual would ever guess the aim of your journey by analysing the direction you are headed.'

'Milva, what is it?'

'Don't talk to me, you drunken fool.'

'Hey, she's crying! Hey, look . . .'

'Go to hell, I said!' the archer raised her voice, wiping away the tears. 'Or I'll smack you between the eyes, you fucking poetaster . . . Give me the glass, Zoltan . . .'

'I've mislaid it . . .' the dwarf mumbled. 'Oh, here it is. Thanks, master barber-surgeon . . . And where the hell is Schuttenbach?'

'He went outside. Some time ago. Dandelion, I recall you promised you'd tell me the story of the Child of Destiny.'

'All right, all right, Regis. I'll just have a swig . . . and I'll tell you everything . . . About Ciri, and about the Witcher . . . In detail . . .'

'Confusion to the whores' sons!'

'Be quiet, dwarf! You'll wake up the kids outside the cottage!'

'Calm down, archeress. There you go, drink that.'

'Ah, well.' Dandelion looked around the shack with a slightly

vacant stare. ‘If the Countess de Lettenhove could see me like this . . .’

‘Who?’

‘Never mind. Bloody hell, this moonshine really does loosen the tongue . . . Geralt, shall I pour you another one? Geralt!’

‘Leave him be,’ Milva said. ‘Let him sleep.’

The barn on the edge of the village was pounding with music. The rhythm seized them before they arrived, filling them with excitement. They began to sway involuntarily in their saddles as their horses walked up, firstly to the rhythm of the dull boom of the drum and double bass, and then, when they were closer, to the beat of the melody being played by the fiddles and the pipes. The night was cold, the moon shone full and in its glow the barn, illuminated by the light shining through gaps in the planks, looked like a fairy-tale enchanted castle.

A clamour and a bright glow, broken up by the shadows of cavorting couples, flooded out from the doorway of the barn.

When they entered the music fell silent, dissolving in a long-drawn-out discord. The dancing, sweating peasants parted, leaving the dirt floor, and grouped together by the walls and posts. Ciri, walking alongside Mistle, saw the eyes of the young women, wide with fear; noticed the hard, determined glances of the men and lads, ready for anything. She heard the growing whispering and growling, louder than the cautious skirling of the bagpipes, than the fading insect-like droning of violins and fiddles. Whispering. The Rats . . . The Rats . . . Robbers . . .

‘Fear not,’ Giselher said loudly, chucking a plump and chinking purse towards the dumbstruck musicians. ‘We’ve come here to make merry. The village fair is open to anyone, isn’t it?’

‘Where’s the beer?’ Kayleigh asked, shaking a pouch. ‘And where’s the hospitality?’

‘And why is it so quiet here?’ Iskra asked, looking around. ‘We came down from the mountains for a dance. Not for a wake!’

One of the peasants finally broke the impasse, and walked over to Giselher with a clay mug overflowing with froth. Giselher took it with a bow, drank from it, and courteously and decorously thanked him. Several peasants shouted enthusiastically. But the others remained silent.

‘Hey, fellows,’ Iskra called again. ‘I see that you need livening up!’

A heavy oak table, laden with clay mugs, stood against one wall of the barn. The she-elf clapped her hands and nimbly jumped onto it. The peasants quickly gathered up the mugs. With a vigorous kick Iskra cleared the ones they were too slow to remove.

‘Very well, musicians,’ she said, putting her fists on her hips and shaking her hair. ‘Show me what you can do. Music!’

She quickly tapped out a rhythm with her heels. The drum repeated the rhythm and the double bass and oboe followed. The pipes and fiddles took up the tune, quickly embellishing it, challenging Iskra to adjust her steps and tempo. The she-elf, gaudily dressed and as light as a butterfly, adapted to it with ease and began moving rhythmically. The peasants began to clap.

‘Falka!’ Iskra called, narrowing her eyes, which were intensified by heavy make-up. ‘You’re swift with a sword! And in the dance? Can you keep step with me?’

Ciri freed herself from Mistle’s arm, untied the scarf from around her neck and took off her beret and jacket. With a single bound she was on the table beside the she-elf. The peasants cheered enthusiastically, the drum and double bass boomed and the bagpipes wailed plaintively.

‘Play, musicians!’ Iskra yelled. ‘With verve! And passion!’

With her hands on her hips and an upturned head, the she-elf tapped her feet, cut a caper, and beat out a quick, rhythmic staccato with her heels. Ciri, bewitched by the rhythm, copied the steps. The she-elf laughed, hopped and changed the tempo. Ciri shook her hair from her forehead with a sudden jerk of her head and copied Iskra’s movements perfectly. The two girls stepped in unison, each the mirror image of the other. The peasants yelled and applauded. The fiddles and violins sang a piercing song, tearing the measured, solemn rumbling of the double bass and keening of the bagpipes to shreds.

They danced, both as straight as a poker, arms akimbo, touching each other’s elbows. The iron on their heels beat out the rhythm, the table shook and trembled, and dust whirled in the light of tallow candles and torches.

‘Faster!’ Iskra urged on the musicians. ‘Look lively!’

It was no longer music, it was a frenzy.

‘Dance, Falka! Abandon yourself to it!’

Heel, toe, heel, toe, heel, step forward and jump, shoulders swinging, fists on hips, heel, heel. The table shakes, the light shimmers, the crowd sways, everything sways, the entire barn is dancing, dancing, dancing . . . The crowd yells, Giselher yells, Asse yells, Mistle laughs, claps, everyone claps and stamps, the barn shudders, the earth shudders, the world is shaken to its foundations. The world? What world? There’s no world now, there’s nothing, only the dance, the dance . . . Heel, toe, heel . . . Iskra’s elbow . . . Fever pitch, fever pitch . . . Only the wild playing of the fiddles, pipes, double bass and bagpipes, the drummer raises and lowers his drumsticks but he is now superfluous, they beat the rhythm out by themselves. Iskra and Ciri, their heels, until the table booms and rocks, the entire barn booms and rocks . . . The rhythm, the rhythm is them, the music is them, they are the music. Iskra’s dark hair flops on her forehead and shoulders. The fiddles’ strings play a passionate tune, reaching fever pitch. Blood pounds in their temples.

Abandon. Oblivion.

I am Falka. I have always been Falka! Dance, Iskra! Clap, Mistle! The violins and pipes finish the melody on a strident, high chord, and Iskra and Ciri mark the end of the dance with a simultaneous bang of their heels, their elbows still touching. They are both panting, quivering, het up, they suddenly cling to each other, they hug, they share their sweat, their heat and their happiness with each other. The barn explodes with one great bellow and the clapping of dozens of hands.

‘Falka, you she-devil,’ Iskra pants. ‘When we grow tired of robbery, we’ll go out into the world and earn a living as dancers . . .’

Ciri also pants. She is unable to say a single word. She just laughs spasmodically. A tear runs down her cheek.

A sudden shout in the crowd, a disturbance. Kayleigh shoves a burly peasant hard, the peasant shoves Kayleigh back, the two of them are caught in the press, raised fists fly. Reef jumps in and a dagger flashes in the light of a torch.

‘No! Stop!’ Iskra cries piercingly. ‘No brawling! This is a night of dance!’ She takes Ciri by the hand. They drop from the table to the floor. ‘Musicians, play! Whoever wants to show us their paces, join us! Well, who’s feeling brave?’

The double bass booms monotonously, the long-drawn-out wailing of the bagpipes cuts in, to be joined by the high, piercing song of the fiddles. The peasants laugh, nudge one another, overcoming their reserve. One – broad-shouldered and fair-haired – seizes Iskra. A second – younger and slimmer – bows hesitantly in front of Ciri. Ciri haughtily tosses her head, but soon smiles in assent. The lad closes his hands around her waist and Ciri places her hands on his shoulders. The touch shoots through her like a flaming arrowhead, filling her with throbbing desire.

‘Look lively, musicians!’

The barn shudders from the noise, vibrates with the rhythm and the melody.

Ciri dances.

A vampire, or upir, is a dead person brought to life by Chaos. Having lost its first life, a ***v.*** *enjoys its second life during the night hours. It leaves its grave by the light of the moon and only under its light may it act, assailing sleeping maidens or young swains, who it wakes not, but whose blood it sucks.*

Physiologus

The peasants consumed garlic in great abundance and for greater certainty hung strings of garlic around their necks. Some, womenfolk in particular, stopped up their orifices with whole bulbs of garlic. The whole hamlet stank of garlic horrendus, so the peasants believed they were safe and that the vampire was incapable of doing them harm. Mighty was their astonishment, however, when the vampire who flew to their hamlet at midnight was not in the least afraid and simply began to laugh, gnashing his teeth in delight and jeering at them.

'It is good,' he said, 'that you have spiced yourselves, for I shall soon devour you and seasoned meat is more to my taste. Apply also salt and pepper to yourselves, and forget not the mustard.'

Sylvester Bugiardo, *Liber Tenebrarum,*

or The Book of Fell but Authentic Cases

never Explained by Science

The moon shines bright,

The vampire alights

Swish, swish goes his cloak . . .

Maiden, are you not afeared?

Folk song

Chapter Four

As usual, the birds filled the grey and foggy dawn with an explosion of chirruping in anticipation of the sunrise. As usual, the first members of the party ready to set off were the taciturn women from Kernow and their children. Emiel Regis turned out to be equally swift and energetic, joining the others with a travelling staff and a leather bag over one shoulder. The rest of the company, who had drained the still during the night, were not quite so lively. The cool of the morning roused and revived the revellers, but failed to thwart the effects of the mandrake moonshine. Geralt awoke in a corner of the shack with his head in Milva's lap. Zoltan and Dandelion lay in each other's arms on a pile of mandrake roots, snoring so powerfully that they were making the bundles of herbs hanging on the walls flutter. Percival was discovered outside, curled up in a ball under a hagberry bush, covered by the straw mat Regis normally used to wipe his boots on. The five of them betrayed distinct – but varied – symptoms of fatigue and they all went to soothe their raging thirst at the spring.

However, by the time the mists had dissipated and the red ball of the sun was blazing in the tops of the pines and larches of Fen Carn the company were already on their way, marching briskly among the barrows. Regis took the lead, followed by Percival and Dandelion, who kept each other's spirits up by singing a two-part ballad about three sisters and an iron wolf. After them trudged Zoltan Chivay, leading the chestnut colt by the reins. The dwarf had found a knobbly ashen staff in the barber-surgeon's yard, which he was now using to whack all the menhirs they passed and wish the long-deceased elves eternal rest, while Field Marshal Windbag – who was sitting on his shoulder – puffed up his feathers and occasionally squawked; reluctantly, indistinctly and somewhat half-heartedly.

Milva turned out to be the least tolerant to the mandrake distillate. She marched with visible difficulty, was sweaty, pale and acted like a bear with a sore head, not even responding to the twittering of the little girl with the plaits who was riding in the black's saddle. Geralt thus made no attempt to strike up a conversation, not being in the best of shape himself.

The fog and the adventures of the iron wolf sung in loud – though somewhat morning-after – voices meant that they happened upon a small group of peasants suddenly and without warning. The peasants, however, had heard them much earlier and were waiting,

standing motionless among the monoliths sunk into the ground, their grey homespun coats camouflaging them perfectly. Zoltan Chivay barely avoided whacking one of them with his staff, having mistaken him for a tombstone.

'Yo-ho-ho!!' he shouted. 'Forgive me, good people! I didn't notice you. A good day to you! Greetings!'

The dozen peasants murmured an answer to his greeting in an incoherent chorus, grimly scrutinising the company. The peasants were clutching shovels, picks and six-foot pointed stakes.

'Greetings,' the dwarf repeated. 'I presume you're from the camp by the Chotla. Am I right?'

Rather than answering, one of the peasants pointed out Milva's horse to the rest of them.

'That black one,' he said. 'See it?'

'The black,' affirmed another and licked his lips. 'Oh, yes, the black. Should do the job.'

'Eh?' Zoltan said, noticing their expressions and gestures. 'Are you referring to our black steed? What about it? It's a horse, not a giraffe, there's nothing to be astonished about. What are you up to, my good fellows, in this burial ground?'

'And you?' the peasant asked, looking askance at the company. 'What are *you* doing here?'

'We've bought this land,' the dwarf said, looking him straight in the eye and hitting a menhir with his staff, 'and we're pacing it out, to check we haven't been swindled on the acreage.'

'And we're hunting a vampire!'

'What?'

'A vampire,' the oldest peasant repeated emphatically, scratching his forehead beneath a felt cap stiff with grime. 'He must have his lair somewhere here, curse him. We have sharpened these here aspen stakes, and now we shall find the scoundrel and run him through, so he will never rise again!'

'And we've holy water in a pot the priest gave us!' another peasant called cheerfully, pointing to the vessel. 'We'll sprinkle it on the bloodsucker, make things hot for him!'

'Ha, ha,' Zoltan Chivay said, with a smile. 'I see it's a proper hunt; full scale and well organised. A vampire, you say? Well, you're in luck, good fellows. We have a vampire specialist in our company, a

wi . . .’

He broke off and swore under his breath, because the Witcher had kicked him hard in the ankle.

‘Who saw the vampire?’ Geralt asked, hushing his companions with a telling glance. ‘Why do you think you should be looking for him here?’

The peasants whispered among themselves.

‘No one saw him,’ the peasant in the felt cap finally admitted. ‘Or heard him. How can you see him when he flies at night, in the dark? How can you hear him when he flies on bat’s wings, without a sound?’

‘We didn’t see the vampire,’ added another, ‘but there are signs of his ghastly practices. Ever since the moon’s been full, the fiend’s murdered one of our number every night. He’s already torn two people apart, ripped them to shreds. A woman and a stripling. Horrors and terrors! The vampire tore the poor wretches to ribbons and drank all their blood! What are we to do? Stand idly by for a third night?’

‘But who says the culprit is a vampire, and not some other predator? Whose idea was it to root around in this burial ground?’

‘The venerable priest told us to. He’s a learned and pious man, and thanks be to the Gods he arrived in our camp. He said at once that a vampire was plaguing us. As punishment, for we’ve neglected our prayers and church donations. Now he’s reciting prayers and carrying out all kinds of exorcismums in the camp, and ordered us to search for the tomb where the undead fiend sleeps during the day.’

‘What, here?’

‘And where would a vampire’s grave be, if not in a burial ground? And anyway it’s an elven burial ground and every toddler knows that elves are a rotten, godless race, and every second elf is condemned to damnation after death! Elves are to blame for everything!’

‘Elves and barber-surgeons,’ said Zoltan, nodding his head seriously. ‘That’s true. Every child knows that. That camp you were talking about, is it far from here?’

‘Why, no . . .’

‘Don’t tell them too much, Father,’ said an unshaven peasant with a shaggy fringe, the one who had previously been unfriendly. ‘The

devil only knows who they are; they're a queer-looking band. Come on, let's get to work. Let them give us the horse and they can go on their way.'

'Right you are,' the older peasant said. 'Let's not dilly-dally, time's getting on. Hand over the horse. That black one. We need it to search for the vampire. Get that kid off the saddle, lassie.'

Milva, who had been staring at the sky with a blank expression all along, looked at the peasant and her features hardened dangerously.

'Talking to me, yokel?'

'What do you think? Give us the black, we need it.'

Milva wiped her sweaty neck and gritted her teeth, and the expression in her tired eyes became truly ferocious.

'What's this all about, good people?' the Witcher asked, smiling and trying to defuse the tense situation. 'Why do you need this horse? The one you are so politely requesting?'

'How else are we going to find the vampire's grave? Everybody knows you have to ride around a cemetery on a black colt, as it will stop by the vampire's grave and will not be budged from it. Then you have to dig up the vampire and stab him with an aspen stake. Don't argue with us, for we're desperate. It's a matter of life and death here. We have to have that black horse!'

'Will another colour do?' Dandelion asked placatingly, holding out Pegasus's reins to the peasant.

'Not a chance.'

'Pity for you, then,' Milva said through clenched teeth. 'Because I'm not giving you my horse.'

'What do you mean you won't? Didn't you hear what we said, wench? We have to have it!'

'You might. But I don't have to give it to you.'

'We can solve this amicably,' Regis said in a kind voice. 'If I understand rightly, Miss Milva is reluctant to hand over her horse to a stranger . . .'

'You could say that,' the archer said, and spat heartily. 'I cringe at the very thought.'

'Both the wolves have eaten much and the sheep have not been touched,' the barber-surgeon recited calmly. 'Let Miss Milva mount

the horse herself and carry out the necessary circuit of the necropolis.'

'I'm not going to ride around the graveyard like an idiot!'

'And no one's asking you to, wench!' said the one with the shaggy fringe. 'This requires a bold and strong blade; a maid's place is in the kitchen, bustling around the stove. A wench may come in handy later, true enough, because a virgin's tears are very useful against a vampire; for if you sprinkle a vampire with them he burns up like a firebrand. But the tears must be shed by a pure and untouched wench. And you don't quite look the part, love. So you're not much use for anything.'

Milva took a quick step forward and her right fist shot out as fast as lightning. There was a crack and the peasant's head lurched backwards, which meant his bristly throat and chin created an excellent target. The girl took another step and struck straight ahead with the heel of her open hand, increasing the force of the blow with a twist of her hips and shoulders. The peasant staggered backwards, tripped over his own feet and keeled over, banging the back of his head with an audible thud against the menhir.

'Now you see what use I am,' the archer said, in a voice trembling with fury, rubbing her fist. 'Who's the blade now, and whose place is in the kitchen? Truly, there's nothing like a fist-fight, which clears everything up. The bold and strong one is still on his feet, and the pussy and the milksop is lying on the ground. Am I right, yokels?'

The peasants didn't hurry to answer, but looked at Milva with their mouths wide open. The one in the felt cap knelt down by the one on the ground and slapped him gently on his cheek. In vain.

'Killed,' he wailed, raising his head. 'Dead. How could you, wench? How could you just up and kill a man?'

'I didn't mean to,' Milva whispered, lowering her hands and blenching frightfully. And then she did something no one expected.

She turned away, staggered, rested her forehead against the menhir and vomited violently.

'What's up with him?'

'Slight concussion,' the barber-surgeon replied, standing up and fastening his bag. 'His skull's in one piece. He's already regained consciousness. He remembers what happened and he knows his

own name. That's a good sign. Miss Milva's intense reaction was, fortunately, groundless.'

The Witcher looked at the archer, who was sitting at the foot of the menhir with her eyes staring into the distance.

'She isn't a delicate maiden, prone to that sort of emotion,' he muttered. 'I'd be more inclined to blame yesterday's hooch.'

'She's puked before,' Zoltan broke in softly. 'The day before yesterday, at the crack of dawn. While everyone was still asleep. I think it's because of those mushrooms we scoffed in Turlough. My guts gave me grief for two days.'

Regis looked at the Witcher from under his greying eyebrows with a strange expression on his face, smiled mysteriously, and wrapped himself in his black, woollen cloak. Geralt went over to Milva and cleared his throat.

'How do you feel?'

'Rough. How's the yokel?'

'He'll be fine. He's come round. But Regis won't let him get up. The peasants are making a cradle and we'll carry him to the camp between two horses.'

'Take mine.'

'We're using Pegasus and the chestnut. They're more docile. Get up, it's time we hit the road.'

The enlarged company now resembled a funeral procession and crawled along at a funereal pace.

'What do you think about this vampire of theirs?' Zoltan Chivay asked the Witcher. 'Do you believe their story?'

'I didn't see the victims. I can't comment.'

'It's a pack of lies,' Dandelion declared with conviction. 'The peasants said the dead had been torn apart. Vampires don't do that. They bite into an artery and drink the blood, leaving two clear fang marks. The victim quite often survives. I've read about it in a respectable book. There were also illustrations showing the marks of vampire bites on virgins' swanlike necks. Can you confirm that, Geralt?'

'What do you want me to confirm? I didn't see those illustrations. I'm not very clued up about virgins, either.'

‘Don’t scoff. You can’t be a stranger to vampire bite marks. Ever come across a case of a vampire ripping its victim to shreds?’

‘No. That never happens.’

‘In the case of higher vampires – never, I agree,’ Emiel Regis said softly. ‘From what I know alpors, katakans, moolas, bruxas and nosferats don’t mutilate their victims. On the other hand, fleders and ekimmas are pretty brutal with their victims’ remains.’

‘Bravo,’ Geralt said, looking at him in genuine admiration. ‘You didn’t leave out a single class of vampire. Nor did you mention any of the imaginary ones, which only exist in fairy-tales. Impressive knowledge indeed. You must also know that ekimmas and fleders are never encountered in this climate.’

‘What happened, then?’ Zoltan snorted, swinging his ashen staff. ‘Who mutilated that woman and that lad in this climate, then? Or did they mutilate themselves in a fit of desperation?’

‘The list of creatures that may have been responsible is pretty long. Beginning with a pack of feral dogs, quite a common affliction during times of war. You can’t imagine what dogs like that are capable of. Half the supposed victims of chaotic monsters can actually be chalked up to packs of wild farmyard curs.’

‘Does that mean you rule out monsters?’

‘Not in the least. It may have been a striga, a harpy, a graveir, a ghoul . . .’

‘Not a vampire?’

‘Unlikely.’

‘The peasants mentioned some priest or other,’ Percival Schuttenbach recalled. ‘Do priests know much about vampires?’

‘Some are expert on a range of subjects, to quite an advanced level, and their opinions are worth listening to, as a rule. Sadly, that doesn’t apply to all of them.’

‘Particularly the kind that roam around forests with fugitives,’ the dwarf snorted. ‘He’s most probably some kind of hermit, an illiterate anchorite from the wilderness. He dispatched a peasant expedition to your burial ground, Regis. Have you never noticed a single vampire while you were gathering mandrake there? Not even a tiny one? A teeny-weeny one?’

‘No, never,’ the barber-surgeon gave a faint smile. ‘But no wonder. A vampire, as you’ve just heard, flies in the dark on bat’s

wings, without making a sound. He's easy to miss.'

'And easy to see one where it isn't and has never been,' Geralt confirmed. 'When I was younger, I wasted my time and energy several times chasing after delusions and superstitions which had been seen and colourfully described by an entire village, including the headman. Once I spent two months living in a castle which was supposedly haunted by a vampire. There was no vampire. But they fed me well.'

'No doubt, however, you have experienced cases when the rumours about vampires were well founded,' Regis said, not looking at the Witcher. 'In those cases, I presume, your time and energy were not wasted. Did the monsters die by your sword?'

'It has been known.'

'In any event,' Zoltan said, 'the peasants are in luck. I think we'll wait in that camp for Munro Bruys and the lads, and a rest won't do you any harm either. Whatever killed the woman and the boy, I don't fancy its chances when the Witcher turns up in the camp.'

'While we're at it,' Geralt said, pursing his lips, 'I'd rather you didn't bruit who I am and what my name is. That particularly applies to you, Dandelion.'

'As you wish,' the dwarf nodded. 'You must have your reasons. Lucky you've forewarned us, because I can see the camp.'

'And I can hear it,' Milva added, breaking a lengthy silence. 'They're making a fearful racket.'

'The sound we can hear,' Dandelion said, playing the wiseacre, 'is the everyday symphony of a refugee camp. As usual, scored for several hundred human throats, as well as no fewer bovine, ovine and anserine ones. The solo parts are being performed by women squabbling, children bawling, a cock crowing and, if I'm not mistaken, a donkey, who someone's poked in the backside with a thistle. The title of the symphony is: *A human community fights for survival.*'

'The symphony, as usual, can be heard *and* smelled,' Regis observed, quivering the nostrils of his noble nose. 'This community – as it fights for survival – gives off the delicious fragrance of boiled cabbage, a vegetable without which survival would apparently be impossible. The characteristic olfactory accent is also being created by the effects of bodily functions, carried out in random places, most often on the outskirts of the camp. I've never understood why the fight for survival manifests itself in a reluctance to dig latrines.'

‘To hell with your smart-arsed chatter,’ said Milva in annoyance. ‘Three dozen fancy words when three will do: it stinks of shit and cabbage!’

‘Shit and cabbage always go hand in hand,’ Percival Schuttenbach said pithily. ‘One drives the other. It’s perpetuum mobile.’

No sooner had they set foot in the noisy and foul-smelling camp, among the campfires, wagons and shelters, than they became the centre of interest of all the fugitives gathered there, of which there must have been at least two hundred, possibly even more. The interest bore fruit quickly and remarkably; someone suddenly screamed, someone else suddenly bellowed, someone suddenly flung their arms around someone else’s neck, someone began to laugh wildly, and someone else to sob wildly. There was a huge commotion. At first it was difficult to work out what was happening among the cacophony of men, women and children screaming, but finally all was explained. Two of the women from Kernow who had been travelling with them had found, respectively, a husband and a brother, whom they had believed to be dead or to missing without trace in the turmoil of war. The delight and tears seemed to be never-ending.

‘Something so banal and melodramatic,’ Dandelion said with conviction, indicating the moving scene, ‘could only happen in real life. If I tried to end one of my ballads like that, I would be ribbed mercilessly.’

‘Undoubtedly,’ Zoltan confirmed. ‘Nonetheless, banalities like these gladden the heart, don’t they? One feels more cheerful when fortune gives one something, rather than only taking. Well, we’ve got rid of the womenfolk. We guided them and guided them and finally got them here. Come on, no point hanging around.’

For a moment, the Witcher felt like suggesting they delay their departure. He was counting on one of the women deciding it would be fitting to express a few words of gratitude and thanks to the dwarf. He abandoned that idea, though, when he saw no sign of it happening. The women, overjoyed at being reunited with their loved ones, had completely forgotten about Geralt and his company.

‘What are you waiting for?’ Zoltan said, looking at him keenly. ‘To be covered in blossom out of gratitude? Or anointed with honey? Let’s clear off; there’s nothing for us here.’

‘You’re absolutely right.’

They didn’t get far. A squeaky little voice stopped them in their tracks. The freckle-faced little girl with the plaits had caught them up. She was out of breath and had a large posy of wild flowers in her hand.

‘Thank you,’ she squeaked, ‘for looking after me and my little brother and my mummy. For being kind to us and all that. I picked these flowers for you.’

‘Thank you,’ Zoltan Chivay said.

‘You’re kind,’ the little girl added, sticking the end of her plait into her mouth. ‘I don’t believe what auntie said at all. You aren’t filthy little burrowing midgets. And you aren’t a grey-haired misfit from hell. And you, Uncle Dandelion, aren’t a gobbling turkey. Auntie wasn’t telling the truth. And you, Auntie Maria, aren’t a slapper with a bow and arrow. You’re Auntie Maria and I like you. I picked the prettiest flowers for you.’

‘Thank you,’ Milva said in a slightly altered voice.

‘We all thank you,’ Zoltan echoed. ‘Hey, Percival, you filthy little burrowing midget, give the child some token as a farewell present. A souvenir. Have you got a spare stone in one of your pockets?’

‘I have. Take this, little miss. It’s beryllium aluminium cyclosilicate, popularly known as . . .’

‘An emerald,’ the dwarf finished off the sentence. ‘Don’t confuse the child, she won’t remember anyway.’

‘Oh, how pretty! And how green! Thank you very, very much!’

‘Enjoy it and may it bring you fortune.’

‘And don’t lose it,’ Dandelion muttered. ‘Because that little pebble’s worth as much as a small farm.’

‘Get away,’ Zoltan said, adorning his cap with the cornflowers the girl had given him. ‘It’s only a stone, nothing special. Take care of yourself, little miss. Let’s go and sit down by the ford to wait for Bruys, Yazon Varda and the others. They ought to stroll by any time now. Strange they haven’t shown up yet. I forgot to get the bloody cards off ’em. I bet they’re sitting somewhere and playing Barrel!’

‘The horses need feeding,’ Milva said. ‘And watering. Let’s go towards the river.’

‘Perhaps we’ll happen upon some home-cooked fare,’ Dandelion added. ‘Percival, take a gander around the camp and put your

hooter to use. We'll eat where the food is tastiest.'

To their slight amazement, the way down to the river was fenced off and under guard. The peasants guarding the watering place were demanding a farthing per horse. Milva and Zoltan were incandescent, but Geralt, hoping to avoid a scene and the publicity it would lead to, calmed them down, while Dandelion contributed a few coins he dug from the depths of his pocket.

Soon after Percival Schuttenbach showed up, dour and cross.

'Found any grub?'

The gnome cleared his nose and wiped his fingers on the fleece of a passing sheep.

'Yes. But I don't know if we can afford it. They expect to be paid for everything here and the prices will take your breath away. Flour and barley groats are a crown a pound. A plate of thin soup's two nobles. A pot of weatherfish caught in the Chotla costs the same as a pound of smoked salmon in Dillingen . . .'

'And fodder for the horses?'

'A measure of oats costs a thaler.'

'How much?' the dwarf yelled. 'How much?'

'How much, how much,' Milva snapped. 'Ask the horses how much. They'll peg it if we make them nibble grass! And there isn't any here anyway.'

There was no way of debating self-evident facts. Attempts at hard bargaining with the peasant selling oats didn't achieve anything either. He relieved Dandelion of the last of his coins, and was also treated to a few insults from Zoltan, which didn't bother him in the slightest. But the horses enthusiastically stuck their muzzles into the nosebags.

'Daylight bloody robbery!' the dwarf yelled, unloading his anger by aiming blows of his staff at the wheels of passing wagons. 'Incredible that they let us breathe here for nothing, and don't charge a ha'penny for each inhalation! Or a farthing for a dump!'

'Higher physiological needs,' Regis declared in utter seriousness, 'have a price. Do you see the tarpaulin stretched between those sticks? And the peasant standing alongside? He's peddling the charms of his own daughter. Price open to negotiation. A moment ago I saw him accepting a chicken.'

'I predict a bad end for your race, humans,' Zoltan Chivay said

grimly. ‘Every sentient creature on this earth, when it falls into want, poverty and misfortune, usually cleaves to his own. Because it’s easier to survive the bad times in a group, helping one another. But you, humans, you just wait for a chance to make money from other people’s mishaps. When there’s hunger you don’t share out your food, you just devour the weakest ones. This practice works among wolves, since it lets the healthiest and strongest individuals survive. But among sentient races selection of that kind usually allows the biggest bastards to survive and dominate the rest. Come to your own conclusions and make your own predictions.’

Dandelion forcefully protested, giving examples of even greater scams and self-seeking among the dwarves, but Zoltan and Percival drowned him out, simultaneously and loudly imitating with their lips the long-drawn-out sounds which accompany farting, by both races considered an expression of disdain for one’s adversary’s arguments in a dispute.

The sudden appearance of a small group of peasants led by their friend the vampire hunter, the old chap in the felt cap, brought an end to the quarrel.

‘It’s about Cloggy,’ one of the peasants said.

‘We aren’t buying anything,’ the dwarf and the gnome snapped in unison.

‘The one whose head you split open,’ another peasant quickly explained. ‘We were planning to get him married off.’

‘We’ve got nothing against that,’ Zoltan said angrily. ‘We wish him and his new bride all the best. Good health, happiness and prosperity.’

‘And lots of little Cloggies,’ Dandelion added.

‘Just a moment,’ the peasant said. ‘You may laugh, but how are we to get him hitched? For ever since you whacked him in the head he’s been totally dazed, and can’t tell day from night.’

‘It isn’t that bad,’ Milva grunted, eyes fixed on the ground. ‘He seems to be doing better. That is, much better than he was early this morning.’

‘I’ve got no idea how Cloggy was early this morning,’ the peasant retorted. ‘But I just saw him standing in front of an upright thill saying what a beauty she was. But never mind. I’ll say it briefly: pay up the blood money.’

‘What?’

‘When a knight kills a peasant he must pay blood money. So says the law.’

‘I’m not a knight!’ Milva yelled.

‘That’s one thing,’ Dandelion said in her defence. ‘And for another, it was an accident. And for a third, Cloggy’s alive, so blood money’s out of the question. The most you can expect is compensation, namely redress. But for a fourth, we’re penniless.’

‘So hand over your horses.’

‘Hey,’ Milva said, her eyes narrowing malevolently. ‘You must be out of your mind, yokel. Mind you don’t go too far.’

‘Motherrfuccckkerr!’ Field Marshal Windbag squawked.

‘Ah, the bird’s hit the nail on the head,’ Zoltan Chivay drawled, tapping his axe, which was stuck into his belt. ‘You ought to know, tillers of the soil, that I also don’t have the best opinion about the mothers of individuals who think of nothing but profit, even if they plan to make money out of their mate’s cracked skull. Be off with you, people. If you go away forthwith, I promise I won’t come after you.’

‘If you don’t want to pay, let the authorities arbitrate.’

The dwarf ground his teeth and was just reaching for his battle-axe when Geralt seized him by the elbow.

‘Calm down. How do you want to solve this problem? By killing them all?’

‘Why kill them right away? It’s enough to cripple them good and proper.’

‘That’s enough, darn it,’ the Witcher hissed, and then turned to the peasant. ‘These authorities you were talking about; who are they?’

‘Our camp elder, Hector Laabs, the headman from Breza, one of the villages that was burnt down.’

‘Lead us to him, then. We’ll come to some agreement.’

‘He’s busy at present,’ the peasant announced. ‘He’s sitting in judgement on a witch. There, do you see that crowd by the maple? They’ve caught a hag who was in league with a vampire.’

‘Here we go again,’ Dandelion snorted, spreading his arms. ‘Did you hear that? When they aren’t digging up cemeteries they’re hunting witches, supposedly vampires’ accomplices. Folks, perhaps

instead of ploughing, sowing and harvesting, you'll become witchers.'

'Joke as much as you like,' the peasant said, 'and laugh all you want, but there's a priest here and priests are more trustworthy than witchers. The priest said that vampires always carry out their practices in league with witches. The witch summons the vampire and points out the victim to him, then blinds everyone's eyes so they won't see anything.'

'And it turned out it was indeed like that,' a second one added. 'We were harbouring a treacherous hag among us. But the priest saw through her witchcraft and now we're going to burn her.'

'What else,' the Witcher muttered. 'Very well, we'll take a look at your court. And we'll talk to the elder about the accident that befell the unfortunate Cloggy. We'll think about suitable compensation. Right, Percival? I'll wager that we'll find another pebble in one of your pockets. Lead on, good people.'

The procession set off towards a spreading maple. The ground beneath it was indeed teeming with excited people. The Witcher, having purposely slowed his pace, tried to strike up a conversation with one of the peasants, who looked reasonably normal.

'Who's this witch they've captured? Was she really engaged in black magic?'

'Well, sir,' the peasant mumbled, 'I couldn't say. That wench is a waif, a stranger. To my mind, she's not quite right in the head. Grown-up, but still only plays with the nippers, as if she was a child herself; ask her something and she won't say a word. Everyone says she consorted with a vampire and hexed people.'

'Everyone except the suspect,' said Regis, who until then had been walking quietly beside the Witcher. 'Because she, if asked, wouldn't utter a word. I'm guessing.'

There was not enough time for a more detailed investigation, because they were already under the maple. They made their way through the crowd, not without the help of Zoltan and his ashen staff.

A girl of about sixteen had been tied to the rack of a wagon laden with sacks, her arms spread wide apart. The girl's toes barely reached the ground. Just as they arrived, her shift and blouse were torn away to reveal thin shoulders. The captive reacted by rolling her eyes and loosing a foolish combination of giggling and sobbing.

A fire had been started directly alongside the wagon. Someone had fanned the coals well and someone else had used pincers to place some horseshoes in the glowing embers. The excited cries of the priest rose above the crowd.

‘Vile witch! Godless female! Confess the truth! Ha, just look at her, people, she’s overindulged in some devilish herbs! Just look at her! Witchery is written all over her countenance!’

The priest who spoke those words was thin and his face was as dark and dry as a smoked fish. His black robes hung loosely on his skinny frame. A sacred symbol glistened on his neck. Geralt didn’t recognise which deity it represented, and anyway he wasn’t an expert. The pantheon, which in recent times had been growing quickly, did not interest him much. The priest must, however, have belonged to one of the newer religious sects. The older ones were concerned with more useful matters than catching girls, tying them to wagons and inciting superstitious mobs against them.

‘Since the dawn of time woman has been the root of all evil! The tool of Chaos, the accomplice in a conspiracy against the world and the human race! Woman is governed only by carnal lust! That is why she so willingly serves demons, in order to slake her insatiable urges and her unnatural wantonness!’

‘We’ll soon learn more about women,’ Regis muttered. ‘This a phobia, in a pure clinical form. The devout man must often dream about a *vagina dentata*.’

‘I’ll wager it’s worse,’ Dandelion murmured. ‘I’m absolutely certain that even when he’s awake he dreams about a regular toothless one. And the semen has affected his brain.’

‘But it’s this feeble-minded girl who will have to pay for it.’

‘Unless we can find someone,’ Milva growled, ‘who’ll stop that black-robed ass.’

Dandelion looked meaningfully and hopefully at the Witcher, but Geralt avoided his gaze.

‘And of what, if not female witchery, are our current calamities and misfortunes the result?’ the priest continued to yell. ‘For no one else but the sorceresses betrayed the kings on the Isle of Thanedd and concocted the assassination of the King of Redania! Indeed, no one else but the elven witch of Dol Blathanna is sending Squirrels after us! Now you see to what evil the familiarity with sorceresses has led us! And the tolerance of their vile practices! Turning a blind eye to their wilfulness, their impudent hubris, their wealth! And

who is to blame? The kings! The vainglorious kings renounced the Gods, drove away the priests, took away their offices and seats on councils, and showered the loathsome sorceresses with honours and gold! And now we all suffer the consequences!'

'Aha! There lies the rub,' Dandelion said. 'You were wrong, Regis. It was all about politics and not vaginas.'

'And about money,' Zoltan Chivay added.

'Verily,' the priest roared, 'I say unto you, before we join battle with Nilfgaard, let us first purge our own house of these abominations! Scorch this abscess with a white-hot iron! Subject it to a baptism of fire! We shall not allow any woman who dabbles in witchcraft to live!'

'We shall not allow it! Burn her at the stake!' yelled the crowd.

The girl who was bound to the wagon laughed hysterically and rolled her eyes.

'All right, all right, easy does it,' said a lugubrious peasant of immense size who until that moment had been silent, and around whom was gathered a small group of similarly silent men and several grim-faced women. 'We've only heard squawking so far. Everyone's capable of squawking, even crows. We expect more from you, venerable father, than we would from a crow.'

'Do you refute my words, Elder Laabs? The words of a priest?'

'I'm not refitting anything,' the giant replied, then he spat on the ground and hitched up a pair of coarse britches. 'That wench is an orphan and a stray, no family of mine. If it turns out that she is in league with a vampire, take her and kill her. But while I'm the elder of this camp, only the guilty will be punished here. If you want to punish her, first establish her guilt.'

'That I shall!' the priest screamed, giving a sign to his stooges, the same ones who had previously put the horseshoes into the fire. 'I'll show you incontrovertibly! You, Laabs, and everyone else present here!'

His stooges brought out a small, blackened cauldron with a curved handle from behind the wagon and set it on the ground.

'Here is the proof!' the priest roared, kicking the cauldron over. A thin liquid spilt onto the ground, depositing some small pieces of carrots, some strips of unrecognisable greens and several small bones onto the sand. 'The witch was brewing a magic concoction! An elixir which enabled her to fly through the air to her vampire-

lover. To have immoral relations with him and hatch more iniquities! I know the ways and deeds of sorcerers and I know what that decoct is made of! The witch boiled up a cat alive!'

The crowd oohed and aahed in horror.

'Ghastly,' Dandelion said, shuddering. 'Boiling a creature alive? I felt sorry for the girl, but she went a bit too far . . .'

'Shut your gob,' Milva hissed.

'Here is the proof!' the priest yelled, holding up a small bone he had removed from the steaming puddle. 'Here is the irrefutable proof! A cat's bone!'

'That's a bird's bone,' Zoltan Chivay said coldly, squinting. 'It's a jay's, I would say, or a pigeon's. The girl cooked herself some broth, and that's that!'

'Silence, you pagan imp!' the priest roared. 'Don't blaspheme, or the Gods will punish you at the hands of the pious! The brew came from a cat, I tell you!'

'From a cat! Without doubt a cat!' the peasants surrounding the priest yelled. 'The wench had a cat! A black cat! Everyone knew she did! It followed her around everywhere! And where is that cat now? It's gone! Gone into the pot!'

'Cooked! Boiled up as a potion!'

'Right you are! The witch has cooked up the cat into a potion!'

'No other proof is needed! Into the fire with the witch! But first torture her! Let her confess everything!'

''Kin' 'ell!' Field Marshal Windbag squawked.

'It's a shame about that cat,' Percival Schuttenbach suddenly said in a loud voice. 'It was a fine beast, sleek and fat. Fur shining like anthracite, eyes like two chrysoberyls, long whiskers, and a tail as thick as a mechanical's tool! Everything you could want in a cat. He must have caught plenty of mice!'

The peasants fell silent.

'And how would you know, Master Gnome?' someone asked. 'How do you know what the cat looked like?'

Percival Schuttenbach cleared his nose and wiped his fingers on a trouser leg.

'Because he's sitting over there on a cart. Right behind you.'

The peasants all turned around at once, muttering as they

observed the cat sitting on a pile of bundles. The cat, meanwhile, utterly unconcerned about being the centre of attention, stuck a hind leg up in the air and got down to licking his rump.

'Thus it has turned out,' Zoltan Chivay said, breaking the silence, 'that your irrefutable proof is a load of crap, reverend. What will the next proof be? Perhaps a she-cat? That would be good. Then we'll put them together, they'll produce a litter and not a single rodent will come within half an arrow's shot of the granary.'

Several peasants snorted, and several others, including Elder Laabs, cackled openly. The priest turned purple with rage.

'I will remember you, blasphemer!' he roared, pointing a finger at the dwarf. 'O heathen kobold! O creature of darkness! How did you come to be here? Perhaps you are in collusion with the vampire? Just wait; we'll punish the witch and then we'll interrogate you! But first we'll try the witch! Horseshoes have already been put on the coals, so we'll see what the sinner reveals when her hideous skin starts to sizzle! I tell you she will confess to the crimes of witchcraft herself. And what more proof is there than a confession?'

'Oh, she will, she will,' Hector Laabs said. 'And were red-hot horseshoes placed against the soles of your feet, reverend, you would surely even confess to immoral coition with a mare. Ugh! You're a godly man, but you sound like a rascal!'

'Yes, I'm a godly man!' the priest bellowed, outshouting the intensifying murmurs of the peasants. 'I believe in divine judgement! And in a divine trial! Let the witch face trial by ordeal . . .'

'Excellent idea,' the Witcher interrupted loudly, stepping out from the crowd.

The priest glared at him. The peasants stopped muttering and stared at him with mouths agape.

'Trial by ordeal,' Geralt repeated to complete silence from the crowd, 'is utterly certain and utterly just. The verdicts of trial by ordeal are also accepted by secular courts and have their own principles. These rules say that in the case of a charge against a woman, child, old or otherwise enfeebled person a defence counsel may represent them. Am I right, Elder Laabs? So, I hereby offer myself in that role. Mark off the circle. Whomsoever is certain of the girl's guilt and is not afraid of trial of ordeal should step forward and do battle with me.'

'Ha!' the priest called, still glaring at him. 'Don't be too cunning,

noble stranger. Throwing down the gauntlet? It's clear at once you are a swordsman and a killer! You wish to conduct a trial of ordeal with your criminal sword?'

'If the sword doesn't suit you, your reverence,' Zoltan Chivay announced in a drawling voice, standing alongside Geralt, 'and if you object to this gentleman, perhaps I would be more suitable. By all means, may the girl's accuser take up a battle-axe against me.'

'Or challenge me at archery,' Milva said, narrowing her eyes and also stepping forward. 'A single arrow each at a hundred paces.'

'Do you see, people, how quickly defenders of the witch are springing up?' the priest screamed, and then turned away and contorted his face into a cunning smile. 'Very well, you good-for-nothings, I invite all three of you to the trial by ordeal which will soon take place. We shall establish the hag's guilt, and test your virtue at one and the same time! But not using swords, battle-axes, lances or arrows! You know, you say, the rules? I also know them! See the horseshoes in the coals, glowing white-hot? Baptism of fire! Come, O minions of witchcraft! Whomsoever removes a horseshoe from the fire, brings it to me and betrays no marks of burning, will have proven that the witch is innocent. If, though, the trial of ordeal reveals something else, then it shall be death to all of you and to her! I have spoken!'

The hostile rumble of Elder Laabs and his group was drowned out by the enthusiastic cries of most of the people gathered behind the priest. The mob had already scented excellent sport and entertainment. Milva looked at Zoltan, Zoltan at the Witcher, and the Witcher first at the sky and then at Milva.

'Do you believe in the Gods?' he asked in hushed tones.

'Yes, I do,' the archer snapped back softly, looking at the glowing coals. 'But I don't think they'll want to be bothered by red-hot horseshoes.'

'It's no more than three paces from the fire to that bastard,' Zoltan hissed through clenched teeth. 'I'll get through it somehow, I worked in a foundry . . . But if you wouldn't mind praying to your Gods for me. . .'

'One moment,' Emiel Regis said, placing a hand on the dwarf's shoulder. 'Please withhold your prayers.'

The barber-surgeon walked over to the fire, bowed to the priest and the audience, then stooped rapidly and put his hand into the hot coals. The crowd screamed as one, Zoltan cursed and Milva dug

her fingers into Geralt's arm. Regis straightened up, calmly looked down at the white-hot horseshoe he was holding, and walked unhurriedly over to the priest. The priest took a step back, bumping into the peasants standing behind him.

'This was the idea, if I'm not mistaken, your reverence.' Regis said, holding up the horseshoe. 'Baptism of fire? If so, I believe the divine judgement is unambiguous. The girl is innocent. Her defenders are innocent. And I, just imagine, am also innocent.'

'Sh . . . sh . . . show me your hand . . .' the priest mumbled. 'Is it not burnt?'

The barber-surgeon smiled his usual smile, with pursed lips, then moved the horseshoe to his left hand, and showed his right hand, totally unharmed, first to the priest, and then, holding it up high, to everyone else. The crowd roared.

'Whose horseshoe is it?' Regis asked. 'Let the owner take it back.'

No one came forward.

'It's a devilish trick!' the priest bellowed. 'You are a sorcerer yourself, or the devil incarnate!'

Regis threw the horseshoe onto the ground and turned around.

'Carry out an exorcism on me then,' he suggested coldly. 'You are free to do so. But the trial of ordeal has taken place. I have heard, though, that to question its verdict is heresy.'

'Perish. Be gone!' the priest shrieked, waving an amulet in front of the barber-surgeon's nose and tracing cabbalistic signs with his other hand. 'Be gone to the abyss of hell, devil! May the earth be riven asunder beneath you . . .'

'That is enough!' Zoltan shouted angrily. 'Hey, people! Elder Laabs! Do you intend to stand and watch this foolishness any longer? Do you intend . . . ?'

The dwarf's voice was drowned out by a piercing cry.

'Niiiilfgaaaaaard!'

'Cavalry from the west! Horsemen! Nilfgaard are attacking! Every man for himself!'

In one moment the camp was transformed into total pandemonium. The peasants charged towards their wagons and shelters, knocking each other down and trampling on each other. A single, great cry rose up into the sky.

‘Our horses!’ Milva yelled, making room around herself with punches and kicks. ‘Our horses, Witcher! Follow me, quickly!’

‘Geralt!’ Dandelion shouted. ‘Save me!’

The crowd separated them, scattered them like a great wave and carried Milva away in the blink of an eye. Geralt, gripping Dandelion by the collar, didn’t allow himself to be swept away, for just in time he caught hold of the wagon which the girl accused of witchcraft was tied to. The wagon, however, suddenly lurched and moved off, and the Witcher and the poet fell to the ground. The girl jerked her head and began to laugh hysterically. As the wagon receded the laughter became quieter and was then lost among the uproar.

‘They’ll trample us!’ Dandelion shouted from the ground. ‘They’ll crush us! Heeeelp!’

‘’Kiiin’ ’ell!’ Field Marshal Windbag squawked from somewhere out of sight.

Geralt raised his head, spat out some sand and saw a chaotic scene.

Only four people did not panic, although to tell the truth one of them simply had no choice. That was the priest, unable to move owing to his neck being held in the iron grip of Hector Laabs. The two other individuals were Zoltan and Percival. The gnome lifted up the priest’s robe at the back with a rapid movement, and the dwarf, armed with the pincers, seized a red-hot horseshoe from the fire and dropped it down the saintly man’s long johns. Freed from Laabs’s grip, the priest shot straight ahead like a comet with a smoking tail, but his screams were drowned in the roar of the crowd. Geralt saw Laabs, the gnome and the dwarf about to congratulate one another on a successful ordeal by fire when another wave of panic-stricken peasants descended upon them. Everything disappeared in clouds of dust. The Witcher could no longer see anything, though neither did he have time to watch since he was busy rescuing Dandelion, whose legs had been swept from under him again by a stampeding hog. When Geralt bent down to lift the poet up, a hay rack was thrown straight on his back from a wagon rattling past. The weight pinned him to the ground, and before he was able to throw it off a dozen people ran across it. When he finally freed himself, another wagon overturned with a bang and a crash right alongside, and three sacks of wheaten flour – costing a crown a pound in the camp – fell onto him. The sacks split open and the world vanished in a white cloud.

‘Get up, Geralt!’ the troubadour yelled. ‘Get on your blasted feet!’

‘I can’t,’ the Witcher groaned, blinded by the precious flour, seizing in both hands his knee, which had been shot through by an overwhelming pain. ‘Save yourself. Dandelion . . .’

‘I won’t leave you!’

Gruesome screams could be heard from the western edge of the camp, mixed up with the thud of iron-shod hooves and the neighing of horses. The screaming and tramping of hooves intensified suddenly, and the ringing, clanging and banging of metal striking against metal joined it.

‘It’s a battle!’ the poet shouted. ‘It’s war!’

‘Who’s fighting who?’ Geralt asked, trying desperately to clean the flour and chaff from his eyes. Not far away something was on fire, and they were engulfed by a wave of heat and a cloud of foul-smelling smoke. The hoofbeats rose in their ears and the earth shuddered. The first thing he saw in the cloud of dust were dozens of horses’ fetlocks crashing up and down. All around him. He fought off the pain.

‘Get under the wagon! Hide under the wagon, Dandelion, or they’ll trample us!’

‘Let’s stay still . . .’ the poet whimpered, flattened against the ground. ‘Let’s just lie here . . . I’ve heard a horse will never tread on a person lying on the ground . . .’

‘I’m not sure,’ Geralt exhaled, ‘if every horse has heard that. Under the wagon! Quickly!’

At that moment one of the horses, unaware of human proverbs, kicked him in the side of the head as it thundered by. Suddenly all the constellations of the firmament flashed red and gold in the Witcher’s eyes, and a moment later the earth and the sky were engulfed in impenetrable darkness.

The Rats sprang up, awoken by a long-drawn-out scream that boomed with an intensifying echo around the walls of the cave. Asse and Reef seized their swords and Iskra swore loudly as she banged her head on a rocky protrusion.

‘What is it?’ Kayleigh yelled. ‘What’s happening?’

It was dark in the cave even though the sun was shining outside – the Rats had been sleeping off a night spent in the saddle, fleeing

from pursuers. Giselher shoved a brand into the glowing embers, lit it, held it up and walked over to where Ciri and Mistle were sleeping, as usual away from the rest of the gang. Ciri was sitting with her head down and Mistle had her arm around her.

Giselher lifted the flaming brand higher. The others also approached. Mistle covered Ciri's naked shoulders with a fur.

'Listen, Mistle,' the leader of the Rats said gravely. 'I've never interfered with what you two do in a single bed. I've never said a nasty or mocking word. I always try to look the other way and not notice. It's your business and your tastes, and nobody else's, as long as you do it discreetly and quietly. But this time you went a little too far.'

'Don't be stupid,' Mistle exploded. 'Are you trying to say that . . . ? She was screaming in her sleep! It was a nightmare!'

'Don't yell. Falka?'

Ciri nodded.

'Was your dream so dreadful? What was it about?'

'Leave her in peace!'

'Give it a rest, Mistle. Falka?'

'Someone, someone I once knew,' Ciri stammered, 'was being trampled by horses. The hooves . . . I felt them crushing me . . . I felt his pain . . . In my head and knee . . . I can still feel it. I'm sorry I woke you up.'

'Don't be sorry,' Giselher said, looking at Mistle's stern expression. 'You two deserve the apology. Forgive me. And the dream? Why, anybody could have dreamed that. Anybody.'

Ciri closed her eyes. She wasn't certain if Giselher was right.

He was awoken by a kick.

He was lying with his head against a wheel of the overturned cart, with Dandelion hunched up alongside him. He had been kicked by a foot soldier in a padded jacket and a round helmet. A second stood beside him. They were both holding the reins of horses, the saddles of which were hung with crossbows and shields.

'Bloody millers or what?'

The other soldier shrugged. Geralt saw that Dandelion couldn't take his eyes off the shields. Geralt himself had already noticed that

there were lilies on them. The emblem of the Kingdom of Temeria. Other mounted crossbowmen – who were swarming around nearby – also bore the same arms. Most of them were busy catching horses and stripping the dead. The latter mainly wore black Nilfgaardian cloaks.

The camp was still a smoking ruin after the attack, but peasants who had survived and hadn't fled very far were beginning to reappear. The mounted crossbowmen with Temerian lilies were rounding them up with loud shouts.

Neither Milva, Zoltan, Percival nor Regis were anywhere to be seen.

The hero of the recent witchcraft trial, the black tomcat, sat alongside the cart, dispassionately looking at Geralt with his greenish-golden eyes. The Witcher was a little surprised, since ordinary cats couldn't bear his presence. He had no time to reflect on this unusual phenomenon, since one of the soldiers was prodding him with the shaft of his lance.

'Get up, you two! Hey, the grey-haired one has a sword!'

'Drop your weapon!' the other one shouted, attracting the attention of the rest. 'Drop your sword on the ground. Right now, or I'll stick you with my glaive.'

Geralt obeyed. His head was ringing.

'Who are you?'

'Travellers,' Dandelion said.

'Sure you are,' the soldier snorted. 'Are you travelling home? After fleeing from your standard and throwing away your uniforms? There are plenty of travellers like that in this camp, who've taken fright at Nilfgaard and lost the taste for army bread! Some of them are old friends of ours. From our regiment!'

'Those travellers can expect another trip now,' his companion cackled. 'A short one! Upwards on a rope!'

'We aren't deserters!' the poet yelled.

'We'll find out who you are. When you account for yourselves to the officer.'

A unit of light horse led by several armoured cavalrymen with splendid plumes on their helmets emerged from the ring of mounted crossbowmen.

Dandelion looked closely at the knights, brushed the flour off

himself and tidied up his clothing, then spat on a hand and smoothed down his dishevelled hair.

‘Geralt, keep quiet,’ he forewarned. ‘I’ll parley with them. They’re Temerian knights. They defeated the Nilfgaardians. They won’t do anything to us. I know how to talk to the knighthood. You have to show them they aren’t dealing with commoners, but with equals.’

‘Dandelion, for the love of . . .’

‘Never fear, everything will be fine. I have a lot of experience in talking to the knighthood and the nobility; half of Temeria know me. Hey, out of our way, servants, step aside! I wish to speak with your superiors!’

The soldiers looked on hesitantly, and then raised their couched lances and made room. Dandelion and Geralt moved towards the knights. The poet strode proudly, bearing a lordly expression which was somewhat out of place considering his frayed and flour-soiled tunic.

‘Stop!’ one of the armoured men yelled at him. ‘Not another step! Who are you?’

‘Who should I tell?’ Dandelion said, putting his hands on his hips. ‘And why? Who are these well-born lords, that they oppress innocent travellers?’

‘You don’t ask the questions, riffraff! You answer them!’

The troubadour inclined his head and looked at the coats of arms on the knights’ shields and tabards.

‘Three red hearts on a golden field,’ he observed. ‘That means you are an Aubry. There’s a three-pointed label on the shield’s chief, so you must be the eldest son of Anzelm Aubry. I know your pater well, good Sir Knight. And you, strident Sir Knight, what do you have on your silver shield? A black stripe between two gryphons’ heads? The Papebrock family’s coat of arms, if I’m not mistaken, and I am rarely mistaken in matters of this kind. The stripe, they say, illustrates the acuity possessed by that family’s members.’

‘Will you bloody stop,’ Geralt groaned.

‘I’m the celebrated poet Dandelion!’ the bard said, puffing himself up and paying no attention to the Witcher. ‘No doubt you’ve heard of me? Lead me, then, to your commander, to the seigneur, for I’m accustomed to speaking with equals!’

The knights did not react, but their facial expressions became more and more uncongenial and their iron gloves gripped their

decorated bridles more and more tightly. Dandelion clearly hadn't noticed.

'Well, what's the matter with you?' he asked haughtily. 'What are you staring at? Yes, I'm talking to you, Sir Black Stripe! Why are you making faces? Did someone tell you that if you narrow your eyes and stick your lower jaw out you look manly, doughty, dignified and menacing? Well, they deceived you. You look like someone who hasn't had a decent shit for a week!'

'Seize them!' yelled the eldest son of Anzelm Aubry – the bearer of the shield with three hearts – to the foot soldiers. The Black Stripe from the Papebrock family spurred his steed.

'Seize them! Bind the blackguards!'

They walked behind the horses, pulled by ropes attaching their wrists to the pommels. They walked and occasionally ran, because the horsemen spared neither their mounts nor their captives. Dandelion fell over twice and was dragged along on his belly, yelling pathetically. He was stood up again and urged on roughly with the lance shaft. And then driven on once more. The dust choked and blinded them, making their eyes water and their noses tingle. Thirst parched their throats.

Only one thing was encouraging; the road they were being driven along was heading south. Geralt was thus journeying in the right direction at last and pretty quickly, at that. He wasn't happy, though. Because he had imagined the journey would be altogether different.

They arrived at their destination just as Dandelion had made himself hoarse from curses peppered with cries for mercy, while the pain in Geralt's elbow and knee had become sheer torment – so severe that the Witcher had begun to consider taking radical, or even desperate measures.

They reached a military camp organised around a ruined, half-burnt stronghold.

Beyond the ring of guards, hitching bars and smoking campfires they saw knights' tents adorned with pennants, surrounding a large and bustling field beyond a ruined and charred stockade. The field marked the end of their forced trek.

Seeing a horse trough, Geralt and Dandelion strained against their bonds. The horsemen were initially disinclined to let them go

anywhere near the water, but Anzelm Aubry's son evidently recalled the supposed acquaintance of Dandelion and his father and deigned to be kind. They forced their way between the horses, and drank and washed their faces using their bound hands. A tug of the ropes soon brought them back to reality.

'Who've you brought me this time?' said a tall, slim knight in enamelled, richly gilded armour, rhythmically striking a mace against an ornamented tasset. 'Don't tell me it's more spies.'

'Spies or deserters,' Anzelm Aubry's son stated. 'We captured them in the camp by the Chotla, when we wiped out the Nilfgaardian foray. Clearly a suspicious element!'

The knight in the gilded armour snorted, looked intently at Dandelion, and then his young – but austere – face suddenly lit up.

'Nonsense. Untie them.'

'They're Nilfgaardian spies!' Black Stripe of the Papebrocks said indignantly. 'Particularly this one here, as insolent as a country cur. Says he's a poet, the rogue!'

'And he speaks the truth,' the knight in the gilded armour smiled. 'It's the bard Dandelion. I know him. Remove his bonds. And free the other one too.'

'Are you sure, My Lord?'

'That was an order, Knight Papebrock.'

'Didn't realise I could come in useful, did you?' said Dandelion to Geralt, while he rubbed his wrists, which were numb from the bonds. 'So now you do. My fame goes before me, I'm known and esteemed everywhere.'

Geralt didn't comment, being busy massaging his own wrists, his sore elbow and knee.

'Please forgive the overzealousness of these youngsters,' said the knight who had been addressed as a member of the nobility. 'They see Nilfgaardian spies everywhere, bring back a few suspicious-looking types every time they're sent out. I mean anybody who in any way stands out from the fleeing rabble. And you, Master Dandelion, stand out, after all. How did you end up by the Chotla, among those fugitives?'

'I was travelling from Dillingen to Maribor,' the poet lied with ease, 'when we were caught up in this hell, me and my . . . confrere. You're sure to know him. His name is . . . Giraldus.'

‘But of course I do, I’ve read him,’ the knight bragged. ‘It’s an honour for me, Master Giraldus. I am Daniel Etcheverry, Count of Garramone. Upon my word, Master Dandelion, much has changed since the times you sang at King Foltest’s court.’

‘Much indeed.’

‘Who would have thought,’ the count said, his face darkening, ‘that it would come to this. Verden subjugated to Emhyr, Brugge practically defeated, Sodden in flames . . . And we’re in retreat, in constant retreat . . . My apologies, I meant to say we are “executing tactical withdrawals”. Nilfgaard are burning and pillaging everywhere. They have almost reached the banks of the Ina, have almost completed the sieges of the fortresses of Mayena and Razwan, and the Temerian Army continues its “tactical withdrawals”. . .’

‘When I saw the lilies on your shields by the Chotla,’ Dandelion said, ‘I thought the offensive was here.’

‘A counter-attack,’ Daniel Etcheverry corrected him, ‘and reconnaissance in force. We crossed the Ina, put to the sword a few Nilfgaardian forays and Scoia’tael commandos who were lighting fires. You can see what remains of the garrison in Armeria, who we managed to free. But the forts in Carcano and Vidort were burnt to the ground . . . The entire south is soaked in blood, afire and dense with smoke . . . Oh, but I’m boring you. You know only too well what’s happening in Brugge and Sodden. After all, you ended up wandering with fugitives from there. And my brave boys took you for spies! Please accept my apologies one more time. And my invitation to dinner. Some of the noblemen and officers will be delighted to meet you, Master Poets.’

‘It is a genuine honour, My Lord,’ said Geralt, bowing stiffly. ‘But time is short. We must be away.’

‘Oh, please don’t be shy,’ Daniel Etcheverry said, smiling. ‘A standard, modest soldier’s repast. Venison, grouse, sterlet, truffles . . .’

‘To decline,’ Dandelion said, swallowing and giving the Witcher a telling glance, ‘would be a serious affront. Let us go without delay, My Lord. Is that your tent, the sumptuous one, in blue and gold?’

‘No. That is the commander-in-chief’s. Azure and gold are the colours of his fatherland.’

‘Really?’ Dandelion said in astonishment. ‘I thought this was the Temerian Army. And that you were in command.’

‘This is a regiment assigned to the Temerian Army. I am King Foltest’s liaison officer, and a goodly number of the Temerian nobility are serving here with detachments, which bear lilies on their shields as a formality. But the main part of this corps consists of the subjects of another kingdom. Do you see the standard in front of the tent?’

‘Lions,’ Geralt said, stopping. ‘Golden lions on a blue field. That’s . . . That’s the emblem . . .’

‘Of Cintra,’ the count averred. ‘They are emigrants from the Kingdom of Cintra, at present occupied by Nilfgaard. Under the command of Marshal Vissegerd.’

Geralt turned back, intending to announce to the count that urgent matters were nonetheless compelling him to decline the venison, sterlet and truffles. He wasn’t quick enough. He saw some men approaching, led by a well-built, big-bellied, grey-haired knight in a blue cloak with a gold chain over his armour.

‘Here, Master Poets, is Marshal Vissegerd in person,’ Daniel Etcheverry said. ‘Allow me, Your Lordship, to introduce you to . . .’

‘That won’t be necessary,’ Marshal Vissegerd interrupted hoarsely, looking piercingly at Geralt. ‘We have already been introduced. In Cintra, at the court of Queen Calanthe. On the day of Princess Pavetta’s betrothal. It was fifteen years ago, but I have a good memory. And you, you rogue of a witcher? Do you remember me?’

‘Indeed, I do,’ Geralt said nodding, obediently holding out his hands for the soldiers to bind.

Daniel Etcheverry, Count of Garramone, had tried to vouch for them when the infantrymen were sitting the trussed-up Geralt and Dandelion down on stools in the tent, and now, after the soldiers had left on the orders of Marshal Vissegerd, the count renewed his efforts.

‘That is the poet and troubadour Dandelion, marshal,’ he repeated. ‘I know him. The whole world knows him. I consider it unfitting to treat him thus. I pledge my knightly word he is not a Nilfgaardian spy.’

‘Don’t make such rash pledges,’ Vissegerd snarled, without taking his eyes off the captives. ‘Perhaps he is a poet, but if he was captured in the company of that blackguard, the Witcher, I

wouldn't vouch for him. It seems to me you still have no idea what kind of bird we've ensnared.'

'The Witcher?'

'Indeed. Geralt, also known as the Wolf. The very same good-for-nothing who claimed the right to Cirilla, the daughter of Pavetta and the granddaughter of Calanthe; the very same Ciri about whom everyone is talking at present. You are too young, My Lord, to remember the time when that scandal was being widely discussed at many courts. But I, as it happens, was an eyewitness.'

'But what could link him to Princess Cirilla?'

'That scoundrel there,' Vissegerd said, pointing at Geralt, 'played his part in giving Pavetta, the daughter of Queen Calanthe, in marriage to Duny, a totally unknown stranger from the south. From that mongrel union was subsequently born Cirilla, the subject of their reprehensible conspiracy. For you ought to know that Duny, the bastard, had promised the girl to the Witcher in advance, as payment for facilitating his marriage. The Law of Surprise, do you see?'

'Not entirely. But speak on, My Lord Marshal.'

'The Witcher,' Vissegerd said, pointing a finger at Geralt once again, 'wanted to take the girl away after Pavetta's death, but Calanthe did not permit him, and drove him away. But he waited for a timely moment. When the war with Nilfgaard broke out and Cintra fell, he kidnapped Ciri, exploiting the confusion. He kept the girl hidden, although he knew we were searching for her. And finally he grew tired of her and sold her to Emhyr!'

'Those are lies and calumny!' Dandelion yelled. 'There is not a word of truth in it!'

'Quiet, fiddler, or I'll have you gagged. Put two and two together, My Lord. The Witcher had Cirilla and now Emhyr var Emreis has her. And the Witcher gets captured in the vanguard of a Nilfgaardian raid. What does that signify?'

Daniel Etcheverry shrugged his shoulders.

'What does it signify?' Vissegerd repeated, bending over Geralt. 'Well, you rascal? Speak! How long have you been spying for Nilfgaard, cur?'

'I do not spy for anybody.'

'I'll have your hide tanned!'

‘Go ahead.’

‘Master Dandelion,’ the Count of Garramone suddenly interjected. ‘It would probably be better if you set about explaining. The sooner, the better.’

‘I would have done so before,’ the poet exploded, ‘but My Lord Marshal here threatened to gag me! We are innocent; those are all outright fabrications and vile slanders. Cirilla was kidnapped from the Isle of Thanedd, and Geralt was seriously wounded defending her. Anybody can confirm that. Every sorcerer who was on Thanedd. And Redania’s secretary of state, Sigismund Dijkstra . . .’

Dandelion suddenly fell silent, recalling that Dijkstra was in no way suitable as a defence witness in the case; and neither were references to the mages of Thanedd likely to improve the situation to any great degree.

‘What utter nonsense it is,’ he continued loudly and quickly, ‘to accuse Geralt of kidnapping Ciri in Cintra! Geralt found the girl when she was wandering around in Riverdell after the city had been sacked, and hid her, not from you, but from the Nilfgaardian agents who were pursuing her! I myself was captured by those agents and submitted to torture so that I would betray where Ciri was concealed! But I didn’t breathe a word and those agents are now six feet under. They didn’t know who they were up against!’

‘Your valour,’ the count interrupted, ‘was in vain, however. Emhyr finally has Cirilla. As we are all aware, he means to marry her and make her Imperatrice of Nilfgaard. For the moment he has proclaimed her Queen of Cintra and the surrounding lands, causing us some problems by so doing.’

‘Emhyr,’ the poet declared, ‘could place whoever he wanted on the Cintran throne. Ciri, whichever way you look at it, has a right to the throne.’

‘A right?’ Vissegerd bellowed, spraying Geralt with spittle. ‘What fucking right? Emhyr may marry her; that is his choice. He may give her and the children he sires with her endowments and titles according to his whims and fancies. Queen of Cintra and the Skellige Islands? Duchess of Brugge? Countess Palatine of Sodden? By all means. Let us all bow down! And why not, I humbly ask, why not the Queen of the Sun and the Suzerain of the Moon? That accursed, tainted blood has no right to the throne! The entire female line of that family is accursed, all rotten vipers, beginning with Riannon! Like Cirilla’s great-grandmother, Adalia, who lay with her own cousin; like her great-great-grandmother, Muriel the

Impure, who debased herself with everyone! Incestuous bastards and mongrels emerge from that family on the distaff side, one after the other!'

'Speak more softly, My Lord Marshal,' Dandelion advised haughtily. 'The standard with the golden lions flutters before your tent, and you are prepared at any moment to proclaim Ciri's grandmother, Calanthe, the Lioness of Cintra, in whose name the majority of your soldiers shed blood at the Battles of Marnadal and Sodden, a bastard. I would not be sure of the loyalty of your army, were you to do so.'

Vissegerd covered the distance separating him from Dandelion in two paces, seized the poet by the ruff and lifted him up from his chair. The marshal's face, which a moment before had only been flecked with red spots, now assumed the colour of deep, heraldic red. Geralt was just beginning to seriously worry about his friend when luckily an aide-de-camp burst into the tent, informing the marshal in an excited voice about urgent and important news brought by the scouts. Vissegerd shoved Dandelion back down onto the stool and exited.

'Phew . . .' the poet snuffled, twisting his head and neck around. 'Much more of that and he'd have throttled me . . . Could you loosen my bonds somewhat, My Lord?'

'No, Master Dandelion. I cannot.'

'Do you give credence to this balderdash? That we are spies?'

'My credence is neither here nor there. You will remain bound.'

'Very well,' Dandelion said, clearing his throat. 'What's got into your marshal? Why did he suddenly assault me like a falcon swooping on a woodcock?'

Daniel Etcheverry smiled wryly.

'When you alluded to the soldiers' loyalty you unwittingly rubbed salt in the wound, Master Poet.'

'What do you mean? What wound?'

'These soldiers sincerely lamented Cirilla's passing, when news of her death reached them. And then new information got out. It turned out that Calanthe's granddaughter was alive. That she was in Nilfgaard, in the good graces of Imperator Emhyr. Which led to mass desertion. Bear in mind that these men left their homes and families, and fled to Sodden and Brugge, and to Temeria, because they wanted to fight for Cintra, for Calanthe's blood. They wanted

to liberate their country, to drive the invader from Cintra, so that Calanthe's descendant would regain the throne. And what has happened? Calanthe's blood is returning to the Cintran throne in triumph and glory . . .'

'As a puppet in the hands of Emhyr, who kidnapped her.'

'Emhyr will marry her. He wants to place her beside him on the imperial throne and validate her titles and fiefs. Is that how puppets are treated? Cirilla was seen at the imperial court by envoys from Kovir. They maintain that she did not give the impression of someone who had been kidnapped. Cirilla, the only heiress to Cintra's throne, is returning to that throne as an ally of Nilfgaard. That is the news that has spread among the soldiery.'

'Circulated by Nilfgaardian agents.'

'I'm aware of that.' The count nodded. 'But the soldiers aren't. When we catch deserters, we stretch their necks, but I understand them a little. They're Cintrans. They want to fight for their own – not Temerian – homes. Under their own banner. Under their own command, not the command of Temeria. They see that here, in this army, their golden lions have to bow the knee before the Temerian lilies. Vissegerd had eight thousand men, of which five thousand were native Cintrans; the rest consisted of Temerian reserve units and volunteer chivalry from Brugge and Sodden. At this moment the corps numbers six thousand. And all the deserters have been from Cintra. Vissegerd's army has been decimated even before the battle has begun. Do you understand what that means for him?'

'A serious loss of face. And maybe position.'

'Precisely. Should another few hundred desert, King Foltest will deprive him of his baton. Right now it's hard to call this corps "Cintran". Vissegerd is vacillating, wanting to put an end to the defection, which is why he's spreading rumours about the doubtful – but most certainly unlawful – descent of Cirilla and her ancestors.'

'Which you,' Geralt said, unable to stop himself, 'listen to with evident distaste, My Lord.'

'Have you noticed?' Daniel Etcheverry said, smiling faintly. 'Why, Vissegerd doesn't know my lineage . . . In short, I'm related to this Cirilla. Muriel, Countess of Garramone, known as the Beautiful Impure, Cirilla's great-great-grandmother, was also my great-great-grandmother. Legends about her love affairs circulate in the family to this day. However, I listen with distaste as Vissegerd imputes incestuous tendencies and promiscuity to my ancestor. But I do not

react. Because I'm a soldier. Do you understand me sufficiently, gentlemen?'

'Yes,' Geralt said.

'No,' Dandelion said.

'Vissegerd is the commander of this corps, which forms part of the Temerian Army. And Cirilla in Emhyr's hands is a threat to the corps, and thus to the army, not to mention my king and my country. I have no intention of refuting the rumours being circulated about Cirilla by Vissegerd nor of challenging my commanding officer's authority. I even intend to support him in proving that Cirilla is a bastard with no rights to the throne. Not only will I not challenge the marshal – not only will I not question his decisions or orders – I shall actually support them. And execute them when necessary.'

The Witcher's mouth contorted into a smile.

'I think you understand now, don't you, Dandelion? Not for a moment did the count consider us spies, or he would not have given us such a thorough explanation. The count knows we're innocent. But he will not lift a finger when Vissegerd sentences us.'

'You mean . . . You mean we're . . .'

The count looked away.

'Vissegerd,' he said softly, 'is furious. You were unlucky to fall into his hands. Particularly you, Master Witcher. As for Master Dandelion, I shall try to . . .'

He was interrupted by the return of Vissegerd, still red-faced and panting like a bull. The marshal walked over to the table, slammed his mace onto the maps spread over it, then turned towards Geralt and bored his eyes into him. The Witcher did not avert his gaze.

'The wounded Nilfgaardian the scouts captured,' Vissegerd drawled, 'managed to tear his dressing off and bled to death on the way. He preferred to die, rather than contribute to the defeat and death of his countrymen. We wanted to use him, but he escaped, slipped through our fingers, leaving nothing on them but blood. He'd been well schooled. It's a pity that witchers don't instil such customs in royal children when they take them to be raised.'

Geralt remained silent, but still did not lower his eyes.

'Well, you monster. You freak of nature. You hell spawn. What did you teach Cirilla after kidnapping her? How did you bring her up? Everyone can see how! That snake-in-the-grass is alive, and is

lounging on the Nilfgaardian throne, as if it were nothing! And when Emhyr takes her to his bed she's sure to spread her legs willingly, as if it were nothing too, the slut!'

'Your anger is getting the better of you,' Dandelion mumbled. 'Is it chivalrous, marshal, to blame a child for everything? A child that Emhyr took by force?'

'There are also ways against force! Chivalrous ones, noble ones! Were she really of royal blood, she would have found a way! She would have found a knife! A pair of scissors, a piece of broken glass. Why, even a bodkin! The bitch could have torn open the veins in her wrists with her own teeth! Or hanged herself with her own stockings!'

'I don't want to listen to you any longer, marshal,' Geralt said softly. 'I don't want to listen to you any longer.'

Vissegerd ground his teeth audibly and leant over.

'You don't want to,' he said, in a voice trembling with fury. 'That is fortunate, because I don't have anything more to say to you. Apart from one thing. Back then, in Cintra, fifteen years ago, a great deal was said about destiny. At the time I thought it was nonsense. But it turned out to be your destiny, Witcher. Ever since that night your fate has been sealed, written in black runes among the stars. Ciri, daughter of Pavetta, is your destiny. And your death. Because of Ciri, daughter of Pavetta, you shall hang.'

The Brigade joined Operation Centaur as a unit assigned to the 4th Horse Cavalry. We received reinforcements in the form of three squads of Verdenian light horse, which I assigned to the Vreemde Battle Group. Following the example of the campaign in Aedirn, I created two more battle groups from the rest of the brigade, naming them Sievers and Morteisen, each comprising four squadrons.

We set out from the concentration area near Drieschot on the night of the fourth of August. The Groups' orders ran:

Capture the Vidort-Carcano-Armeria territory; seize the crossing over the Ina; destroy any hostile troops encountered, but avoid significant points of resistance. Start fires, particularly at night, to light the way for the 4th Horse Cavalry. Induce panic among civilians and use their flight to block all of the arterial routes to the enemy's rear. Feign encirclement to drive the retreating enemy forces towards the actual encirclements. Carry out the elimination of selected groups of the civilian population and prisoners of war to cause terror, intensify panic, and undermine the enemy's morale.

The Brigade carried out the above mission with great soldierly devotion.

Elan Trahe,

For Imperator and Fatherland. The glorious trail of fire of the 7th Daerlanian Cavalry Brigade

Chapter Five

Milva did not have time to reach the horses and save them. She was a witness to their theft, but a helpless one. First she was swept along by the frantic, panic-stricken crowd, then the road was obstructed by careering wagons, and finally she became stuck in a woolly, bleating flock of sheep, through which she had to force her way as though it were a snowdrift. Later, by the Chotla, only a leap into the tall rushes growing in the marshes by the bank saved her from the Nilfgaardians' swords as they ruthlessly cut down the fugitives crowded by the river, showing no mercy either to women or children. Milva jumped into the water and reached the other bank, partly wading and partly swimming on her back among the corpses being carried by the current.

And she took up the hunt. She remembered the direction in which the peasants who had stolen Roach, Pegasus, the chestnut colt and her own black had fled. And her priceless bow was still attached to her saddle. *Tough luck*, she thought, feet squelching in her wet boots as she ran, *the others will have to cope without me for now. I must get my damn bow and horse back!*

She freed Pegasus first. The poet's horse was ignoring the heels digging into his sides. He was paying no heed to the urgent shouts of the inexperienced rider and had no intention of galloping; instead he trotted slowly through the birch wood. The poor fellow was being left a long way behind the other horse thieves. When he heard and then saw Milva over his shoulder, he jumped off without a second thought and bolted into the undergrowth, holding up his britches with both hands. Milva did not pursue him, overcoming her seething desire to exact some serious revenge. She leapt into the saddle in full flight, landing heavily and making the strings of the lute fastened to the saddlebags twang. A skilled horsewoman, she managed to force the gelding to gallop. Or rather, to the lumbering canter that Pegasus considered a gallop.

But even this pseudo-gallop was enough, for the horse thieves' escape had been slowed by another tricky mount. The Witcher's skittish Roach, the infuriating, sulky bay mare Geralt had so often sworn he'd exchange for another steed, whether it be an ass, a mule or even a billy goat. Milva caught up with the thieves just as Roach, irritated by a clumsy tug of the reins, had thrown her rider to the ground. The rest of the peasants had dismounted and were trying to get the frisky and excitable mare under control. They were so busy they only noticed Milva when she rode among them on Pegasus and

kicked one of them in the face, breaking his nose. When he fell to the ground, howling and calling upon the Gods, she recognised him. It was Cloggy. A peasant who clearly had no luck in his dealings with people. Or, more particularly, with Milva.

Unfortunately, luck deserted Milva too. To be precise, it wasn't her luck that was to blame, more her own conceit and her conviction – based on shaky practical evidence – that she could beat up any brace of peasants she happened to meet, in whatever manner she chose. When she dismounted she was punched in the eye and found herself on the ground. She drew her knife, ready to spill some guts, but was hit over the head with a stout stick so hard that it broke, blinding her with bark and rotten wood. Stunned and blinded, she still managed to grab the knee of the peasant beating her with the remains of the stick, when he unexpectedly howled and keeled over. The other yelled too, bringing both hands up to protect his head. Milva rubbed her eyes and saw that he was protecting himself from a rain of blows from a knout, dealt by a man riding a grey horse. She sprang up, dealing a powerful kick to the neck of the prostrate peasant. The rustler wheezed and flailed his legs, leaving his loins unprotected. Milva took advantage of that at once, channelling all her anger into a well-aimed kick. The peasant curled up in a ball, clamped his hands on his crotch and howled so loudly leaves fell from the birch trees.

Meanwhile, the horseman on the grey was busy with Cloggy, whose nose was streaming blood, and with the other peasant – he chased them away into the trees with blows from the knout. He returned in order to thrash the one on the ground, but reined in his horse; Milva had managed to catch her black and was holding her bow with an arrow already nocked. The bowstring was only pulled halfway back, but the arrowhead was pointing directly at the horseman's chest.

For a moment, they looked at each other: the horseman and the young woman. Then, with a slow movement, he pulled an arrow with long fletchings from his belt and threw it down at Milva's feet.

'I knew I'd have the chance to give you back your arrow, elf,' he said calmly.

'I'm not an elf, Nilfgaardian.'

'And I'm not a Nilfgaardian. Put that bow down, will you? If I wished you ill, I could have just stood by and watched those peasants kick you around.'

'The devil only knows,' she said through her teeth, 'who you are

and what you wish for me. But thanks for saving me. And for my arrow. And for dealing with that good-for-nothing I didn't hit properly the other day.'

The roughed-up horse thief, still curled up in a ball, choked back his sobs, his face buried in the leaf litter. The horseman didn't even look at him. He looked at Milva.

'Catch the horses,' he said. 'We have to get away from the river, and fast too; the army's combing the forests on both banks.'

'*We* have to?' she said, grimacing and lowering her bow. 'Together? Since when were we comrades? Or a company?'

'I'll explain,' he said, steering his horse and grabbing the chestnut's reins, 'if you give me time.'

'The point is, I don't have any time. The Witcher and the others —'

'I know. But we won't save them by letting ourselves get killed or captured. Catch the horses and we'll flee into the forest. Hurry!'

His name's Cahir, Milva recalled, glancing at her companion, with whom she was now sitting in the pit left by a fallen tree. *A strange Nilfgaardian, who says he isn't a Nilfgaardian. Cahir.*

'We thought they'd killed you,' she muttered. 'The riderless chestnut came running past us . . .'

'I had a minor adventure,' he answered drily, 'with three brigands, as shaggy as werewolves. They ambushed me. The horse got away. The brigands didn't, but then they were on foot. Before I managed to get a new mount, I'd fallen far behind you. I only managed to catch up with you this morning. Right by the camp. I crossed the river down in the gully and waited on the far bank. I knew you'd head east.'

One of the horses concealed in the alder wood snorted and stamped its hooves. Dusk was falling. Mosquitoes whined annoyingly around their ears.

'It's quiet in the forest,' Cahir said. 'The armies have gone, the battle is over.'

'The slaughter's over, you mean.'

'Our cavalry . . .' he stammered and cleared his throat. 'The imperial cavalry attacked the camp, and then troops appeared from the south. I think it was the Temerian Army.'

‘If the battle’s over, we should go back. We should search for the Witcher, Dandelion and the others.’

‘It would be better to wait until nightfall.’

‘There’s something horrible about this place,’ she said softly, tightening her grip on the bow. ‘It’s such a bleak wilderness. It gives me the shivers. Apparently quiet, but there’s always something rustling in the bushes . . . The Witcher said ghouls are attracted to battlefields . . . And the peasants were telling stories about a vampire . . .’

‘You aren’t alone,’ he replied under his breath. ‘It’s much more frightening when you’re alone.’

‘Indeed.’ She nodded, empathising with him. ‘After all you’ve been following us for almost a fortnight, all alone. You’ve been trudging after us, while surrounded by your people— You might say you’re not a Nilfgaardian, but they're still yours, aren’t they. Devil take me if I understand it; instead of going back to your own you’re tracking the Witcher. Why?’

‘It’s a long story.’

When the tall Scoia’tael leant over him Struycken, who was bound to a pole, blinked in fear. It was said there was no such thing as an ugly elf, that every single one of them was comely, that they were born beautiful. And perhaps the legendary commander of the Squirrels had been born beautiful. But now that his face was gashed by a hideous diagonal scar deforming his forehead, eyebrow, nose and cheek, nothing remained of his elven good looks.

The elf with the disfigured physiognomy sat down on a fallen tree trunk.

‘I am Isengrim Faoiltiarna,’ he said, leaning over the captive once again. ‘I’ve been fighting humans for four years and leading a commando for three. I have buried my brother, who fell in combat, four cousins and more than four hundred brothers in arms. In my struggle, I treat your imperator as my ally, as I have proved several times by passing intelligence to your spies, helping your agents and eliminating individuals selected by you.’

Faoiltiarna fell silent and made a sign with his gloved hand. The Scoia’tael standing alongside picked up a small birchbark canteen. The canteen gave off a sweet aroma.

‘I considered and consider Nilfgaard an ally,’ the elf with the scar

repeated, ‘which is why I did not, initially, believe my informant when he warned that a trap was being laid for me. That I would receive instructions for a private meeting with a Nilfgaardian emissary, and that I would be captured then. I didn’t believe but, being cautious by nature, I turned up for the rendezvous a little earlier than expected and not alone. Much to my surprise and dismay, instead of the said emissary, there were six thugs waiting with a fishing net, ropes, a leather mask with a gag, and a straitjacket fastened with straps and buckles. Standard equipment used by your secret service during abductions I would say. Nilfgaard wanted to capture me, Faoiltiarna, alive, and transport me somewhere, gagged and securely fastened in a straitjacket. A curious affair, I would say. And one requiring some elucidation. I’m delighted that I managed to take alive at least one of the thugs who had been set on me – no doubt their leader – who will be able to furnish me with that elucidation.’

Struycken gritted his teeth and turned his head away, in order not to look at the elf’s disfigured face. He preferred to look at the birchbark canteen, and the two wasps buzzing around it.

‘And now,’ Faoiltiarna continued, wiping his sweaty neck with a scarf, ‘let’s have a little chat, Master Kidnapper. To make the conversation flow, let me clarify a few points. There is maple syrup in the canteen. Should our little chat not proceed in a spirit of mutual understanding and complete frankness, we shall copiously anoint your head with the aforementioned syrup, paying very close attention to your eyes and ears. Then we shall place you on an anthill, this one here to be precise, over which these charming, hardworking insects are scurrying. Let me add that this method has already proved its worth in the case of several Dh’oine and an’givare who evinced great stubbornness and a lack of candour.’

‘I am in the imperial service!’ the spy screamed, blanching. ‘I am an officer of the imperial military intelligence, a subordinate of Lord Vattier de Rideaux, Viscount of Eiddon! My name is Jan Struycken! I protest—’

‘What awful luck,’ the elf interrupted him, ‘that these red ants, greedy for maple syrup, have never heard of the viscount. Let us begin. I shall not ask who gave the order for my abduction, because it is obvious. So my first question shall be: where was I to be taken?’

The Nilfgaardian spy struggled against the ropes and jerked his head, for it seemed to him the ants were already crawling over his cheeks. But he remained silent.

‘Too bad,’ Faoiltiarna said, breaking the silence and gesturing to the elf with the canteen. ‘Apply the syrup.’

‘I was to transport you to Nastrog Castle in Verden!’ Struycken yelled. ‘On the orders of Viscount de Rideaux!’

‘Thank you. And what awaited me there?’

‘An interrogation . . .’

‘What was I to be asked about?’

‘About the events on Thanedd! Untie me, I beg you! I’ll tell you everything!’

‘Of course you will,’ the elf sighed, stretching. ‘Particularly since we’ve already made a start, and in matters like these that’s usually the most difficult part. Continue.’

‘I was ordered to make you confess where Vilgefortz and Rience are hiding! And Cahir Mawr Dyffryn, son of Ceallach!’

‘How comical. A trap laid to ask me about Vilgefortz and Rience? Whatever would I know about them? What could link me with them? And Cahir? That’s even more comical. I sent him to you, did I not? Just as you requested. In fetters. Are you saying the package didn’t arrive?’

‘The unit which was sent to the designated rendezvous point was slaughtered . . . Cahir was not among the dead . . .’

‘Ah. And Lord Vattier de Rideaux became suspicious? But instead of sending another emissary to the commando and asking for an explanation, he immediately laid a trap for me. And ordered me dragged to Nastrog in chains and interrogated about the incidents on Thanedd.’

The spy said nothing.

‘Didn’t you get it?’ the elf said and bent his head, bringing his hideous face towards Struycken. ‘That was a question. And it ran: what’s this all about?’

‘I don’t know . . . I don’t know, I swear . . .’

Faoiltiarna beckoned with a hand and pointed. Struycken howled, thrashed around, swore on the Great Sun, pleaded his innocence, wept, tossed his head about and spat out the syrup, which had been thickly smeared over his face. Only when he was carried over to the anthill by four Scoia’tael did he decide to talk – although the consequences of speaking were potentially more dreadful than the ants.

‘Sire . . . Should anyone find out about this, I’m dead meat . . . But I shall disclose it to you . . . I’ve seen confidential orders. I’ve eavesdropped . . . I’ll tell you everything . . .’

‘Of course you will.’ The elf nodded. ‘The record on the anthill is an hour and forty minutes, and belongs to a certain officer from King Demavend’s special forces. But even he talked in the end. Very well, begin. Quickly, coherently and to the point.’

‘The Imperator is certain he was betrayed on Thanedd. The traitor is Vilgefortz of Roggeveen, a sorcerer, and his assistant Rience. But mostly Cahir Mawr Dyffryn aep Ceallach. Vattier . . . Viscount Vattier is not certain whether you Scoia’tael also had a hand in the treachery, if only unwittingly . . . Which is why he ordered you to be seized and delivered in secret to Nastrog Castle . . . Lord Faoiltiarna, I’ve been working in the secret service for twenty years . . . Vattier de Rideaux is my third boss . . .’

‘More coherently, please. And stop shaking. If you’re frank with me, you’ll still be able to serve a few more bosses.’

‘Although it was kept absolutely confidential, I knew . . . I knew who Vilgefortz and Cahir were supposed to capture on the island. And it looked like they had succeeded. Because they brought that . . . you know . . . that princess from Cintra to Loc Grim. I thought they'd pulled it off and that Cahir and Rience would become barons, and that sorcerer a count at least . . . But instead the Imperator summoned Tawny Owl – I mean, Lord Skellen – and ordered him and Lord Vattier to capture Cahir . . . And Rience, and Vilgefortz . . . Anyone who might know anything about Thanedd and that incident was to be tortured . . . Including you . . . It didn’t take much to guess, you know, that it was treachery. That a sham princess had been brought to Loc Grim . . .’

The spy struggled to breathe, nervously gasping for air through lips covered with maple syrup.

‘Untie him,’ Faoiltiarna ordered his Squirrels. ‘And let him wash his face.’

The order was carried out immediately. A moment later the mastermind of the unsuccessful ambush was standing with head lowered before the legendary Scoia’tael commander. Faoiltiarna looked at him indifferently.

‘Scrape the syrup thoroughly from your ears,’ he finally said. ‘Then prick them up and listen carefully, as befits a spy with many years’ experience. I shall give you proof of my loyalty to the

Imperator. I shall give you a thorough account of the matters that interest him. And you will repeat everything, word for word, to Vattier de Rideaux.'

The spy nodded eagerly.

'In the middle of Blathe, which according to your reckoning is the beginning of June,' the elf began, 'I was contacted by Enid an Gleanna, the sorceress also known as Francesca Findabair. Soon after, on her orders, a certain Rience came to my commando. He was said to be the factotum of Vilgefortz of Roggeveen, also a sorcerer. A plan of action was drawn up in utter secrecy, with the aim of eliminating a number of mages during the conclave on the Isle of Thanedd. The plan was presented as one having the full support of Imperator Emhyr, Vattier de Rideaux and Stephan Skellen; otherwise I should not have agreed to collaborate with Dh'oine – sorcerers or not – for I have seen too many entrapments in my life. The involvement of the Empire was confirmed by the arrival of a ship at Cape Bremervoord. On board was Cahir, son of Ceallach, equipped with special authorisation and orders. According to those orders I selected a special squad from the commando, which would be answerable only to Cahir. I was aware that they were trusted to capture and remove a . . . certain individual . . . from the island.'

'We sailed to Thanedd,' Faoiltiarna began again after a pause, 'on the ship which had brought Cahir. Rience had some amulets and he used them to surround the ship with a magical fog. We sailed into the caverns beneath the island. From there we proceeded to the catacombs under Garstang. There we realised at once that something wasn't right. Rience had received some telepathic signals from Vilgefortz. We knew we'd have to start fighting any minute. Fortunately, we were ready, because the moment we left the catacombs we were plunged into hell.'

The elf contorted his mutilated face, as though the recollection pained him.

'After our initial successes, matters became complicated. We were unable to eliminate all the royal sorcerers, and we took heavy casualties. Several mages who were party to the conspiracy also perished, while others began to save their skins and teleport away. All of a sudden Vilgefortz vanished, then Rience, and Enid an Gleanna soon followed suit. I treated that final disappearance as the conclusive signal for our withdrawal. I did not, however, give the order, but waited for the return of Cahir and his squad, who had set off at once to carry out their mission. When they did not return, we

began to search for them.'

'No one,' Faoiltiarna said, looking the Nilfgaardian spy in the eyes, 'survived from that squad; they were all brutally slaughtered. We found Cahir on the steps leading to Tor Lara, a tower which exploded during the battle and ended up as a heap of rubble. He was wounded and unconscious; it was clear he had not accomplished the mission he had been assigned. There was no sign of his target anywhere and royal troops were already pouring out of Aretuza and Loxia. I knew there was no way Cahir could fall into their hands, because it would have been proof of Nilfgaard's active involvement in the operation. So we took him with us and fled back to the catacombs and then the caverns. We boarded the ship and sailed away. Twelve remained of my commando, most of them wounded.'

'The wind was at our backs. We landed to the west of Hirundum and hid in the forest. Cahir was trying to tear off his bandages and was yelling something about an insane girl with green eyes, about the Lion Cub of Cintra, about a witcher who had massacred his men, about the Tower of Gulls and a mage who flew like a bird. He demanded a horse and ordered us to return him to the island, citing the imperial orders, which under the circumstances I had to treat as the ravings of a madman. As we knew, war was already raging in Aedirn, so I considered it more important to swiftly rebuild my depleted commando and resume the fight against the Dh'oine.'

'Cahir was still with us when I found your secret order in a dead drop. I was astonished. Although Cahir had clearly not completed his mission, there was nothing to suggest he was guilty of treachery. But I did not ponder over it for long, judging that it was your business and that you ought to clear it up. Cahir put up no resistance to being tied up, he was calm and resigned. I ordered him to be placed in a coffin and with the help of a hawker acquaintance delivered to the location designated in the letter. I was not, I admit, inclined to further deplete my commando by providing an escort. I don't know who murdered your men at the rendezvous point. But only I knew where it was. So if this version of the totally random extermination of your unit doesn't suit you, search for traitors among your own, because only you and I knew the time and place.'

Faoiltiarna stood up.

'That is all. All the information I have given here is true. I would not supply you with anything more in the dungeons of Nastrog. The lies and confabulations with which I might try to satisfy the investigating officer and his torturers would actually do more harm

than good. I do not know anything more. In particular I don't know Vilgefortz and Rience's whereabouts, and neither do I know if your suspicions of betrayal are justified. I also emphatically declare that I know nothing about the princess from Cintra, the genuine or the sham one. I have told you everything I know. I trust that neither Lord de Rideaux nor Stephan Skellen will want to set any more traps for me. The Dh'oine have been trying to capture and kill me for a long, long time, so I have adopted the custom of ruthless extermination of all trap setters. I shall not, in the future, investigate to check if one of the trap setters is, by chance, a subordinate of Vattier or Skellen. I do not have the time nor the desire to make such an investigation. Do I make myself clear?'

Struycken nodded and swallowed.

'Now take a horse, spy, and get the hell out of my forest.'

'You mean they were delivering you to the gallows?' Milva mumbled. 'Now I understand some of it, but not everything. Why, instead of holing up somewhere, are you following the Witcher? He's really got it in for you . . . And he's spared your life twice . . .'

'Three times.'

'I saw two of them. Though you weren't the one who beat the shit out of the Witcher on Thanedd, as I first thought, I don't think you ought to get in the way of his sword again. There's a lot about your feud I don't understand, but you saved me and you've got an honest face . . . So I'll tell you, Cahir, bluntly: when the Witcher talks about the men who took his Ciri to Nilfgaard, he grinds his teeth until sparks fly. And if you spat on him, he would steam.'

'Ciri,' he repeated. 'Sounds nice.'

'Didn't you know?'

'No. My people always called her Cirilla or the Lion Cub of Cintra . . . And when she was with me – for she was once . . . she didn't say a single word. Even though I saved her life.'

'Only the devil himself could grasp all this,' Milva said, exasperated. 'Your fates are all entangled, Cahir, knotted and mixed up. It's too much for my head.'

'And what's your name?' he suddenly asked.

'Milva . . . Maria Barring. But call me Milva.'

'The Witcher's heading the wrong way, Milva,' he offered a

moment later. ‘Ciri isn’t in Nilfgaard. The kidnappers didn’t take her to Nilfgaard. If it was a kidnap at all.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘It’s a long story.’

‘By the Great Sun,’ Fringilla said, standing in the doorway, tilting her head and looking in astonishment at her friend. ‘What have you done to your hair, Assire?’

‘I washed it,’ Assire var Anahid replied coldly. ‘And styled it. Come in and sit down. Get out of that chair, Merlin. Shoo!’

The sorceress sat down in the chair the black cat had reluctantly vacated, her eyes still fixed on her friend’s coiffure.

‘Stop staring,’ Assire said, touching her bouffant and glistening curls. ‘I decided to make a few changes. Why, I just took your lead.’

‘I was always taken as an oddball and a rebel,’ Fringilla Vigo chuckled. ‘But when they see you in the academy or at court . . .’

‘I’m seldom at court,’ Assire cut her off, ‘and the academy will have to get used to it. This is the thirteenth century. It’s high time we challenged the superstition that dressing up is proof of an enchantress’s flightiness and the superficiality of her mind.’

‘Fingernails too,’ Fringilla said, slightly narrowing her green eyes, which never, ever, missed anything. ‘Whatever next, darling? I hardly recognise you.’

‘A simple spell,’ the enchantress replied coolly, ‘ought to be enough to prove it’s me and no doppelgänger. Cast the spell, if you must. And then let’s move on to the matter in hand. I asked something of you . . .’

Fringilla Vigo stroked the cat, which was rubbing himself against her calf, purring and arching his back, pretending it was a gesture of friendship and not a veiled hint that the black-haired sorceress should get up from the armchair.

‘The same thing Seneschal Ceallach aep Gruffyd asked of you,’ she said, without raising her head.

‘Indeed,’ Assire confirmed in hushed tones, ‘Ceallach visited me, distraught, and asked me to intercede to save his son. Emhyr has ordered him to be captured, tortured and executed. Who else could he turn to except a relative? Mawr, Ceallach’s wife and Cahir’s mother, is my niece, my sister’s youngest daughter. In spite of all

that I didn't promise him anything. Because my hands are tied. Certain circumstances took place recently which do not permit me to draw attention to myself. I shall elucidate. But only after you've given me the information I asked you to gather.'

Fringilla Vigo furtively sighed with relief. She had been afraid her friend would want to get involved in the case of Cahir, son of Ceallach, which had 'gallows' written all over it. And equally afraid she would be asked for help she couldn't refuse.

'Around the middle of July,' she began, 'the entire court at Loc Grim had the opportunity to marvel at a fifteen-year-old girl, supposedly the Princess of Cintra, whom Emhyr insisted on referring to as "Your Majesty" during the audience and was treated so kindly there were even rumours of a quick marriage.'

'So I heard,' Assire said, stroking the cat, which had given up on Fringilla and was trying to occupy her own armchair instead. 'This doubtlessly political marriage is still talked about.'

'But more discreetly and not so often. For the Cintran was moved to Darn Rowan. Prisoners of state, as you know, are often kept in Darn Rowan. Potential imperatrices much less often.'

Assire didn't comment. She waited patiently, examining her freshly filed and varnished fingernails.

'You must remember,' Fringilla Vigo continued, 'how Emhyr summoned us all three years ago and ordered us to establish the whereabouts of a certain individual. Within the Northern Kingdoms. You must also recall how furious he became when we failed. Albrich – who explained it was impossible to detect anything from such a distance, never mind bypassing protective screens – was severely reprimanded. But that's not all. A week after the aforementioned audience in Loc Grim, when victory at Aldersberg was being celebrated, Emhyr noticed myself and Albrich in the castle chamber. And graced us with his conversation. The gist of his speech, only somewhat trivialising it, was: "You're all of you leeches, spongers and idlers. Your conjuring tricks cost me a fortune and there's nothing to show for it. The task which your entire lamentable academy failed to achieve was carried out in four days by an ordinary astrologist.'

Assire var Anahid snorted disdainfully and continued to stroke the cat.

'It was easy to discover,' Fringilla Vigo went on, 'that the miracle worker was none other than the infamous astrologist Xarthisius.'

‘I take it the subject of the search was the Cintran candidate for the position of Imperatrice. Xarthisius found her. And then what? Was he appointed Secretary of State? Head of the Department of Unfeasible Affairs?’

‘No. He was thrown into a dungeon the following week.’

‘I fear I fail to understand what this has to do with Cahir, son of Ceallach.’

‘Patience. Don’t make me get ahead of myself. This is crucial.’

‘I beg your pardon. Go on.’

‘Do you remember what Emhyr gave us when we began our search three years ago?’

‘A lock of hair.’

‘Precisely,’ Fringilla said, reaching for a small, leather purse. ‘And this is it. A few blonde hairs belonging to a six-year-old girl. I kept the remnants. And it’s worth your knowing that Stella Congreve, Countess of Liddertal, is looking after the Cintran princess who is being kept in isolation in Darn Rowan. Stella happens to be indebted to me for various reasons, so it was easy for me to come by a second lock of hair. And this is it. Somewhat darker, but hair darkens with age. Nonetheless, the locks belong to two totally different people. I’ve examined them and there is no doubt in this respect.’

‘I had expected a revelation of this kind,’ Assire var Anahid admitted, ‘when I heard that the Cintran had been shut up in Darn Rowan. The astrologer either fouled up completely or is implicated in a conspiracy that planned to supply Emhyr with a bogus individual. A conspiracy which will cost Cahir aep Ceallach his head. Thank you, Fringilla. Everything is clear.’

‘Not everything,’ the sorceress said and shook her head of black hair. ‘First of all, it wasn’t Xarthisius who found the Cintran or took her to Loc Grim. The astrologist started on his horoscopes and astromancy *after* Emhyr realised he had a bogus princess and begun an intensive search for the real one. And the old fool ended up in the dungeon because of a simple mistake in his art or fraud. For he had established the whereabouts of the person Emhyr sought with a radial tolerance of approximately one hundred miles. And that region turned out to be a desert, a savage wilderness somewhere beyond the Tir Tochair massif and the riverhead of the Velda. Stephan Skellen, who was sent there, found nothing but scorpions and vultures.’

‘I wouldn’t have expected much more from Xarthisius. But that won’t affect Cahir’s fate. Emhyr is quick-tempered, but he never sentences anyone to torture or death just like that, without evidence. Someone, as you said yourself, made sure the bogus princess was taken to Loc Grim in place of the real one. Someone came up with a double. So there was a conspiracy and Cahir became mixed up in it. Possibly unwittingly. Which means he was used.’

‘If that was the case, he would have been used until the goal was reached. He would personally have delivered the double to Emhyr. But Cahir has vanished without a trace. Why? His disappearance was sure to have aroused suspicions. Did he fear Emhyr would notice the deception at first glance? For he did. He couldn’t fail to, after all he had a—’

‘A lock of hair,’ Assire cut in. ‘A lock of hair from a six-year-old girl. Fringilla, Emhyr hasn’t been hunting for that girl for three years, but for much longer. It looks as though Cahir has become embroiled in something very nasty, something which began when he was still riding a stick horse and pretending to be a knight. Mmm . . . Leave me those strands of hair. I’d like to test them both thoroughly.’

Fringilla Vigo nodded slowly and narrowed her green eyes.

‘I will. But be cautious, Assire. Don’t get mixed up in any dirty business, because it might draw attention to you. And at the beginning of the conversation you hinted that attention would be inconvenient to you. And promised you’d reveal why.’

Assire var Anahid stood up, walked over to the window and stared at the spires and pinnacles of Nilfgaard – the capital of the Empire, called the City of the Golden Towers – shimmering in the setting sun.

‘You once told me and I remembered it,’ she said, without turning around, ‘that no borders should ever divide magic. That magic should have the highest values, be above all divisions. That what was needed was some kind of . . . secret organisation . . . Something like a convent or a lodge . . .’

‘I am ready,’ said Fringilla Vigo, Nilfgaardian sorceress, breaking the short silence. ‘My mind is made up and I am ready. Thank you for your trust and the distinction. When and where will this lodge meet, my mysterious and enigmatic friend?’

Assire var Anahid, Nilfgaardian sorceress, turned away. The hint

of a smile played on her lips.

‘Soon,’ she said. ‘I’ll explain everything to you soon. But first, before I forget . . . Give me the address of your milliner, Fringilla.’

‘There isn’t a single fire,’ Milva whispered, staring at the dark bank beyond the river, gleaming in the moonlight, ‘or a living soul there, I reckon. There were two hundred refugees in the camp. Has no one got off scot-free?’

‘If the imperial troops won, they took them all captive,’ Cahir whispered back. ‘If your boys got the upper hand, they took the refugees with them when they moved on.’

They neared the riverbank and the reeds covering the marsh. Milva trod on something and sprang back, suppressing a scream, at the sight of a stiff arm, covered in leeches, sticking out of the mud.

‘It’s just a dead body,’ Cahir muttered, grabbing her hand. ‘One of ours. A Daerlanian.’

‘Who is he?’

‘One of the Seventh Daerlanian Cavalry Brigade. See the silver scorpion on his sleeve . . .’

‘By the Gods. . .’ The girl shuddered and gripped her bow tightly in her sweating fist. ‘Did you hear that noise? What was it?’

‘A wolf.’

‘Or a ghoul . . . Or some other hell spawn. There must be a whole load of dead bodies in the camp . . . A pox on it, I’m not crossing that river at night!’

‘Fine, we’ll wait until dawn . . . Milva? What’s that strange . . . ?’

‘Regis . . .’ the archer said, stifling a shout at the scent of wormwood, sage, coriander and aniseed. ‘Regis? Is that you?’

‘Yes, it’s me,’ the barber-surgeon replied, noiselessly emerging from the gloom, ‘I was worried about you. But you’re not alone, I see.’

‘Aye.’ Milva released Cahir’s arm, noticing he had already drawn his sword. ‘I’m not alone and he’s not alone any more. But that’s a long story, as some people would say. Regis, what about the Witcher? And Dandelion? And the others? Do you know what’s happened to them?’

‘Indeed I do. Do you have horses?’

‘Yes, they’re hidden in the willows . . .’

‘Then let’s head southwards, down the Chotla. Without delay. We must reach Armeria before midnight.’

‘What about the Witcher and the poet? Are they alive?’

‘Yes. But they’re in a bit of difficulty.’

‘What kind of difficulty?’

‘It’s a long story.’

Dandelion groaned, trying to turn around and get into a slightly more comfortable position. It was, however, an impossible task for someone lying trussed up like a ham to be smoked in a pile of soft wood shavings and sawdust.

‘They didn’t hang us right away,’ he grunted. ‘There’s hope for us still. We aren’t done for yet . . .’

‘Would you mind shutting up?’ the Witcher said, lying back calmly and looking up at the moon, visible through a hole in the roof of the woodshed. ‘Do you know why Vissegerd didn’t hang us right away? Because we’re to be executed publicly, at dawn, while the entire corps are mustered before moving out. For propaganda purposes.’

Dandelion did not respond to that. Geralt only heard him panting with worry.

‘You still have a chance of dodging the drop,’ he added, trying to reassure the poet. ‘Vissegerd simply wants to exact his own private revenge on me; he hasn’t got anything against you. Your friend the count will get you out of trouble, you’ll see.’

‘That’s crap,’ the bard replied, to the Witcher’s astonishment calmly and quite reasonably. ‘Crap, crap, crap. Don’t treat me like a child. For one thing, two hanged men are better for propaganda purposes than one. For another, you don’t let a witness to private revenge live. No, brother, they’ll stretch us both.’

‘That’s enough, Dandelion. Lie there quietly and think up a plan.’

‘What bloody plan?’

‘Any bloody plan.’

The poet’s idle chatter prevented the Witcher from gathering his thoughts, and he had no time to waste. He expected that men from Temerian military intelligence – some of whom must have been

present in Vissegerd's corps – would burst into the woodshed at any moment. Intelligence officers would surely be interested in asking him about various aspects of the events in Garstang on the Isle of Thanedd. Geralt hardly knew any of the details, but he was confident that he would be feeling very, very poorly indeed before the agents accepted this. All his hopes depended on Vissegerd, blinded by the lust for revenge, not having made the Witcher's capture public. Intelligence officers might want to free the captives from the clutches of the furious marshal in order to take them to headquarters. Or, to be more precise, take whatever was left of them after the first round of interrogation.

The poet, meanwhile, had come up with a plan.

'Geralt! Let's pretend we know something important. That we really are spies or something like that. Then—'

'Dandelion, please.'

'No? So we could try to bribe the sentries. I have some money hidden away. Doubloons, sewn into the lining of my boot. For a rainy day . . . We'll summon the sentries . . .'

'Who'll take all you have and then beat you up for good measure.'

The poet grumbled, but stopped talking. From the field they heard shouts, the patter of hooves and – what was worse – the smell of army pea soup. At that moment, Geralt would have given all the sterlets and truffles in the world for a bowl of it. The sentries standing outside the shed were talking lazily, chuckling and, from time to time, hawking up and spitting. The sentries were professional soldiers, which could be discerned by their remarkable ability to communicate using sentences constructed entirely of pronouns and coarse expletives.

'Geralt?'

'What?'

'I wonder what's happened to Milva . . . And Zoltan, and Percival and Regis . . . Did you see them?'

'No. We can't rule out their being hacked to death or trampled by horses during the skirmish. The camp was knee-deep in corpses.'

'I can't believe,' Dandelion declared resolutely and with a note of hope in his voice, 'I can't believe that crafty buggers like Zoltan and Percival . . . Or Milva . . .'

'Stop deluding yourself. Even if they did survive, they won't help us.'

‘Why not?’

‘For three reasons. Firstly, they have their own problems. Secondly, we’re lying tied up in a shed in the middle of a camp of several thousand soldiers.’

‘And the third reason? You mentioned three.’

‘Thirdly,’ the Witcher replied in a tired voice, ‘the monthly quota on miracles was used up when the woman from Kernow found her missing husband.’

‘Over there,’ the barber-surgeon said, indicating the small dots of campfires, ‘is Fort Armeria, at present the camp of the Temerian Army concentrated at Mayena.’

‘Are the Witcher and Dandelion being held prisoner there?’ Milva asked, standing up in her stirrups. ‘Ha, then things are bad . . . There must be hordes of armed men and guards everywhere. Won’t be easy sneaking in there.’

‘You won’t have to,’ Regis responded, dismounting from Pegasus. The gelding gave a long snort and pulled his head away, clearly disgusted by the barber-surgeon’s herbal odour, which made his nostrils tingle.

‘You won’t have to sneak in,’ he repeated. ‘I’ll take care of it. You’ll be waiting with the horses where the river’s sparkling, do you see? Beneath the brightest star in the Seven Goats. The Chotla flows into the Ina there. Once I’ve got the Witcher out of trouble I’ll point him in that direction. And that’s where you’ll meet.’

‘How arrogant is that?’ Cahir muttered to Milva when they came close to each other, dismounting. ‘He’ll get them out of trouble by himself, without anyone’s help. Did you hear that? Who is he?’

‘In truth, I don’t know,’ Milva muttered back. ‘But when it comes to impossible tasks, I believe him. Yesterday, in front of my very eyes, he got a red-hot horseshoe out of a fire with his bare hands . . .’

‘Is he a sorcerer?’

‘No,’ Regis answered from behind Pegasus, demonstrating his exceptionally sensitive hearing. ‘But does it really matter who I am? After all, I haven’t asked for your personal details.’

‘I am Cahir Mawr Dyffryn aep Ceallach.’

‘I thank you and am full of admiration.’ The barber-surgeon’s

voice had a slight note of scorn. ‘I heard almost no Nilfgaardian accent when you pronounced your Nilfgaardian surname.’

‘I’m not—’

‘Enough!’ Milva cut him off. ‘This isn’t the time for arguing or hesitating. Regis, the Witcher’s waiting to be rescued.’

‘Not before midnight,’ the barber-surgeon said coldly, looking up at the moon. ‘So we have some time to talk. Who is this person, Milva?’

‘That person,’ the archer replied, a little angry and standing up for Cahir, ‘rescued me from a tight spot. That person will tell the Witcher, when he meets him, that he’s going in the wrong direction. Ciri’s not in Nilfgaard.’

‘A revelation indeed,’ the barber-surgeon said, his voice softening. ‘And its source, Sir Cahir, son of Ceallach?’

‘It’s a long story.’

Dandelion had been silent for a long time when one of the sentries suddenly stopped talking in the middle of a curse and the other rasped, or possibly groaned. Geralt knew there had been three on guard, so he listened intently, but the third didn’t utter even the slightest sound.

The Witcher waited, holding his breath, but what came to his ears a moment later was not the creaking of the door to the woodshed being opened by their rescuers. Not in the least. He heard even, soft, choral snoring. The sentries were quite simply asleep on duty.

He breathed out, swore silently, and was just about to lose himself in thoughts about Yennefer when medallion around the Witcher’s neck suddenly vibrated and the air was filled with the scent of wormwood, basil, coriander, sage, aniseed, and the devil only knew what else.

‘Regis?’ he whispered in disbelief, ineffectually trying to lift his head from the wood shavings.

‘Regis,’ Dandelion whispered back, moving around and rustling. ‘No one else reeks like that . . . Where are you? I can’t see you—’

‘Be quiet!’

The medallion stopped vibrating, Geralt heard the poet’s relieved sigh and immediately after the soft hiss of a blade cutting his ropes.

A moment later Dandelion gave a moan of pain as his circulation returned, but dutifully tried to suppress it by sticking his fist into his mouth.

'Geralt,' the barber-surgeon said, his vague, wavering shadow materialising at the Witcher's side, and immediately began to cut his bonds. 'You'll have to get past the camp guard yourselves. Head towards the east and the brightest star in the Seven Goats. Straight to the Ina. Milva's waiting for you there with the horses.'

'Help me get up . . .'

He stood first on one leg and then on the other, biting his fist. Dandelion's circulation was already back to normal. A moment later the Witcher was also ready for action.

'How are we going to get out?' the poet suddenly asked. 'The sentries at the door are snoring, but they may . . .'

'No, they won't,' Regis interrupted in a whisper. 'But be careful when you leave. It's a full moon and the field's lit by campfires. In spite of it being night the entire camp is bustling, but perhaps that's a good thing. The corporals of the guard are bored of challenging the sentries. Out you go. Good luck.'

'What about you?'

'Don't worry about me. Don't wait for me and don't look back.'

'But—'

'Dandelion,' the Witcher hissed. 'You've been told not to worry about him, got it?'

'Out you go,' Regis repeated. 'Good luck. Until the next time, Geralt.'

The Witcher turned around.

'Thank you for rescuing us,' he said. 'But it would be best if we never met again. Am I making myself clear?'

'Absolutely. Don't waste time.'

The sentries were sleeping as they had fallen, snoring and smacking their lips. Not one of them even twitched when Geralt and Dandelion squeezed out through the slightly open door. Neither did any of them react when the Witcher unceremoniously pulled the thick homespun capes from two of them.

'That's no ordinary sleep,' Dandelion whispered.

'Of course it isn't,' Geralt said. Hidden in the dark of the

woodshed's shadow, he looked around.

'I see.' The poet sighed. 'Is Regis a sorcerer?'

'No. No, not a sorcerer.'

'He took that horseshoe from the fire. Put the sentries to sleep . . .'

'Stop wittering and concentrate. We aren't free yet. Wrap that cape around you and let's cross the field. If anyone stops us we're pretending to be soldiers.'

'Right. If anything happens I'll say—'

'We're pretending to be stupid soldiers. Let's go.'

They crossed the field, keeping their distance from the soldiers crowded around glowing braziers and campfires. Soldiers were roaming about here and there; two more weren't conspicuous. They didn't arouse anyone's suspicions; no one questioned them or stopped them. They passed beyond the stockade quickly and without any difficulty.

Everything went smoothly; in fact, *too* smoothly. Geralt became anxious, since he instinctively sensed danger and his anxiety was growing – rather than diminishing – the further they moved from the centre of the camp. He repeated to himself that there was nothing strange in that: they hadn't drawn attention to themselves in the middle of a military camp that was busy even at night, and the only danger had been that of the alarm being raised, should someone notice the sleeping sentries at the door to the woodshed. Now, however, they were approaching the perimeter, where the sentries had – by necessity – to be vigilant. The fact that they were heading away from the centre of the camp could not be helping them. The Witcher recalled the plague of desertion in Vissegerd's corps and was certain the guards had orders to watch carefully for anyone trying to abandon the camp.

The moon was shining brightly enough for Dandelion not to have to grope his way. This amount of light meant the Witcher could see as well as during the day, which enabled them to avoid two sentry posts and wait in the bushes for a mounted patrol to pass. There was an alder grove directly in front of them, apparently outside the ring of sentry posts. Everything was still going smoothly. Too smoothly.

Their ignorance of military customs proved to be their undoing.

They were tempted by the low, dark clump of alders, because of

the cover it offered. But since time immemorial there have always been soldiers who lie in the bushes when it is their turn to be on guard duty, while the ones who aren't asleep keep an eye both on the enemy and on their own bloody-minded officers, should any of the latter descend on them with an unexpected inspection.

Geralt and Dandelion had barely reached the alder grove before several dark shapes – and spear blades – loomed up in front of them.

'Password?'

'Cintra!' Dandelion blurted out without hesitation.

The soldiers chuckled as one.

'Really, boys,' one of them said, 'is that the best you can do? If only someone would come up with something original. But no, nothing but "Cintra". Missing home, are we? Well, the fee's the same as yesterday.'

Dandelion audibly ground his teeth. Geralt weighed up the situation and their chances. His assessment: decidedly crap.

'Come on,' the soldier said, hurrying them. 'If you want to get through, pay up and we'll turn a blind eye. And quickly, because the corporal of the guard will be here any second.'

''Owd on,' the poet said, changing his accent and mode of speech. 'I'll just sit down and get me boot off, because there's. . .'

He didn't manage to say anything else. Four soldiers threw him to the ground. Then two of them, each one seizing one of his legs between theirs, pulled off his boots. The one who'd asked for the password tore the lining from the inside of a bootleg. Something scattered around with a jingle.

'Gold!' the leader yelled. 'Pull the boots off the other one! And summon the corporal!'

However, there was no one to do any boot-pulling or summoning, because half the guard dropped on their knees to search for the doubloons scattered among the leaves while the other half immediately began fighting furiously over Dandelion's second boot. *It's now or never*, Geralt thought, punching the leader in the jaw and then kicking him in the side of his head as he fell. The soldiers who were searching for gold didn't even notice. Dandelion needed no encouragement to spring up and dash through the bushes, his footwraps flapping. Geralt ran after him.

'Help! Help!' the leader of the watch bellowed from the ground,

his voice soon after joined by his comrades. ‘Cooorporaaal!’

‘You swine!’ Dandelion yelled back as he fled. ‘Knaves! You stole my money!’

‘Save your breath, dolt! See that forest? Make for it.’

‘Stop them! Stop theeem!’

They ran. Geralt swore furiously, hearing shouts, whistles, neighing and the thudding of hooves. Behind them. And in front of them. His astonishment didn’t last long; one careful look was enough. What he had taken for a forest and a safe haven was an approaching wall of cavalry, surging towards them like a wave.

‘Stop, Dandelion!’ he shouted, then turned back to the patrol galloping in their direction and whistled piercingly through his fingers.

‘Nilfgaard!’ he yelled at the top of his voice. ‘Nilfgaard are coming! Back to the camp! Get back to the camp, you fools! Sound the alarm! Nilfgaard!’

The leading rider of the patrol pursuing them reined his horse to a rapid stop, looked towards where Geralt had pointed, screamed in terror and was about to turn back. But Geralt decided he had already done enough for the Cintran lions and Temerian lilies. He leapt at the soldier and dragged him from the saddle with a dextrous tug.

‘Jump on, Dandelion! And hold tight!’

The poet didn’t need to be told twice. The horse sagged a little under the weight of an extra rider, but spurred on by two pairs of heels was soon galloping hard. The approaching swarm of Nilfgaardians now represented a much greater threat than Vissegerd and his corps, so they galloped along the ring of sentry posts, trying to escape from the area where the two armies would clash at any moment. The Nilfgaardians were close, however, and had seen them. Dandelion yelled, then Geralt looked around and saw the dark wall of Nilfgaardian troops beginning to extend black tentacles of pursuit. Without hesitating he steered the horse towards the camp, overtaking the fleeing guards. Dandelion yelled once again, but this time there was no need. The Witcher could also see the cavalry charging at them from the camp. Having been alerted, Vissegerd’s corps had mounted at admirable speed. And Geralt and Dandelion were caught in a trap.

There was no way out. The Witcher changed the direction of their

flight once more and urged from the horse all the speed it could muster, trying to slip out of the dangerously narrowing gap between hammer and anvil. When hope dawned that they might just make it, the night air suddenly sang with a whistle of fletchings. Dandelion yelled, this time very loudly indeed, and dug his fingers into Geralt's sides. The Witcher felt something warm dripping onto his neck.

'Hold on!' he shouted, catching the poet by his elbow and drawing him closer to his own back. 'Hold on, Dandelion!'

'They've killed me!' the poet howled, impressively loudly for a dead man. 'I'm bleeding! I'm dying!'

'Hold on!'

The hail of arrows and quarrels, which was raining down on both armies and had proved to be so disastrous for Dandelion, was also their salvation. The armies under fire seethed and lost momentum, and the gap between the front lines which had been about to draw together remained open just long enough for the heavily snorting horse to whisk the two riders out of the trap. Geralt mercilessly forced his steed to ride hard, for although the trees and safety were looming up in front of them, hooves continued to thunder behind them. The horse grunted and stumbled, but did not stop and they might have escaped had not Dandelion suddenly groaned and lurched backwards, dragging the Witcher out of the saddle with him. Geralt unintentionally tugged on the reins, the horse reared, and the two men tumbled to the ground among some very low pines. The poet thudded onto the dirt and lay still, groaning pathetically. His head and left shoulder were covered in blood, which glistened black in the moonlight.

Behind them, the armies collided with thuds, clangs and screams. But despite the raging battle, their Nilfgaardian pursuers hadn't forgotten about them. Three cavalrymen were galloping towards them.

The Witcher sprang up, feeling a swelling wave of cold fury and hatred inside him. He jumped out to meet their pursuers, drawing the horsemen's attention away from Dandelion. But not because he wanted to sacrifice himself for his friend. He wanted to kill.

The leading rider, who had pulled ahead, flew at him with a raised battle-axe, but had no way of knowing he was attacking a witcher. Geralt dodged the blow effortlessly and seized the Nilfgaardian leaning over in the saddle by his cloak, while the fingers of his other hand caught the soldier's broad belt. He pulled

the rider from the saddle with a powerful wrench and fell on him, pinning him to the ground. Only then did Geralt realise he had no weapon. He caught the man by the throat, but couldn't throttle him because of his iron gorget. The Nilfgaardian struggled, hit him with an armoured gauntlet and gashed his cheek. The Witcher smothered his opponent with his entire body, groped for the misericord in the broad belt, and jerked it out of its sheath. The man on the ground felt it and howled. Geralt fended off the arm with the silver scorpion on the sleeve that was still hitting him and raised the dagger to strike.

The Nilfgaardian screamed.

The Witcher plunged the misericord into his open mouth. Up to the hilt.

When he got to his feet, he saw horses without riders, bodies and a cavalry unit heading away towards the battle. The Cintrans from the camp had dispatched their Nilfgaardian pursuers, and had not even noticed the poet or the two men fighting on the ground in the gloom among the low pine trees.

'Dandelion! Where were you hit? Where's the arrow?'

'In my head . . . It's stuck in my head . . .'

'Don't talk nonsense! Bloody hell, you were lucky . . . It only grazed you . . .'

'I'm bleeding . . .'

Geralt removed his jerkin and tore off a shirtsleeve. The point of the quarrel had caught Dandelion above the ear, leaving a nasty-looking gash extending to his temple. The poet kept bringing his shaking hand up to the wound and then looking at the blood, which was profusely spattering his hands and cuffs. His eyes were vacant. The Witcher realised he was dealing with a person who, for the first time in his life, had been wounded and was in pain. Who, for the first time in his life, was seeing his own blood in such quantities.

'Get up,' he said, wrapping the shirtsleeve quickly and clumsily around the troubadour's head. 'It's nothing. Dandelion, it's only a scratch . . . Get up, we have to get out of here fast . . .'

The battle on the field raged on in the dark; the clatter of steel, neighing of horses and screams grew louder and louder. Geralt quickly caught two Nilfgaardian steeds, but it turned out one was sufficient. Dandelion managed to get up, but immediately sat down again, groaned and sobbed pitifully. The Witcher lifted him to his

feet, shook him back to consciousness and hauled him into the saddle.

Geralt mounted behind the wounded poet and spurred the horse east, to where – above the already visible pale blue streaks of the dawn – hung the brightest star of the Seven Goats constellation.

'Dawn will be breaking soon,' Milva said, looking not at the sky but at the glistening surface of the river. 'The catfish are tormenting the small fry. But there's neither hide nor hair of the Witcher or Dandelion. Oh, I hope Regis didn't mess up—'

'Don't tempt fate,' Cahir muttered, adjusting the girth of the recovered chestnut colt.

Milva looked around for a piece of wood to knock on.

'. . . But it does seem to be like that . . . Whoever encounters your Ciri, it's as though they've put their head on the block . . . That girl brings misfortune . . . Misfortune and death.'

'Spit that out, Milva.'

She spat obediently, as superstition demanded.

'There's such a chill, I'm shivering . . . And I'm thirsty, but I saw another rotting corpse in the river near the bank. Phooey . . . I feel sick . . . I think I'm going to throw up . . .'

'There you go,' Cahir said, handing her a canteen. 'Drink that. And sit down close to me, I'll keep you warm.'

Another catfish struck a shoal of minnows in the shallows and they scattered near the surface in a silver hail. A bat or nightjar flashed past in a beam of moonlight.

'Who knows,' Milva muttered pensively, cuddling up to Cahir, 'what tomorrow will bring. Who'll cross that river and who'll perish.'

'What will be, will be. Drive those thoughts away.'

'Aren't you afraid?'

'I am. What about you?'

'I feel sick.'

There was a lengthy pause.

'Tell me, Cahir, when did you meet Ciri?'

'For the first time? Three years ago. During the fight for Cintra. I

got her out of the city. I found her, beset by fire. I rode through the fire, through the flames and smoke, holding her in my arms. And she was like a flame herself.'

'And?'

'You can't hold a flame in your hands.'

'If it isn't Ciri in Nilfgaard,' she said after a long silence, 'then who is it?'

'I don't know.'

Drakenborg, the Redanian fortress converted into an internment camp for elves and other subversive elements, had some grim traditions, which had evolved during its three years of operation. One of those traditions was dawn hangings. Another was gathering all those under death sentences in a large, common cell, from which they were led out to the gallows at daybreak.

About a dozen of the condemned were grouped together in the cell, and every morning two, three – or occasionally four – of them were hanged. The others waited their turn. A long time. Sometimes as long as a week. The condemned were called Clowns. Because the mood around the death cell was always jolly. Firstly, at meals prisoners were served very thin, sour wine nicknamed 'Dijkstra Dry' in the camp, as it was no secret that they could enjoy it at the behest of the head of the Redanian secret service. Secondly, no one was dragged to the sinister, underground Wash House to be interrogated any longer, nor were the warders allowed to maltreat the convicts.

The tradition was also observed that night. It was merry in the cell being occupied by six elves, a half-elf, a halfling, two humans and a Nilfgaardian. Dijkstra Dry was poured onto a single, shared tin plate and lapped up without the use of the arms, since that method gave the greatest chance of at least some intoxication by the gnat's piss. Only one of the elves, a Scoia'tael from Iorweth's defeated commando, recently severely tortured in the Wash House, retained his composure and dignity and was busy carving the words 'Freedom Or Death' on a post. There were several hundred similar inscriptions on the posts around the cell. The remaining condemned convicts, also in keeping with tradition, sang the Clowns' Anthem over and over again, a song composed in Drakenborg by an unknown author. Every convict learned the words in the barracks, as the song drifted to them at night from the condemned cell,

knowing that the day would come when they would join the choir.

The Clowns dance on the scaffold
Rhythmically twitching and jerking
They sing their song
Of sadness and beauty
And the Clowns have all the fun
Every corpse will recall
When the stool's kicked away
And his eyes roll up to the sun.

The bolt rattled, the key grated in the lock and the Clowns stopped singing. Warders entering at dawn could only mean one thing: in a moment the choir would be depleted by several voices. The only question was: whose?

The warders entered together. All were carrying ropes to tie the hands of the convicts being led to the scaffold. One sniffed, shoved his cudgel under his arm, unrolled a scroll of parchment and cleared his throat.

'Echel Trogelton!'

'Traighlethan,' the elf from Iorweth's commando corrected him softly. He looked at the carved slogan once more and struggled to his feet.

'Cosmo Baldenvegg!'

The halfling swallowed loudly. Nazarian knew Baldenvegg had been imprisoned on charges of acts of sabotage, carried out on the instructions of the Nilfgaardian secret service. However, Baldenvegg had not admitted his guilt and stubbornly maintained he had stolen both cavalry horses on his own initiative to make some money, and that Nilfgaard had nothing to do with it. He had clearly not been believed.

'Nazarian!'

Nazarian stood up obediently and held his hands out for the warders to bind. When the three of them were being led out, the rest of the Clowns took up the song.

The Clowns dance on the scaffold

Merrily twitching and jerking

And the wind carries their song

The chorus echoing all around . . .

The dawn glowed purple and red, heralding a beautiful, sunny day.

The Clowns' Anthem, thought Nazarian, *was misleading*. They could not dance a jaunty jig, since they were not hanged from a gibbet with a cross beam, but from ordinary posts sunk into the ground. They didn't have stools kicked from under them, but practical, low birch blocks, bearing the marks of frequent use. The song's anonymous author, who had been executed the previous year, could not have known that when he composed it. Like all the other convicts, he was only acquainted with the details shortly before his death. In Drakenborg the executions were never carried out in public. They were a just punishment and not sadistic vengeance. Those words were also attributed to Dijkstra.

The elf from Iorweth's commando shook the warders' hands off, stepped onto the block without hesitation and allowed the noose to be placed around his neck.

'Long li—'

The block was kicked out from under his feet.

The halfling required two blocks, which were placed one on top of the other. The alleged saboteur did not bother with any grandiloquent cries. His short legs kicked vigorously and then sagged against the post. His head lolled slackly on his shoulder.

When the warders seized Nazarian he suddenly changed his tune.

'I'll talk!' he croaked. 'I'll testify! I have important information for Dijkstra!'

'Bit late for that,' said Vascoigne, the deputy commander for political affairs at Drakenborg, who was assisting at the execution, doubtingly. 'The sight of the noose rouses the imagination in every second one of you!'

'I'm not making it up!' Nazarian appealed, struggling in the executioners' arms. 'I've got information!'

Less than an hour later Nazarian was sitting in a seclusion cell, delighting in the beauty of life. A messenger stood at readiness

beside his horse, scratching his groin vigorously, and Vascoigne was reading and checking the report which was about to be sent to Dijkstra.

I humbly inform Your Lordship, that the felon by the name of Nazarian, sentenced for an assault on a royal official, has testified to the following: that acting on the orders of a certain Ryens, on the day of the July new moon this year, with two of his accomplices, the elven half-breed Schirrú and Millet, he did take part in the murder of the jurists Codringher and Fenn in the city of Dorian. Millet was killed there, but the half-breed Schirrú murdered the two jurists and set their house on fire. The felon Nazarian shifts all the blame onto the said Schirrú, denies and refutes any suggestion that he committed the murders, but that is probably owing to fear of the gallows. What may interest Your Lordship, however, is that prior to the crime against the jurists being committed, the said malefactors (that is Nazarian, the half-elf Schirrú and Millet) were hunting a witcher, a certain Gerald of Rivia, who had been holding secret meetings with the jurist Codringher. To what end, the felon Nazarian does not know, because neither the aforementioned Ryens, nor the half-elf Schirrú, did divulge the secret to him. But when Ryens was given the report concerning their collusions, he ordered the jurists to be destroyed.

The felon Nazarian further testified that his accomplice Schirrú stole some documents from the jurists, which were later delivered to Ryens at an inn called the Sly Fox in Carreras. What Ryens and Schirrú conversed about there is not known to Nazarian, but the following day the criminal trio travelled to Brugge where, on the fourth day after the new moon, they committed the abduction of a maiden from a red-brick house, on the door of which a pair of brass shears were affixed. Ryens drugged her with a magic potion, and the malefactors Schirrú and Nazarian conveyed her in great haste by carriage to the stronghold of Nastrog in Verden. And now a matter which I commend to Your Lordship's close attention: the malefactors handed the abducted maid over to the stronghold's Nilfgaardian commandant, assuring him that the said individual was Cyryla of Cintra. The commandant, as testified by the felon Nazarian, was greatly content with these tidings.

I dispatch the above in strict confidence to Your Lordship by messenger. I shall likewise send an exhaustive report of the interrogation, when the scribe has made a fair copy. I humbly request instructions from Your Lordship as to what to do with the felon Nazarian. Whether to order him stung with a bullwhip, so that he remembers more, or hang him according to regulations.

Vascoigne signed the report with a flourish, affixed a seal and summoned the messenger.

Dijkstra was acquainted with the contents of the report that evening; Philippa Eilhart by noon of the following day.

By the time the horse carrying the Witcher and Dandelion emerged from the riverside alders, Milva and Cahir were extremely agitated. They had heard the battle, as the water of the Ina carried the sounds a great distance.

As she helped lift the poet down from the saddle, Milva saw Geralt stiffening at the sight of the Nilfgaardian. However, she did not say anything – and neither did the Witcher – for Dandelion was moaning desperately and swooning. They laid him down on the sand, placing a folded-up cloak beneath his head. Milva had just set about changing the blood-soaked makeshift dressing when she felt a hand on her shoulder and smelled the familiar scent of wormwood, aniseed and other herbs. Regis, as was his custom, had appeared unexpectedly, out of thin air.

‘Let me,’ he said, pulling instruments and other paraphernalia from his sizeable medical bag, ‘I’ll take it from here.’

When the barber-surgeon peeled the dressing from the wound, Dandelion groaned pitifully.

‘Relax,’ Regis said, cleansing the wound. ‘It’s nothing. Only blood. Only a little blood . . . Your blood smells nice, poet.’

At precisely that moment the Witcher did something Milva would never have expected. He walked over to the horse and drew a long Nilfgaardian sword from the scabbard fastened under the saddle flap.

‘Move away from him,’ he snarled, standing over the barber-surgeon.

‘The blood smells nice,’ Regis repeated, not paying the slightest bit of attention to the Witcher. ‘I can’t detect in it the smell of infection, which with a head wound could have disastrous consequences. The main arteries and veins are intact . . . This will sting a little.’

Dandelion groaned and took a sharp intake of breath. The sword

in the Witcher's hand vibrated and glistened with light reflected from the river.

'I'll put in a few stitches,' Regis said, continuing to ignore both the Witcher and his sword. 'Be brave, Dandelion.'

Dandelion was brave.

'Almost done here,' Regis said, setting about bandaging the victim's head. 'Don't you worry, Dandelion, you'll be right as rain. The wound's just right for a poet, Dandelion. You'll look like a war hero, with a proud bandage around your head, and the hearts of the maidens looking at you will melt like wax. Yes, a truly poetic wound. Unlike an abdominal wound for instance. Liver all cut up, kidneys and guts mangled, stomach contents and faeces pouring out, peritonitis . . . Right, that's done. Geralt, I'm all yours.'

He stood and the Witcher brought the sword up against his throat, as quick as lightning.

'Move away,' he snapped at Milva. Regis didn't twitch, even though the point of the sword was pressing gently against his neck. The archer held her breath, seeing the barber-surgeon's eyes glowing in the dark with a strange, cat-like light.

'Go on,' Regis said calmly. 'Thrust it in.'

'Geralt,' Dandelion spoke from the ground, totally alert. 'Are you utterly insane? He saved us from the gallows . . . And patched me up . . .'

'He saved us and the girl in the camp,' Milva recalled softly.

'Be quiet, all of you. You don't know what he is.'

The barber-surgeon did not move. And Milva suddenly saw what she ought to have seen long before: Regis did not cast a shadow.

'Indeed,' he said slowly. 'You don't know what I am. And it's time you did. My name is Emiel Regis Rohellec Terzieff-Godefroy. I have lived on this earth for four hundred and twenty-eight years according to your reckoning, or six hundred and forty-two years by the elven calendar. I'm the descendant of survivors, unfortunate beings imprisoned here after the cataclysm you call the Conjunction of the Spheres. I'm regarded, to put it mildly, as a monster. As a blood-sucking fiend. And now I've encountered a witcher, who earns his living eliminating creatures such as I. And that's it.'

'And that is enough,' Geralt said, lowering the sword. 'More than enough. Now scram, Emiel Regis Whatever-It-Was. Get out of here.'

‘Astonishing.’ Regis sneered. ‘You’re permitting me to leave? Me, who represents a danger to people? A witcher ought to make use of every opportunity to eliminate dangers of this kind.’

‘Get lost. Make yourself scarce and do it fast.’

‘To which far-flung corner should I make myself scarce?’ Regis asked slowly. ‘You’re a witcher, after all. You know about me. When you’ve dealt with your problem, when you’ve sorted out whatever you need to sort out, you’ll probably return to these parts. You know where I live, where I spend my time, how I earn my keep. Will you come after me?’

‘It’s possible. If there’s a bounty. I am a witcher.’

‘I wish you luck,’ Regis said, fastening his bag and spreading his cape. ‘Farewell. Ah, one more thing. How high would the price on my head have to be in order for you to bother? How high do you value me?’

‘Bloody high.’

‘You tickle my vanity. To be precise?’

‘Fuck off, Regis.’

‘I’m going. But first put a value on me. If you please.’

‘I’ve usually taken the equivalent of a good saddle horse for an ordinary vampire. But you, after all, are not ordinary.’

‘How much?’

‘I doubt,’ the Witcher said, his voice as cold as ice, ‘I doubt whether anyone could afford it.’

‘I understand and thank you,’ the vampire said, smiling. This time he bared his teeth. At the sight, Milva and Cahir stepped back and Dandelion stifled a cry of horror.

‘Farewell. Good luck.’

‘Farewell, Regis. Same to you.’

Emiel Regis Rohellec Terzieff-Godefroy shook his cape, wrapped himself up in it with a flourish and vanished. He simply vanished.

‘And now,’ Geralt said, spinning around, the unsheathed sword still in his hand, ‘it’s your turn, Nilfgaardian . . .’

‘No,’ Milva interrupted angrily. ‘I’ve had a bellyful of this. To horse, let’s get out of here! Shouts carry over the water and before

we know it someone will be hot on our trail!'

'I'm not going any further in his company.'

'Go on alone then!' she yelled, furious. 'The other way! I'm up to here with your moods, Witcher! You've driven Regis away, even though he saved your life, and that's your business. But Cahir saved me, so we're comrades! If he's an enemy to you, go back to Armeria. Suit yourself! Your mates are waiting for you there with a noose!'

'Stop shouting.'

'Well, don't just stand there. Help me get Dandelion onto the gelding.'

'You rescued our horses? Roach too?'

'*He* did,' she said, nodding towards Cahir. 'Let's be going.'

They forded the Ina. They rode along the right-hand bank, alongside the river, through shallow backwaters, through wetlands and old riverbeds, through swamps and marshes resounding with the croaking of frogs and the quacking of unseen mallards and garganeys. The day exploded with red sunlight, blindingly sparkling on the surfaces of small lakes overgrown with water lilies, and they turned towards a point where one of the Ina's numerous branches flowed into the Yaruga. Now they were riding through tenebrous, gloomy forests, where the trees grew straight from the marsh, green with duckweed.

Milva led the way, riding beside the Witcher, busy giving him an account of Cahir's story in hushed tones. Geralt was as silent as the grave, never once looking back at the Nilfgaardian, who was riding behind them, helping the poet. Dandelion moaned a little from time to time, swore and complained that his head was hurting, but held out bravely, without slowing down the march. His mood had improved with the recovery of Pegasus and the lute fastened to the saddle.

Around noon they rode out once more into sunny wetlands, beyond which the broad, calm waters of the Great Yaruga stretched out. They forced their way through dried-up riverbeds and waded through shallows and backwaters. And happened upon an island, a dry spot among the marshes and tussocks of grass between the river's numerous offshoots. The island was overgrown with bushes and willows, and there were a few taller trees growing on it, bare,

withered and white from cormorants' guano.

Milva was the first to notice a boat among the reeds, which must have been deposited there by the current. She was also the first to spot a clearing among the osiers, which was a perfect place for a rest.

They stopped, and the Witcher decided it was time to talk to the Nilfgaardian. Face to face and without witnesses.

'I spared your life on Thanedd. I felt sorry for you, whippersnapper. It's the biggest mistake I've ever made. Early this morning I let a higher vampire go, even though he is certain to have several human lives on his conscience. I ought to have killed him. But I couldn't be bothered with him, for I'm preoccupied with one thought: to get my hands on the people who harmed Ciri. I've sworn that those who've harmed her will pay for it with their blood.'

Cahir did not speak.

'Your revelations, which Milva has told me about, don't change anything. There's only one conclusion: you were unable to abduct Ciri on Thanedd, despite your best efforts. Now you're trailing me, so that I can lead you to her. So that you can get your hands on her again, because then your imperator might spare you and not send you to the scaffold.'

Cahir said nothing. Geralt felt bad. Very bad.

'She cried out in the night because of you,' he snapped. 'You grew to nightmarish proportions in her child's eyes. But actually, you were – and are – only a tool, a wretched minion of your imperator. I don't know what you did to become a nightmare for her. And the worst thing is I don't understand why in spite of everything I can't kill you. I don't understand what's holding me back.'

'Perhaps,' Cahir said softly, 'that despite all the circumstances and appearances we have something in common, you and I.'

'You reckon?'

'Like you, I want to rescue Ciri. Like you, I don't care if that surprises or astonishes anybody. Like you, I have no intention of justifying my motives to anybody.'

'Is that all?'

'No.'

'Very well, go on.'

‘Ciri,’ the Nilfgaardian began slowly, ‘is riding a horse through a dusty village. With six other young people. Among those people is a girl with close-cropped hair. Ciri is dancing on a table in a barn and is happy . . .’

‘Milva has told you about my dreams.’

‘No. She hasn’t told me anything. Do you believe me?’

‘No.’

Cahir lowered his head and ground his heel in the sand.

‘I’d forgotten,’ he said, ‘that you can’t believe me, can’t trust me. I understand that. But like you I had one more dream. A dream you haven’t told anyone about. Because I seriously doubt that you’d want to tell anyone about it.’

It could be said that Servadio was simply in luck. He had come to Loredo without intending to spy on anyone in particular. But the village wasn’t called the Bandits’ Lair for no reason. Loredo lay on the Bandits’ Trail, and brigands and thieves from all the regions of the Upper Velda called in there, met up to sell or barter loot, to stock up with provisions and tackle, and relax and enjoy themselves in the select company of fellow criminals. The village had been burnt down several times, but the few permanent and more numerous temporary residents would rebuild it each time. They lived off the bandits, and did very well, thank you. And snoopers and narks like Servadio always had the opportunity to pick up some information there, which might be worth a few florins to the prefect.

This time Servadio was counting on more than just a few. Because the Rats were riding into the village.

They were led by Giselher and flanked by Iskra and Kayleigh. Behind them rode Mistle and the new, flaxen-haired girl they called Falka. Asse and Reef brought up the rear, pulling some riderless horses, doubtlessly stolen with intent to sell. The Rats were tired and dust-covered but bore themselves briskly in the saddle, enthusiastically responding to greetings from the various comrades and acquaintances they happened to see. After dismounting and being given beer, they immediately entered noisy negotiations with traders and fences. All of them except Mistle and the new, flaxen-haired one, who wore a sword slung across her back. These two set off among the stalls, which, as usual, covered the village green. Loredo had its market days and the range of goods on offer (with

the visiting bandits in mind) was especially rich and varied then. Today was such a day.

Servadio cautiously followed the girls. In order to make any money, he had to have information, and in order to have information he had to eavesdrop.

The girls looked at colourful scarves, beads, embroidered blouses, saddlecloths and ornate browbands for their horses. They sifted through the goods, but didn't buy anything. Mistle kept a hand on the fair-haired girl's shoulder almost the whole time.

The snooper cautiously moved closer, pretending to be looking at the straps and belts on a leatherworker's stall. The girls were talking, but quietly. He couldn't hear them and was too afraid to approach them any closer. They might have noticed, grown suspicious.

Candyfloss was being sold at one of the stalls. The girls walked over, Mistle bought two sticks wrapped round with the snow-white sweetmeat and handed one to the flaxen-haired girl. She nibbled it delicately. A white strand stuck to her lip. Mistle wiped it off with a careful, tender movement. The flaxen-haired girl opened her emerald-green eyes widely, slowly licked her lips and smiled, cocking her head playfully. Servadio felt a shudder, a cold trickle running between his shoulder blades. He recalled the rumours going around about the two female bandits.

He was going to withdraw stealthily, since it was clear he wouldn't pick up any useful information. The girls weren't talking about anything important. However, not far away, where the senior members of various bandit gangs were gathered, Giselher, Kayleigh and the others were noisily quarrelling, haggling, and yelling, every now and then holding mugs under the tap of a small cask. Servadio was likely to learn more from them. One of the Rats might let something slip, if only a single word, betraying the gang's current plans, their route or their destination. Should he manage to eavesdrop and supply the information in time to the prefect's soldiers or the Nilfgaardian spies who showed a lively interest in the Rats, the reward was practically his for the taking. And were the prefect to set a successful trap thanks to his information, Servadio could count on a considerable injection of funds. *I'll buy the old lady a sheepskin coat*, he thought feverishly. *I'll finally get the kids some shoes and maybe some toys . . . And for me . . .*

The girls wandered between the stalls, licking and nibbling the candyfloss from the sticks. Servadio suddenly noticed they were

being watched. And pointed at. He knew who was doing the pointing; footpads and horse thieves from the gang of Pinta, also known as Otterpelt.

The thieves exchanged several provocatively loud comments and cackled with glee. Mistle squinted and placed her hand on the flaxen-haired girl's shoulder.

'Turtle doves!' one of the thieves snorted. He was a beanpole with a moustache like a bunch of oakum. 'Look, they'll be billing and cooing next!' Servadio saw the flaxen-haired girl tense up and noticed that Mistle's grip on her shoulder tightened. The thieves all chuckled. Mistle turned around slowly and several of them stopped laughing. But the one with the oakum moustache was either too drunk or too lacking in imagination to take the hint.

'Maybe one of you needs a man?' he said, moving closer and making obscene, suggestive movements. 'All you need is a good shag, and you'll cure that kink in a flash! Hey! I'm talking to you, you—'

He didn't manage to touch her. The flaxen-haired girl coiled up like an attacking adder, and her sword flashed and struck before the candyfloss she released had hit the ground. The moustachioed thief staggered and gobbled like a turkey, the blood from his butchered neck gushing in a long stream. The girl coiled up again, was on him in two nimble steps and struck once more, a wave of gore splashing the stalls. The corpse toppled over, the sand around it immediately turning red. Someone screamed. A second thief leant over and drew a knife from his bootleg, but at the same moment slumped, struck by Giselher with the metal handle of his knout.

'One stiff's enough!' the Rats' leader yelled. 'That one's only got himself to blame; he didn't know who he was crossing! Back off, Falka!'

Only then did the flaxen-haired girl lower her sword. Giselher took out a purse and shook it.

'According to the laws of our brotherhood, I'm paying for the man who was killed. Fairly, according to his weight, a thaler for every pound of the lousy cadaver! And that'll put an end to the feud! Am I right, comrades? Pinto, what do you say?'

Iskra, Kayleigh, Reef and Asse stood behind their leader. They had faces of stone and held their hands on their sword hilts.

'That's fair,' Otterpelt replied, surrounded by his gang. He was a short, bow-legged man in a leather tunic. 'You're right, Giselher.

The feud's over.'

Servadio swallowed, trying to melt into the crowd now gathering at the scene. He swiftly lost all interest in stalking the Rats or the flaxen-haired girl they called Falka. He decided that the reward promised by the prefect was not nearly as high as he'd thought.

Falka calmly sheathed her sword and looked around. Servadio was dumbstruck at the sudden change in her expression.

'My candyfloss,' the girl whined miserably, looking at her treat lying soiled in the sand. 'I dropped my candyfloss . . .'

Mistle hugged her.

'I'll buy you another.'

The Witcher sat on the sand among the willows, gloomy, angry and lost in thought. He was looking at the cormorants sitting on the shit-covered tree.

After their conversation, Cahir had vanished into the bushes and had not reappeared. Milva and Dandelion were looking for something to eat. They had managed to find a copper cauldron and a trug of vegetables under some nets in the boat which had been washed up by the current. They set a wicker trap they had found in the boat in a riverside channel, then waded near to the bank and began hitting the rushes with sticks in order to drive fish into it. The poet was now feeling better and was strutting around as proud as a peacock with his heroically bandaged head.

Geralt continued to brood and sulk.

Milva and Dandelion hauled the fish pot out and began to swear, for instead of the catfish and carp they had expected, all they saw was silvery fry wriggling around inside.

The Witcher stood up.

'Come over here, you two! Leave that trap and come here. I've got something to tell you.

'You're returning home,' he began bluntly when they came over, wet and stinking of fish. 'Head north, towards Mahakam. I'm going on by myself.'

'What?'

'Now we must go our separate ways. The party's over, Dandelion. You're going home to write poems. Milva will lead you through the

forests . . . What's the matter?'

'Nothing's the matter,' Milva said, tossing her hair from her shoulder with a sudden movement. 'Nothing. Speak, Witcher. I'd like to hear what you're going to say.'

'I don't have anything else to say. I'll go south, crossing to the Yaruga's far bank. Through Nilfgaardian territory. It'll be a dangerous and long journey. And there's no time to waste. Which is why I'm going by myself.'

'Having got rid of the inconvenient baggage.' Dandelion nodded. 'The ball and chain slowing down your march and causing so many problems. In other words: me.'

'And me,' Milva added, glancing to one side.

'Listen,' Geralt said, now much more calmly. 'This is my own private matter. None of this concerns you. I don't want you to risk your necks for something that only concerns me.'

'It only concerns you,' Dandelion repeated slowly. 'You don't need anybody. Company impedes you and slows down your journey. You don't expect help from anybody and you have no intention of relying on anybody. Furthermore, you love solitude. Have I forgotten anything?'

'Naturally,' Geralt replied angrily. 'You've forgotten to swap your empty head for one with a brain. Had that arrow passed an inch to the right, you idiot, the rooks would be pecking out your eyes now. You're a poet and you've got an imagination; so try imagining a scene like that. I repeat: you're returning north, and I'm heading in the opposite direction. By myself.'

'Go on then,' Milva said, and sprang to her feet. 'I'm not going to plead with you. Go to hell, Witcher. Come on, Dandelion, let's cook something. I'm starving and listening to him makes me sick.'

Geralt turned his head away. He watched the green-eyed cormorants hanging their wings out to dry on the limbs of the guano-covered tree. He smelled the intense scent of herbs and swore furiously.

'You're trying my patience, Regis.'

The vampire, who had suddenly appeared out of thin air, was unconcerned, and sat down alongside the furious witcher.

'I have to change the poet's dressing,' he said calmly.

'Then go to him. But stay well away from me.'

Regis heaved a sigh, showing no intention of moving away.

‘I was listening to your conversation with Dandelion and the archer,’ he said, not without a hint of mockery in his voice. ‘I have to admit you’ve got a real talent for winning people over. Though the entire world seems to be out to get you, you disregard the comrades and allies wanting to help you.’

‘The world turned upside down. A vampire’s teaching me how to deal with humans. What do you know about humans, Regis? The only thing you know is the taste of their blood. Why am I still talking to you?’

‘The world turned upside down,’ the vampire admitted, deadpan. ‘You are talking to me indeed. Perhaps you’d also like to listen to some advice?’

‘No. No, I wouldn’t. I don’t need to.’

‘True, I’d forgotten. Advice is superfluous to you, allies are superfluous, you’ll get by without any travelling companions. The goal of your expedition is, after all, personal and private. More than that, the nature of the goal demands that you accomplish it alone, in person. The risks, dangers, hardships and constant struggle with doubt must only burden you. For, after all, they are components of the penance, the expiation of guilt you want to earn. A baptism of fire, I’d say. You’ll pass through fire, which burns, but also purges. And you’ll do it alone. For were someone to support you in this, help you, take on even a scrap of that baptism of fire, that pain, that penance, they would, by the same token, impoverish you. They would deprive you of part of the expiation you desire, which would be owed to them for their involvement. After all, it should be your exclusive expiation. Only *you* have a debt to pay off, and you don’t want to run up debts with other creditors at the same time. Is my logic correct?’

‘Surprisingly so, considering you’re sober. Your presence annoys me, vampire. Leave me alone with my expiation, please. And with my debt.’

‘As you wish,’ Regis said, arising. ‘Sit and think. But I will give you some advice anyway. A sense of guilt, as well as the need for expiation, for a cleansing baptism of fire, aren’t things you can claim an exclusive right to. Life differs from banking because it has debts which are paid off by running up debts with others.’

‘Go away, please.’

‘As you wish.’

The vampire walked off and joined Dandelion and Milva. While Regis changed the dressing the trio debated what to eat. Milva shook the fry from the fish pot and examined the catch critically.

'There's nothing for it,' she said. 'We'll have to skewer the little tiddlers on twigs and grill them over the embers.'

'No,' Dandelion demurred, shaking his freshly bandaged head, 'that isn't a good idea. There are too few of them, and they won't fill us up. I suggest we make soup.'

'Fish soup?'

'By all means. We have enough of these tiddlers and we have salt,' Dandelion said, counting out the list of ingredients on his fingers. 'We've acquired onions, carrots, parsley root and celery. And a cauldron. If we put it all together we end up with soup.'

'Some seasoning would come in handy.'

'Oh.' Regis smiled, reaching into his bag. 'No problem there. Basil, pimento, pepper, bay leaves, sage . . .'

'Enough, enough.' Dandelion raised his hand, stopping him. 'That'll do. We don't need mandrake in the soup. Right, let's get to work. Clean the fish, Milva.'

'Clean them yourself! Ha! Just because you've got a woman in the company, it doesn't mean she'll slave for you in the kitchen! I'll bring the water and start the fire. And you can get yourself covered in guts with those weatherfish.'

'They aren't weatherfish,' Regis said. 'They're chub, roach, ruff and silver bream.'

'Ah,' Dandelion said, unable to keep quiet. 'I see you know your fish.'

'I know lots of things,' Regis replied neutrally, without boasting. 'I've picked up this and that along the way.'

'If you're such a scholar,' Milva said, blowing on the fire again and getting to her feet, 'use your brain to get these tiddlers gutted. I'm getting the water.'

'Can you manage a full cauldron? Geralt, help her.'

'Course I can.' Milva snorted. 'And I don't need his help. He has his own – personal – issues. No one's to disturb him!'

Geralt turned his head away, pretending not to hear. Dandelion and the vampire skilfully prepared the small fry.

‘This soup’s going to be thin,’ Dandelion said, hanging the cauldron over the fire. ‘We could do with a bigger fish.’

‘Will this do?’ Cahir said, suddenly emerging from the willows carrying a three-pound pike by the gills. It was still flexing its tail and opening and closing its mouth.

‘Oh! What a beauty! Where did you come by that, Nilfgaardian?’

‘I’m not a Nilfgaardian. I come from Vicovaro and my name is Cahir—’

‘All right, all right, we know all that. Now where did you get the pike?’

‘I knocked up a tip-up using a frog as bait. I cast it into a hollow under the bank. The pike took it right away.’

‘Experts to a man,’ Dandelion said, shaking his bandaged head. ‘Pity I didn’t suggest steak, you would have conjured up a cow. But let’s make a start on what we’ve got. Regis, chuck all the fry into the cauldron, heads and tails and all. And the pike needs to be nicely dressed. Know how to, Nilf— Cahir?’

‘Yes.’

‘Get to work then. Geralt, dammit, do you plan to sit there sulking for much longer? Peel the vegetables!’

The Witcher got up obediently and joined them, but stayed ostentatiously well away from Cahir. Before he had time to complain that there wasn’t a knife, the Nilfgaardian – or possibly the Vicovarian – gave him his, taking another from his bootleg. Geralt took it, grunting his thanks.

The teamwork was carried out efficiently. The cauldron full of fingerlings and vegetables was soon bubbling and frothing. The vampire dextrously skimmed off the froth using a spoon Milva had whittled. Once Cahir had dressed and divided up the pike, Dandelion threw the predator’s tail, fins, spine and toothed head into the cauldron and stirred.

‘Mmm, it smells delicious. Once it’s all boiled down, we’ll strain off the waste.’

‘What, through our footwraps?’ Milva said with a grimace, as she whittled another spoon. ‘How can we strain it without a sieve?’

‘But my dear Milva,’ smiled Regis. ‘Don’t say that! We can easily replace what we don’t have with what we do. It’s purely a matter of invention and positive thinking.’

‘Go to hell with your smart-arsed chatter, vampire.’

‘We’ll sieve it through my hauberk,’ Cahir said. ‘Not a problem, it can be rinsed out afterwards.’

‘It should be rinsed out before, too,’ Milva declared, ‘or I won’t eat it.’

The sieving was carried out efficiently.

‘Now throw the pike into the broth, Cahir,’ Dandelion instructed. ‘Smells delicious. Don’t add any more wood, it just needs to simmer. Geralt, where are you shoving that spoon! You don’t stir it now!’

‘Don’t yell. I didn’t know.’

‘Ignorance’ – Regis smiled – ‘is no justification for ill-conceived actions. When one doesn’t know or has doubts it’s best to seek advice . . .’

‘Shut up, vampire!’ Geralt said, stood up and turned his back on them. Dandelion snorted.

‘He’s taken offence, look at him.’

‘That’s him all over,’ Milva said, pouting. ‘He’s all talk. If he doesn’t know what to do, he just talks and gets offended. Haven’t you lot caught on yet?’

‘A long time ago,’ Cahir said softly.

‘Add pepper,’ Dandelion said, licking the spoon and smacking his lips. ‘And some more salt. Ah, now it’s just right. Take the cauldron off the heat. By thunder, it’s hot! I don’t have any gloves . . .’

‘I have,’ Cahir said.

‘And I,’ Regis said, seizing the cauldron from the other side, ‘don’t need any.’

‘Right,’ said the poet, wiping the spoon on his trousers. ‘Well, company, be seated. Enjoy! Geralt, are you waiting for a special invitation? For a herald and a fanfare?’

They sat crowded around the cauldron on the sand and for a long time all that could be heard was dignified slurping, interrupted by blowing on spoons. After half of the broth had been eaten, the cautious fishing out of pieces of pike began, until finally their spoons were scraping against the bottom of the cauldron.

‘Oh, I’m stuffed,’ Milva groaned. ‘It wasn't a bad idea with that soup, Dandelion.’

‘Indeed,’ Regis agreed. ‘What do you say, Geralt?’

‘I say “thank you”,’ the Witcher said, getting up with difficulty and rubbing his knee, which had begun to torment him again. ‘Will that do? Or do you want a fanfare?’

‘He’s always like that,’ the poet said, waving a hand. ‘Take no notice of him. You’re lucky, anyway. I was around when he was fighting with that Yennefer of his; the wan beauty with ebony hair.’

‘Be discreet,’ the vampire admonished Dandelion, ‘and don’t forget he has problems.’

‘Problems,’ said Cahir, stifling a burp, ‘are there to be solved.’

‘Of course they are,’ Dandelion replied. ‘But how?’

Milva snorted, making herself more comfortable on the hot sand.

‘The vampire is a scholar. He’s sure to know.’

‘It’s not about knowledge, but about the skilful examination of the circumstances,’ Regis said calmly. ‘And when the circumstances are examined, we come to the conclusion that we are facing an insoluble problem. The entire undertaking has no chance of success. The likelihood of finding Ciri amounts to zero.’

‘But you can’t say that,’ Milva jibed. ‘We should think positively and use investigation. It’s like it was with that sieve. If we don’t have something, we find a replacement. That’s how I see it.’

‘Until recently,’ the vampire continued, ‘we thought Ciri was in Nilfgaard. Reaching the destination and rescuing her – or abducting her – seemed beyond our powers. Now, after hearing Cahir’s revelations, we have no idea where Ciri is. It’s hard to talk about invention when we have no idea where we should be directing it.’

‘What are we to do, then?’ Milva said, bridling. ‘The Witcher insists on going south . . .’

‘For him’ – Regis laughed – ‘the points of the compass have no great importance. It’s all the same to him which one he chooses, as long as he’s not idle. That is truly a witcher’s principium. The world is full of evil, so it’s sufficient to stride ahead, and destroy the Evil encountered on the way, in that way rendering a service to Good. The rest takes care of itself. To put it another way: being in motion is everything, the goal is nothing.’

‘Baloney,’ Milva commented. ‘I mean, Ciri’s his goal. How can you say she’s nothing?’

‘I was joking,’ the vampire admitted, winking at Geralt’s back, which was still turned away from them. ‘And not very tactfully. I

apologise. You're right, dear Milva. Ciri is our goal. And since we don't know where she is, it would make sense to find that out and direct our activities accordingly. The case of the Child of Destiny, I observe, is simply pulsating with magic, fate and other supernatural elements. And I know somebody who is extremely knowledgeable about such matters and will certainly help us.'

'Ah,' Dandelion said, delighted. 'Who's that? Where are they? Far from here?'

'Closer than the capital of Nilfgaard. In actual fact, really quite close. In Angren. On this bank of the Yaruga. I'm talking about the Druids' Circle, which has its seat in the forests of Caed Dhu.'

'Let's go without delay!'

'Don't any of you,' Geralt said, annoyed, 'think you should ask me my opinion?'

'You?' Dandelion said, turning around. 'But you haven't got a clue what you're doing. You even owe the soup you gobbled down to us. Were it not for us, you'd be hungry. We would be too, had we waited for you to act. That cauldron of soup was the result of cooperation. Of teamwork. The joint efforts of a fellowship united by a common goal. Get it, friend?'

'How could he get it?' Milva said, grimacing. 'He's just "me, me, by myself, all alone". A lone wolf! But you can see he's no hunter, that he's a stranger to the forest. Wolves don't hunt alone! Never! A lone wolf, ha, what twaddle, foolish townie nonsense. But he doesn't understand that!'

'Oh, he does, he does,' Regis cut in, smiling through pursed lips, as was his custom.

'He only looks stupid,' Dandelion confirmed. 'But I do keep hoping he'll finally decide to strain his grey matter. Perhaps he'll come to some useful conclusions. Perhaps he'll realise the only activity that's worth doing alone is wanking.'

Cahir Mawr Dyffryn aep Ceallach remained tactfully silent.

'The hell with all of you,' the Witcher finally said, sticking his spoon into his bootleg. 'The hell with all of you, you cooperative fellowship of idiots, united by a common goal which none of you understand. And the hell with me too.'

This time the others, following Cahir's example, also remained tactfully silent. Dandelion, Maria Barring, also known as Milva, and Emiel Regis Rohellec Terzieff-Godefroy.

‘What a company I ended up with,’ Geralt continued, shaking his head. ‘Brothers in arms! A team of heroes! What have I done to deserve it? A poetaster with a lute. A wild and lippy half-dryad, half-woman. A vampire, who’s about to notch up his fifth century. And a bloody Nilfgaardian who insists he isn’t a Nilfgaardian.’

‘And leading the party is the Witcher, who suffers from pangs of conscience, impotence and the inability to take decisions,’ Regis finished calmly. ‘I suggest we travel incognito, to avoid arousing suspicion.’

‘Or raising a laugh,’ Milva added.

The queen replied: 'Ask not me for mercy, but those whom you wronged with your magic. You had the courage to commit those deeds, now have courage when your pursuers and justice are close at hand. It is not in my power to pardon your sins.' Then the witch hissed like a cat and her sinister eyes flashed. 'My end is nigh,' she shrieked, 'but yours is too, O Queen. You shall remember Lara Dorren and her curse in the hour of your dreadful death. And know this: my curse will hound your descendants unto the tenth generation.' Seeing, however, that a doughty heart was beating in the queen's breast, the evil elven witch ceased to malign her, or try to frighten her with the curse, but began instead to whine for help and mercy like a bitch dog . . .

The Tale of Lara Dorren, as told by the humans

. . . but her begging softened not the stony hearts of the Dh'oine, the merciless, cruel humans. So when Lara, now not begging for mercy for herself, but for her unborn child, caught hold of the carriage door, on the order of the queen the thuggish executioner struck with a sword and hacked off her fingers. And when a severe frost descended in the night, Lara breathed her last on the forested hilltop, giving birth to a tiny daughter, whom she protected with the remains of the warmth still flickering in her. And though she was surrounded by the blizzard, the night and the winter, spring suddenly bloomed on the hilltop and feainnewedd flowers blossomed. Even today do those flowers bloom in only two places: in Dol Blathanna and on the hilltop where Lara Dorren aep Shiadhal perished.

The Tale of Lara Dorren, as told by the elves

Chapter Six

‘I asked you,’ Ciri, who was lying on her back, snapped angrily. ‘I asked you not to touch me.’

Mistle withdrew her hand and the blade of grass she had been tickling Ciri’s neck with, stretched out beside her and gazed up at the sky, placing both hands under her shaven neck.

‘You’ve been acting strangely of late, Young Falcon.’

‘I just want you to stop touching me!’

‘It’s just for fun.’

‘I know,’ Ciri said through pursed lips. ‘Just for fun. It’s always been “just for fun”. But I’ve stopped enjoying it, do you see? For me it’s no fun any more!’

Mistle was silent for a long while, lying on her back and staring at the blue sky riven with ragged streaks of cloud. A hawk circled high above the trees.

‘Your dreams,’ she finally said. ‘It’s because of your dreams, isn’t it? You wake almost every night screaming. What you once lived through now returns in your dreams. I’m no stranger to such things myself.’

Ciri did not answer.

‘You’ve never told me anything about yourself,’ Mistle said, breaking the silence once again. ‘About what you’ve been through. Or where you’re from. Or if you’ve left anyone behind . . .’

Ciri brought a hand up swiftly to her neck, but this time it was only a ladybird.

‘There were a few people,’ she said quietly, not looking at her companion. ‘I mean, I thought there were . . . People who would find me even here, at the end of the world, if they only wanted to . . . Or if they were still alive. Oh, what do you want of me, Mistle? Do you want me to unbosom myself?’

‘You don’t have to.’

‘Good. Because, surely, it’d just be for fun. Like everything else we share.’

‘I don’t understand,’ Mistle said, turning her head away, ‘why you don’t leave, if being with me is so awful.’

‘I don’t want to be alone.’

‘Is that all?’

‘That is a lot.’

Mistle bit her lip. But before she had time to say anything, there was a whistle. They both sprang to their feet, brushing off pine needles, and ran to their horses.

‘The fun’s about to begin,’ said Mistle, leaping into the saddle and drawing her sword. ‘The fun you’ve come to enjoy more than anything, Falka. Don’t think I haven't noticed.’

Ciri angrily kicked her horse with her heels. They hurtled along the side of a ravine at breakneck speed, already hearing the wild whooping of the remaining Rats rushing out of a thicket on the other side of the highway. The pincers of the ambush were closing.

The private audience was over. Vattier de Rideaux, Viscount of Eiddon, head of Imperator Emhyr var Emreis’s military intelligence, left the library, bowing to the Queen of the Valley of Flowers even more politely than courtly protocol demanded. At the same time his bow was very cautious, and his movements deliberate and guarded; the imperial spy’s eyes never left the two ocelots stretched out at the feet of the elven queen. The golden-eyed cats looked languorous and drowsy, but Vattier knew they weren’t cuddly mascots but vigilant guards, ever ready to reduce anyone to a bloody pulp if they tried to come closer to the queen than protocol decreed.

Francesca Findabair, also called Enid an Gleanna, the Daisy of the Valleys, waited until the door was closed behind Vattier, and stroked the ocelots.

‘Very well, Ida,’ she said.

Ida Emean aep Sivney, elven sorceress, one of the free Aen Seidhe from the Blue Mountains, during the audience shrouded by an invisibility spell, materialised in a corner of the library, and smoothed down her dress and vermilion-red hair. The ocelots only reacted with a slight widening of their eyes. Like all cats, they could see what was invisible and could not be deceived by a simple spell.

‘This parade of spies is beginning to annoy me,’ Francesca said with a sneer, finding a more comfortable position on the ebony chair. ‘Henselt of Kaedwen sent me a “consul” not long ago. Dijkstra dispatched a “trade mission” to Dol Blathanna. And now the arch-spy Vattier de Rideaux himself! Oh, and some time ago Stephan Skellen, the Grand Imperial Nobody, was creeping around too. But I

didn't give him an audience. I'm the queen and Skellen's a nobody. He may hold a position, but he's a nobody nonetheless.'

'Stephan Skellen,' Ida Emean said slowly, 'visited us too, and was more fortunate. He spoke with Filavandrel and Vanadain.'

'And like Vattier with me, did he enquire about Vilgefortz, Yennefer, Rience and Cahir Mawr Dyffryn aep Ceallach?'

'Among other things. It may surprise you, but he was more interested in the original version of Ithlinne Aegli aep Aevenien's prophecy, particularly the parts about Aen Hen Ichaer, the Elder Blood. He was also curious about Tor Lara, the Tower of Gulls, and the legendary portal which once connected the Tower of Gulls to Tor Zireael, the Tower of Swallows. How typical of humans, Enid. To expect that, at a single nod, we shall unravel enigmas and mysteries for them which we have been endeavouring to solve for centuries.'

Francesca raised her hand and examined the rings adorning it.

'I wonder,' she said, 'whether Philippa knows about the strange preoccupation of Skellen and Vattier. And of Emhyr var Emreis, whom they both serve.'

'It would be risky to assume she doesn't,' Ida Emean replied, looking keenly at the queen, 'and to withhold what we know from Philippa and the entire lodge at the council in Montecalvo. It wouldn't show us in a very favourable light . . . And we want the lodge to come into being. We want to be trusted – we, elven sorceresses – and not to be suspected of playing a double game.'

'But we *are* playing a double game, Ida. And playing with fire: with the White Flame of Nilfgaard . . .'

'Fire burns,' Ida Emean said, raising her heavily made-up eyes at the queen, 'but it also purifies. It must be passed through. Risks have to be taken, Enid. The lodge ought to exist, ought to begin functioning. At full strength. Twelve sorceresses, including the one mentioned in the prophecy. Even if it is a game, let us rely on trust.'

'And if it's an entrapment?'

'You know the individuals involved better than I do.'

Enid an Gleanna thought for a while.

'Sheala de Tancarville,' she finally said, 'is a secretive recluse, without any loyalties. Triss Merigold and Keira Metz were loyal but they are now both emigrants, since King Foltest drove all the mages from Temeria. Margarita Laux-Antille cares for her school and

nothing besides. Of course, at this moment the last three are heavily under Philippa's sway, and Philippa is an enigma. Sabrina Glevissig will not give up the political influence she has in Kaedwen, but will not betray the lodge either. She is too attracted by the power it can give her.'

'And what about Assire var Anahid? And the other Nilfgaardian, whom we shall meet in Montecalvo?'

'I know little about them.' Francesca smiled faintly. 'But once I see them I shall know more. As soon as I see how they are dressed.'

Ida Emean lowered her painted eyelids, but refrained from asking a question.

'This leaves us with the jade statuette,' she said a moment later. 'The still dubious and enigmatic jade figurine mentioned in the Ithlinnespeath, Ithlinne's Prophecy. I now deem it's time to allow her to express herself. And to tell her what she may expect. Shall I help you with the decompression?'

'No, I shall do it myself. You are familiar with reactions to unpacking. The fewer the witnesses, the less painful a blow it will be to her pride.'

Francesca Findabair checked one more time that the entire courtyard was thoroughly isolated from the rest of the palace by a protective field, which hid it from view and muffled its sounds. She lit three black candles planted in candlesticks equipped with parabolic mirrors. The candlesticks stood at points marked out by a circular mosaic pavement depicting the eight signs of Vicca, the elven zodiac, on the symbols indicating Belleteyn, Lammas and Yule. Inside the zodiac circle, the mosaic formed another, smaller circle, dotted with magic symbols and enclosing a pentagram. Francesca placed small, iron tripods on three symbols of the smaller circle, and then on each of them she carefully mounted three crystals. The cut of the crystals' bases corresponded to the form of the tripods' tops, which meant their placement could be nothing other than precise, but even so Francesca checked everything several times. She didn't want to leave anything to chance.

A fountain was trickling nearby, the water gushing from a marble jug held by a marble naiad. It fell into the pool in four streams and made the water lilies, between which goldfish darted, quiver.

Francesca opened a jewellery case, removed a small, waxy jade figurine from it, and placed it precisely at the centre of the

pentagram. She withdrew, glanced once again at the grimoire lying on a table, took a deep breath, raised her hands and chanted a spell.

The candles burst into bright flame, the crystals' facets lit up and sparkled with streaks of light. Those streaks of light shot towards the figurine, which immediately changed colour from green to gold, and a moment later became transparent. The air shimmered with magical energy, which struck against the protective field. Sparks flew from one of the candles, shadows played on the floor, the mosaic came alive and the shapes in it transformed. Francesca did not lower her hands or interrupt the incantation.

The statuette grew at lightning speed, pulsating and throbbing, its structure and shape changing like a cloud of smoke crawling across the floor. The light shining from the crystals pierced the air; movement and congealing matter appeared in the streams of light. A moment later a human body suddenly manifested in the centre of the magical circles. It was the figure of a black-haired woman, lying inertly on the floor.

The candles bloomed with ribbons of smoke and the crystals went out. Francesca lowered her arms, relaxed her fingers and wiped the sweat from her forehead.

The black-haired woman on the floor curled up in a ball and began to scream.

'What is your name?' Francesca asked in a breathy voice.

The woman convulsed and howled, both hands clutching her belly.

'What is your name?'

'Ye . . . Yennef . . . Yennefeerrr!!! Aaaaaagh . . .'

The elf sighed with relief. The woman continued to squirm and howl, banging her fists against the floor and retching. Francesca waited patiently. And calmly. The woman – a moment earlier a jade figurine – was suffering, that was obvious. And normal. But her mind was undamaged.

'Well, Yennefer,' she said after a long pause, interrupting the groans. 'That ought to do, oughtn't it?'

Yennefer raised herself onto her hands and knees with obvious effort, wiped her nose with her wrist and looked around vacantly. Her gaze flitted over Francesca, as though the she-elf wasn't even in the courtyard, then came to rest – and brightened – at the sight of the fountain gushing water. Having crawled up to it with immense

difficulty, Yennefer hauled herself over the lip and flopped into the pool with a splash. She choked, began to splutter, cough and spit, until finally, parting the water lilies, she waded to the marble naiad and sat down, leaning back against the pedestal of the statue. The water came up to her breasts.

'Francesca . . .' she mumbled, touching the obsidian star hanging from her neck and looking at the she-elf with a slightly clearer gaze. 'It's you . . .'

'It's me. What do you recall?'

'You packed me up . . . Hell's teeth, you packed me up, didn't you!'

'I packed you up and then unpacked you. What do you recall?'

'Garstang . . . Elves. Ciri. You. And the fifty tons suddenly landing on my head . . . Now I know what it was. Artefact compression . . .'

'Your memory's working. Good.'

Yennefer lowered her head and looked between her thighs, over which goldfish were darting.

'The water in the pool will need changing, Enid,' she mumbled. 'I just peed in it.'

'No matter.' Francesca smiled. 'But just see if there's any blood in the water. Compression has been known to damage the kidneys.'

'Only the kidneys?' Yennefer said, taking a cautious breath. 'I don't think there's a single undamaged organ in my body . . . At least that's how I feel. Hell's teeth, Enid, I really don't know what I did to deserve this . . .'

'Get out of the pool.'

'No. I like it here.'

'I know. It's called dehydration.'

'Degradation. Depredation! Why did you do it to me?'

'Get out, Yennefer.'

The sorceress stood up with difficulty, holding onto the marble naiad with both hands. She shook off the water lilies, with a sharp tug tore away her dripping dress and stood naked before the fountain, under the gushing streams. After rinsing herself down and drinking deeply, she stepped out of the pool, sat down on the edge, wrung out her hair and looked around.

'Where am I?'

‘In Dol Blathanna.’

Yennefer wiped her nose.

‘Do the hostilities on Thanedd continue?’

‘No. They ended a month and a half ago.’

‘I must have wronged you greatly,’ Yennefer said a moment later. ‘I must really have got under your skin, Enid. But you can consider us even. You’ve exacted a full revenge, if a little too sadistic. Couldn’t you have just cut my throat?’

‘Don’t talk nonsense,’ the elf said, making a face. ‘I packed you up and got you out of Garstang to save your life. We’ll come back to that, but a little later. Here, have this towel. And this sheet. You’ll get a new dress after you’ve bathed – in a suitable place, in a tub full of warm water. You’ve done enough damage to my goldfish.’

Ida Emean and Francesca were drinking wine. Yennefer was drinking sugar water and carrot juice. In huge quantities.

‘To sum up,’ she said, after hearing Francesca’s account. ‘Nilfgaard has defeated Lyria, in an alliance with Kaedwen has dismantled Aedirn, burnt down Vengerberg, subjugated Verden, and is crushing Brugge and Sodden at this very moment. Vilgefortz has disappeared without a trace. Tissaia de Vries has committed suicide, and you’ve become queen of the Valley of Flowers. Imperator Emhyr has rewarded you with a crown and sceptre in exchange for my Ciri, whom he was hunting for so long, and whom he now has in his power and is using as he sees fit. You packed me up and have kept me in a box as a jade statuette for a month and a half. And no doubt expect me to thank you for it.’

‘It would be polite,’ Francesca Findabair replied coldly. ‘On Thanedd there was a certain Rience, who had made it a point of honour to submit you to a slow and cruel death, and Vilgefortz offered to expedite it. Rience pursued you all over Garstang. But he didn’t find you, because you were already a jade figurine safe in my cleavage.’

‘And I was that figurine for forty-seven days.’

‘Yes. While I, if asked, could always reply that Yennefer of Vengerberg was not in Dol Blathanna. Because the question referred to Yennefer, not a statuette.’

‘What changed to induce you finally to unpack me?’

‘A great deal changed. I shall explain forthwith.’

‘First explain something else to me: the Witcher was also on Thanedd. Geralt. Remember, I introduced him to you in Aretuza. How is he?’

‘Please remain calm. He’s alive.’

‘I *am* calm. Tell me, Enid.’

‘In the space of an hour,’ Francesca said, ‘your Witcher did more than some manage in their entire lives. Put succinctly: he broke Dijkstra’s leg, beheaded Artaud Terranova and slew ten Scoia’tael. Oh, I almost forgot: he also aroused Keira Metz’s unhealthy passions.’

‘Dreadful,’ Yennefer said with a grimace. ‘But Keira will have got over it by now, I imagine. I hope she doesn’t hold a grudge against him. The fact that he didn’t fuck her after inflaming her desire certainly resulted from lack of time, not lack of respect. Please put her mind at ease for me.’

‘You’ll have the chance to do that yourself,’ the Daisy of the Valleys said coldly. ‘And quite soon. Let’s go back, though, to the issues about which you are lamely feigning indifference. Your Witcher was so fervid in his defence of Ciri that he acted very rashly. He attacked Vilgefortz. And Vilgefortz gave him a sound thrashing. The fact that he didn’t kill him certainly resulted from lack of time, not lack of effort. Well? Are you still going to pretend you don’t care?’

‘No,’ Yennefer said, her grimace no longer expressing scorn. ‘No, Enid. I do care. Some people will soon learn how much. You can take my word for it.’

Francesca was no more concerned by Yennefer’s threat than she had been by her mockery.

‘Triss Merigold teleported what was left of the Witcher to Brokilon,’ she stated. ‘As far as I know, the dryads are still healing him. He is said to be recovering now, but it would be better if he didn’t venture out of the forest. He’s being tracked by Dijkstra’s spies and the military intelligence services of all the kings. So are you, for that matter.’

‘What did I do to deserve such attention? I didn’t break anything of Dijkstra’s . . . Oh, keep quiet and let me guess. I vanished without a trace from Thanedd. No one suspects I ended up in your pocket, shrunken down and packed up. Everybody is convinced I escaped to

Nilfgaard with my fellow conspirators. Everybody apart from the real conspirators, naturally, but they won't be correcting that error. For a war is raging, and disinformation is a weapon whose blade must always be kept sharp. And now, forty-seven days later, comes your moment to use that weapon. My house in Vengerberg is burnt to the ground, and I'm being hunted. There's nothing left to do but join a Scoia'tael commando. Or join the fight for the elves' freedom in some other way.'

Yennefer sipped her carrot juice, and stared into the eyes of Ida Emean aep Sivney, who still remained peaceful and silent.

'Well, Mistress Ida, free lady of the Aen Seidhe from the Blue Mountains, have I correctly guessed what's in store for me? Why are you so tight-lipped?'

'Because I, Mistress Yennefer,' the red-headed she-elf answered, 'say nothing when I have nothing sensible to say. It's always better than to make unfounded speculations and disguise one's anxiety with idle talk. Enid, get to the point. Tell Mistress Yennefer what this is all about.'

'You have my undivided attention,' Yennefer said, touching the obsidian star hanging from its velvet ribbon. 'Speak, Francesca.'

The Daisy of the Valleys rested her chin on her interlocked hands.

'Today,' she announced, 'is the second night of the full moon. In a short while, we shall be teleporting to Montecalvo Castle, the seat of Philippa Eilhart. We shall be taking part in a session of an organisation that ought to interest you. After all, you were always of the opinion that magic represents the utmost value, superior to all disputes, conflicts, political choices, personal interests, grudges, sentiments and animosities. It will no doubt gladden you to hear that not long ago the foundations of an institution were laid down. Something like a secret lodge, brought into being exclusively to defend the interests of magic, meant to ensure that magic occupies the place it deserves in the hierarchy of the world. Exercising my privilege to recommend new members to this lodge, I took the liberty of proposing two candidates: Ida Emean aep Sivney and you.'

'What an unexpected honour,' Yennefer sneered. 'From magical oblivion straight to a secret, elite and omnipotent lodge, which stands above personal grudges and resentments. But am I suitable? Will I find sufficient strength of character to rid myself of my grudges against the people who took Ciri from me, cruelly beat a man who is dear to me, and packed—'

‘I am certain,’ the she-elf interrupted, ‘that you will find sufficient strength of character, Yennefer. I know you and know you are not lacking in strength of that kind. Neither are you lacking in ambition, which ought to dispel your doubts about the honour and the advancement which has come your way. If you want, though, I’ll tell you frankly: I’m recommending you to the lodge, because I consider you a person who deserves it and who may render the cause a significant service.’

‘Thank you,’ Yennefer responded, the scornful smirk in no hurry to disappear from her lips. ‘Thank you, Enid. I truly feel the ambition, hubris and self-adoration filling me up. I’m ready to explode at any moment. And that’s before I even begin wondering why you aren’t recommending one more elf from Dol Blathanna or a she-elf from the Blue Mountains instead of me.’

‘You will find out why in Montecalvo,’ Francesca replied coldly.

‘I’d rather find out now.’

‘Tell her,’ Ida Emean muttered.

‘It’s because of Ciri,’ Francesca said after a moment’s thought, raising her inscrutable eyes towards Yennefer. ‘The lodge is interested in her, and no one knows the girl as well as you. You’ll learn the rest when we get there.’

‘Agreed,’ Yennefer said, vigorously scratching a shoulder blade. Her skin, dried out by the compression, was still itching intolerably. ‘Now tell me the names of the other members. Apart from you and Philippa.’

‘Margarita Laux-Antille, Triss Merigold and Keira Metz. Sheala de Tancarville of Kovir. Sabrina Glevissig. And two sorceresses from Nilfgaard.’

‘An international women’s republic?’

‘Let’s say.’

‘They must still think I’m an accomplice of Vilgefortz. Will they accept me?’

‘They accepted me. The rest I leave to you. You will be asked to give an account of your relationship with Ciri. From the very beginning, which – thanks to your witcher – was fifteen years ago in Cintra, and right up until the events of a month and a half ago. Frankness and honesty will be absolutely paramount. And will confirm your loyalty to the lodge.’

‘Who said there’s anything to confirm? Isn’t it too early to talk of

loyalty? I'm not even familiar with the statute or programme of this new institution . . .'

'Yennefer,' the she-elf interjected, frowning slightly. 'I'm recommending you to the lodge. But I have no intention of forcing you to do anything. Particularly not to be loyal. You have a choice.'

'I think I know what it is.'

'And you would be right. But it is still a free choice. Speaking for myself, I still heartily encourage you to choose the lodge. Trust me; by doing so you'll be helping Ciri much more effectively than by plunging headlong into a whirl of events, which, I'm guessing, you would love to do. Ciri's life is in danger. Only our combined efforts can save her. When you have heard what is said in Montecalvo, you'll realise I was speaking the truth . . . Yennefer, I don't like the gleam in your eyes. Give me your word you will not try to escape.'

'No.' Yennefer shook her head, covering the star on the velvet ribbon with her hand. 'No, I will not, Francesca.'

'I must warn you, my dear. All Montecalvo's stationary portals have a distorting blockade. Anyone who tries to enter or leave without Philippa's permission will end up in a dungeon lined with dimeritium. You'll be unable to open your own teleportal without the appropriate components. I don't want to confiscate your star, because you have to be in full possession of your faculties. But if you try any tricks . . . Yennefer, I cannot allow— The lodge won't allow you to launch an insane, one-woman attempt to rescue Ciri and seek vengeance. I still have your matrix and the spell's algorithm. I'll shrink you and pack you into a jade statuette again. For several months this time. Or years, if necessary.'

'Thank you for the warning. But I still will not give you my word.'

Fringilla Vigo was putting on a brave face, but she was anxious and stressed. She herself had often reprimanded young Nilfgaardian mages for uncritically yielding to stereotypical opinions and notions. She herself had regularly ridiculed the crude image painted by gossip and propaganda of the typical sorceress from the North: artificially beautiful, arrogant, vain and spoiled to the limits of perversion, and often beyond them. Right now, though, the closer the sequence of teleportals brought her to Montecalvo Castle, the greater she was racked by uncertainty about what she would find when she arrived at the secret lodge meeting. And about what awaited her. Her untrammelled imagination offered up images of

impossibly gorgeous women with diamond necklaces resting on naked breasts with rouged nipples, women with moist lips and eyes glistening from the effects of alcohol and narcotics. In her mind's eye Fringilla could already see the gathering becoming a wild and depraved orgy accompanied by frenzied music, aphrodisiacs, and slaves of both sexes using exotic accessories.

The final teleportal left her standing between two black marble columns, with dry lips, her eyes watering from the magic wind and her hand tightly clenching her emerald necklace, which filled the square neckline. Beside her materialised Assire var Anahid, also visibly agitated. Nevertheless, Fringilla had reason to suppose her friend was feeling uncomfortable owing to her new and unfamiliar outfit: a plain, but very elegant hyacinth dress, complemented with a small, modest alexandrite necklace.

Her anxiety was dispelled at once. It was cool and quiet in the large hall, which was lit by magical lanterns. There was no naked slave beating a drum, nor girls with sequinned pubic mounds dancing on the table. Neither was there the scent of hashish or Spanish fly in the air. Instead the Nilfgaardian enchantresses were welcomed by Philippa Eilhart, the lady of the castle; tastefully dressed, grave, courteous and businesslike. The others approached and introduced themselves and Fringilla sighed with relief. The sorceresses from the North were beautiful, colourful, and sparkled with jewellery, but there was no trace of intoxicating substances or nymphomania in their eyes, which were accentuated by understated make-up. Nor did any of them have naked breasts. Quite the opposite. Two of them had extremely modest gowns, fastened up to the neck: the severe Sheala de Tancarville, dressed in black, and the young Triss Merigold with her blue eyes and exquisite auburn hair. The dark-haired Sabrina Glevissig and the blondes Margarita Laux-Antille and Keira Metz all had low-cut necklines, only slightly more revealing than Fringilla's.

The wait for other participants was filled by polite conversation, during which all of them had the opportunity to say something about themselves. Philippa Eilhart's tactful comments and observations swiftly and adroitly broke the ice, although the only ice in the vicinity was on the food table, which was piled high with a mountain of oysters. No other ice could be discerned. Sheala de Tancarville, a scholar, immediately found a great deal of common ground with the scholar Assire var Anahid, while Fringilla quickly warmed towards the bubbly Triss Merigold. The conversation was accompanied by the greedy consumption of oysters. The only

person not eating was Sabrina Glevissig, a true daughter of the Kaedwen forests, who took the liberty of expressing a scornful opinion about ‘that slimy filth’ and a yen for a slice of cold venison with plums. Philippa Eilhart, instead of reacting to the insult with haughty coolness, tugged on the bell pull and a moment later meat was brought in inconspicuously and noiselessly. Fringilla’s astonishment was immense. *Well*, she thought, *it takes all sorts*.

The teleportal between the columns flared up and vibrated audibly. Utter amazement was painted on Sabrina Glevissig’s face. Keira Metz dropped an oyster and a knife onto the ice. Triss stifled a gasp.

Three sorceresses emerged from the portal. Three she-elves. One with hair the colour of dark gold, one of vermilion and the third of raven black.

‘Welcome, Francesca,’ Philippa said. In her voice was none of the emotion being expressed by her eyes, which, though, she quickly narrowed. ‘Welcome, Yennefer.’

‘I was given the privilege of filling two seats,’ the golden-haired newcomer addressed as Francesca said melodiously, undoubtedly noticing Philippa’s astonishment. ‘Here are my candidates. Yennefer of Vengerberg, who needs no introduction. And Mistress Ida Emean aep Sivney, an Aen Saevherne from the Blue Mountains.’

Ida Emean slightly inclined her head and her mass of red curls and rustled her floating daffodil-yellow dress.

‘May I assume,’ Francesca said, looking around, ‘that we are all here now?’

‘Only Vilgefortz is missing,’ Sabrina Glevissig hissed quietly, but with unfeigned anger, looking askance at Yennefer.

‘And the Scoia’tael hiding in the cellars,’ Keira Metz muttered. Triss froze her with a look.

Philippa made the introductions. Fringilla watched Francesca Findabair with curiosity – Enid an Gleanna, the Daisy of the Valleys, the illustrious Queen of Dol Blathanna, the queen of the elves, who had not long before recovered their country. *The rumours about Francesca’s beauty were not exaggerated*, thought Fringilla.

The red-headed and large-eyed Ida Emean clearly aroused everybody’s interest, including both sorceresses from Nilfgaard. The free elves from the Blue Mountains maintained contact neither with humans nor with their own kind living closer to humans. The few

Aen Saevherne – or Sages – among the free elves were an almost legendary enigma. Few – even among elves – could boast of a close relationship with the Aen Saevherne. Ida did not only stand out in the group by the colour of hair. There was not a single ounce of metal nor a carat of stone in her jewellery; she wore only pearls, coral and amber.

However, the source of the greatest emotions was, unsurprisingly, the third of the new arrivals: Yennefer, dressed in black and white and with raven-black hair, who was no elf despite first impressions. Her arrival in Montecalvo must have been an immense surprise, and a not entirely pleasant one. Fringilla felt an aura of antipathy and hostility emanating from some of the sorceresses.

While the Nilfgaardian sorceresses were being introduced to her, Yennefer let her violet eyes rest on Fringilla. They were tired and had dark circles around them, which even her make-up was unable to hide.

‘We know each other,’ she said, touching the obsidian star hanging from its velvet ribbon.

A heavy silence, pregnant with anticipation, suddenly descended on the chamber.

‘We’ve already met,’ Yennefer spoke again.

‘I don’t recall,’ Fringilla said without looking away.

‘I’m not surprised. But I have a good memory for faces and figures. I saw you from Sodden Hill.’

‘In which case there can be no mistake,’ Fringilla Vigo said and raised her head proudly, sweeping her eyes over all those present. ‘I was at the Battle of Sodden.’

Philippa Eilhart forestalled a response.

‘I was there too,’ she said. ‘And I also have many recollections. I don’t think, however, that excessive straining of the memory or unnecessary rummaging around in it will bring us any benefit here, in this chamber. What we plan to undertake here will be better served by forgetting, forgiving and being reconciled with each other. Do you agree, Yennefer?’

The black-haired sorceress tossed her curly locks away from her forehead.

‘When I finally learn what you’re trying to do here,’ she replied, ‘I’ll tell you what I agree with, Philippa. And what I don’t agree with.’

‘In that case it would be best if we began without delay. Please, would you take your places, ladies.’

The seats at the round table – apart from one – had place cards. Fringilla sat down beside Assire var Anahid, with the unnamed seat on her right separating her from Sheala de Tancarville, beyond whom Sabina Glevissig and Keira Metz took their places. On Assire’s left sat Ida Emean, Francesca Findabair and Yennefer. Philippa Eilhart occupied the place exactly opposite Assire, with Margarita Laux-Antille on her right, and Triss Merigold on her left.

All of the chairs had armrests carved in the shape of sphinxes.

Philippa began. She repeated the welcome and immediately got down to business. Fringilla, to whom Assire had given a detailed report of the lodge’s previous meeting, learned nothing new from the introduction. Neither was she surprised by the declarations made by all the sorceresses to join the lodge, nor the first contributions to the discussion. She was somewhat disconcerted, however, that those first voices related to the war the Empire was waging with the Nordlings, and in particular the operation in Sodden and Brugge which had been begun a short time before, during which the imperial forces had clashed with the Temerian Army. In spite of the lodge’s statutory political neutrality, the sorceresses were unable to hide their views. Some were clearly anxious about the close proximity of Nilfgaard. Fringilla had mixed feelings. She had assumed that such educated people would understand that the Empire was bringing culture, prosperity, order and political stability to the North. On the other hand, though, she didn’t know how she would have reacted herself, were foreign armies approaching her home.

However, Philippa Eilhart had clearly heard enough discussion about military matters.

‘No one is capable of predicting the outcome of this war,’ she said. ‘What is more, predictions of that kind are pointless. It’s time we looked at this matter with a dispassionate eye. Firstly, war is not such a great evil. I’d be more afraid of the consequences of overpopulation, which at this stage of the growth of agriculture and industry would lead to famine. Secondly, war is an extension of the kings’ politics. How many of those who are reigning now will be alive in a hundred years? None of them, that’s obvious. How many dynasties will last? There’s no way of predicting. In a hundred years, today’s territorial and dynastic conflicts, today’s ambitions and hopes will be dust in the history books. But if we don’t protect ourselves, if we allow ourselves to be drawn into the war, nothing

but dust will remain of us too. If, however, we look a little beyond the battle flags, if we close our ears to the cries of war and patriotism, we shall survive. And we must survive. We must, because we bear responsibility. Not towards kings and their local interests, focused on the concerns of one kingdom. We are responsible for the whole world. For progress. For the changes which accompany this progress. We are responsible for the future.'

'Tissaia de Vries would have expressed it differently,' Francesca Findabair said. 'She was always concerned with responsibility towards the common man. Not in the future, but here and now.'

'Tissaia de Vries is dead. Were she alive, she would be here among us.'

'No doubt,' the Daisy of the Valleys smiled. 'But I don't think she would have agreed with the theory that war is a remedy for famine and overpopulation. Pay attention to the language used here, honourable sisters. We are debating using the Common Speech, which is meant to ease understanding. But for me it's a foreign language; one becoming more and more foreign. In the language of my mother the expression "the common man" does not exist, and "the common elf" would be a coinage. The late, lamented Tissaia de Vries was concerned with the fate of ordinary humans. To me, the fate of ordinary elves is no less important. I'd gladly applaud the idea of looking ahead and treating today as ephemera. But I'm sorry to state that today paves the way for tomorrow, and without tomorrow there won't be any future. For you, humans, perhaps the tears I shed over a lilac shrub burnt to ash during the turmoil of war are ridiculous. After all, there will always be lilac shrubs; if not that one, then another. And if there are no more lilac shrubs, well, there'll be acacia trees. Forgive my botanical metaphors. But kindly note that what is a matter of politics to you humans is a matter of physical survival to the elves.'

'Politics don't interest me,' Margarita Laux-Antille, the rectoress of the academy of magic, announced loudly. 'I simply do not wish my girls, whose education I've dedicated myself to, to be used as mercenaries, pulling the wool over their eyes with slogans about love for one's homeland. The homeland of those girls is magic; that's what I teach them. If someone involves my girls in a war, stands them on a new Sodden Hill, they will be lost, irrespective of the result on that battlefield. I understand your reservations, Enid, but we're here to discuss the future of magic, not issues of race.'

'We are here to discuss the future of magic,' Sabrina Glevissig repeated. 'But the future of magic is determined by the status of

sorcerers. Our status. Our importance. The role we play in society. Trust, respect and credibility, general faith in our usefulness, faith that magic is indispensable. The alternative we face seems simple: either a loss of status and isolation in ivory towers, or service. Service even on the hills of Sodden, even as mercenaries . . .'

'Or as servants and errand girls?' Triss Merigold cut in, tossing her beautiful hair off her shoulder. 'With bent backs, ready to leap into action at every wag of the imperial finger? For that's the role we will be assigned by the *Pax Nilfgaardiana*, should Nilfgaard conquer us all.'

'If it does,' Philippa said with emphasis. 'Anyhow we won't have much choice. For we have to serve. But serve magic. Not kings or imperators, not their present politics. Not matters of racial integration, because they are also subject to today's political goals. Our lodge, my dear ladies, was not brought into being for us to adapt to today's politics and daily changes on the front line. Or to feverishly search for solutions appropriate to the situation at hand, changing the colour of our skin like chameleons. Our lodge must be active, but its assigned role should be quite the opposite. And carried out using all the means we have at our disposal.'

'If I understand correctly,' Sheala de Tancarville said, raising her head, 'you are persuading us to actively influence the course of events. By fair means or foul? Including illegal measures?'

'What laws do you speak of? The ones governing the rabble? The ones written in the codices, which we drew up and dictated to the royal jurists? We are only bound by one law. Our own!'

'I see.' The sorceress from Kovir smiled. 'We, then, shall actively influence the course of events. Should the kings' politics not be to our liking, we'll simply change it. Correct, Philippa? Or perhaps it's better to overthrow all those crowned asses at once; dethrone them and drive them out. And seize power at once?'

'In the past we crowned kings who were convenient to us. Unfortunately we did not put magic on the throne. We have never given magic absolute power. It's time we corrected that mistake.'

'You have yourself in mind, of course?' Sabrina Glevissig said, leaning across the table. 'On the Redanian throne, naturally? Her Majesty Philippa the First? With Dijkstra as prince consort?'

'I was not thinking about myself. Nor was I thinking about the Kingdom of Redania. I have in mind the Kingdom of the North, which the Kingdom of Kovir is today evolving into. An empire

whose power will be equal to Nilfgaard's, thanks to which the currently oscillating scales of the world will finally come to rest in equilibrium. An empire ruled by magic, which we shall raise to the throne by marrying the Kovirian crown prince to a sorceress. Yes, you heard correctly, dear sisters; you are looking in the right direction. Yes, here, at this table, in this vacant seat, we shall place the lodge's twelfth sorceress. And then we shall put her on the throne.'

The silence that fell was broken by Sheala de Tancarville.

'An ambitious project indeed,' she said with a hint of derision in her voice. 'Truly worthy of us all, here seated. It absolutely justifies establishing a lodge of this kind. After all, less lofty tasks, even ones that are tottering on the brink of reality and feasibility, would be an affront to us. That would be like using an astrolabe to hammer in nails. No, no, it is best to set ourselves an utterly impossible task from the start.'

'Why call it impossible?'

'Have mercy, Philippa.' Sabrina Glevissig sighed. 'No king would ever wed a sorcereress. No society would accept a sorceress on the throne. An ancient custom stands in the way. A foolish one, perhaps, but it is there nevertheless.'

'There also exist,' Margarita Laux-Antille added, 'obstacles of what I would call a technical nature. The sorceress who joined the House of Kovir would have to comply with a large number of conditions, both from our point of view and that of the House of Kovir. Those conditions are mutually exclusive, they contradict each other in obvious ways. Don't you see that, Philippa? For us this person ought to be schooled in magic, utterly dedicated to magic, comprehending her role and capable of playing it deftly, imperceptibly and without arousing suspicion. Without direction or prompt, without any grey eminences standing in the shadows, against whom rebels always first direct their anger in a revolution. And Kovir itself, without any apparent pressure from us, must also choose her as the wife of the heir to the throne.'

'That is obvious.'

'So who do you think Kovir would select, given a free choice? A girl from a royal family, whose royal blood flows back many generations. A very young woman, suitable for a young prince. A girl who is fertile, because this is about a dynasty. Such prerequisites rule you out, Philippa. Rule me out, rule out Keira and Triss even, the youngest among us. They also rule out all the

novices at my school, who are anyhow of little interest to us; they are but buds, the colour of whose petals are still unknown. It's unthinkable that any of them could occupy the twelfth, empty seat at this table. In other words, were Kovir to be afflicted with insanity and willing to marry their prince to a sorceress, we couldn't find a suitable woman. Who, then, is to be this Queen of the North?'

'A girl from a royal family,' Philippa calmly replied, 'in whose veins flows royal blood, the blood of several great dynasties. Very young and capable of producing offspring. A girl with exceptional magical and prophetic abilities, a carrier of the Elder Blood as the prophecies have heralded. A girl who will play her role with great aplomb without direction, prompt, sycophants or grey eminences, because that is what her destiny demands. A girl, whose true abilities are and will be known only to us: Cirilla, daughter of Princess Pavetta of Cintra, the granddaughter of the Queen Calanthe called the Lioness of Cintra. The Elder Blood, the Icy Flame of the North, the Destroyer and Restorer, whose coming was prophesied centuries ago. Ciri of Cintra, the Queen of the North. And her blood, from which will be born the Queen of the World.'

At the sight of the Rats bursting out of the ambush, two of the horsemen escorting the carriage immediately turned tail and sped away. But they didn't stand a chance. Giselher, helped by Reef and Iskra, cut off their escape and after a short fight hacked them to pieces. Kayleigh, Asse and Mistle fell on the other two, who were prepared to defend the carriage, and the four spotted horses harnessed to it, desperately. Ciri felt disappointment and overwhelming anger. They hadn't left anyone for her. It looked as though she would have no one to kill.

But there was still one horseman, riding in front of the carriage as an outrider, lightly armed, on a swift horse. He could have escaped, but hadn't. He turned back, swung his sword and dashed straight at Ciri.

She let him approach, even somewhat slowing her horse. When he struck, rising up in the stirrups, she leant far out from the saddle, skilfully ducking under his blade, then sat back up, pushing off hard against the stirrups. The horseman was quick and agile and managed to strike again. This time she parried obliquely, and when the sword slid away she struck the horseman in the hand from below with a short lunge, then swung her sword in a feint towards his face. He involuntarily covered his head with his left hand and she deftly turned the sword around in her hand and slashed him in

the armpit, a cut she had practised for hours at Kaer Morhen. The Nilfgaardian slid from his saddle, fell to the ground, lifted himself up onto his knees, and howled like an animal, desperately trying to staunch the blood gushing from his severed arteries. Ciri watched him for a moment, as usual fascinated by the sight of a man fiercely fighting death with all his strength. She waited for him to bleed out. Then she rode off without looking back.

The ambush was over. The escort had been dispatched. Asse and Reef stopped the carriage, seizing the reins of the lead pair. The postilion, a young boy in colourful livery, having been pushed from the right lead horse, knelt on the ground, crying and begging for mercy. The coachman threw down the reins and also begged for his life, his hands placed together as though in prayer. Giselher, Iskra and Mistle cantered over to the carriage, and Kayleigh jumped off and jerked the door open. Ciri rode up and dismounted, still holding her blood-covered sword.

In the carriage sat a fat matron in an old-fashioned gown and bonnet, clutching a young and terribly pale girl in a black dress fastened up to the neck with a guipure lace collar. Ciri noticed she had a brooch pinned to her dress. A very pretty brooch.

‘Oh, spotted horses!’ Iskra called, looking at the rig. ‘What beauties! We’ll get a few florins for this four!’

‘And the coachman and postilion,’ Kayleigh said, grinning at the woman and the girl, ‘will pull the carriage to town, once we’ve harnessed them up. And when we come to a hill, these two fine ladies will help!’

‘Highwaymen, sirs!’ the matron in the old-fashioned gown whimpered, clearly more horrified by Kayleigh’s hideous smile than the bloody steel in Ciri’s hand. ‘I appeal to your honour! You surely will not outrage this young maiden.’

‘Hey, Mistle,’ Kayleigh called, smiling derisively, ‘your honour’s being appealed to!’

‘Shut your gob.’ Giselher grimaced, still mounted. ‘Your jokes don’t make anyone laugh. And you, woman, calm down. We’re the Rats. We don’t fight women and we don’t harm them. Reef, Iskra. Unharness the ponies! Mistle, catch our mounts; we’re leaving!’

‘We Rats don’t fight with women.’ Kayleigh grinned once more, staring at the ashen face of the girl in the black dress. ‘We just have some fun with them occasionally, if they have a yen. Well, do you, young lady? You haven’t got an itch between your legs, have you?

Please don't be shy. Just nod your little head.'

'Show some respect!' the lady in the old-fashioned gown screamed, her voice faltering. 'How dare you talk like that to the Much Honoured Baron's daughter, brigand!'

Kayleigh roared with laughter, then bowed extravagantly.

'I beg for forgiveness. I didn't wish to offend. What, mayn't I even ask?'

'Kayleigh!' Iskra called. 'Come here and stop dallying! Help us unharness these horses! Falka! Move it!'

Ciri couldn't tear her eyes away from the coat of arms on the carriage doors: a silver unicorn on a black field. *A unicorn*, she thought. *I once saw a unicorn like that . . . When? In another life? Or perhaps it was only a dream.*

'Falka! What's the matter?'

I am Falka. But I wasn't always. Not always.

She gathered herself and pursed her lips. *I was unkind to Mistle*, she thought. *I upset her. I have to apologise somehow.*

She placed a foot on the carriage steps, staring at the brooch on the pale girl's dress.

'Hand it over,' she said bluntly.

'How dare you?' the matron choked. 'Do you know who you are speaking to? She is the noble-born daughter of the Baron of Casadei!'

Ciri looked around, making sure no one was listening.

'A Baron's daughter?' she hissed. 'A petty title. And even if the snot were a countess, she ought to curtsy before me, arse close to the ground and head low. Give me the brooch! What are you waiting for? Should I tear it off along with the bodice?'

The silence which fell at the table after Philippa's declaration was quickly replaced by an uproar. The sorceresses vied with each other to voice their astonishment and disbelief, demanding explanations. Some of them undoubtedly knew a great deal about the prophesied Queen of the North – Cirilla or Ciri – while for others the name was less familiar. Fringilla Vigo didn't know anything, but she had her suspicions and was lost in conjecture, mainly centred on a certain lock of hair. However, when she asked Assire in hushed tones, the

sorceress said nothing and instructed her to remain silent too. Meanwhile, Philippa Eilhart took the floor once again.

'Most of us saw Ciri on Thanedd, where she delivered prophecy in a trance and caused a great deal of confusion. Some of us are close – or even very close – to her. I have you in mind, in particular, Yennefer. It's your turn to speak.'

When Yennefer was telling the assembly about Ciri, Triss Merigold looked attentively at her. Yennefer spoke calmly and without emotion, but Triss knew her too well and had known her for too long to be fooled. She had seen her in many situations, including stressful ones, which had exhausted her and led her to the verge of sickness, and occasionally into it. Now, without doubt, Yennefer found herself in such a situation again. She looked distressed, weary and ill.

The sorceress talked, and Triss, who knew both the story and the person it concerned, discreetly observed the audience. Particularly the two sorceresses from Nilfgaard. The utterly transformed Assire var Anahid, now dressed up but still feeling uncertain in her make-up and fashionable dress. And Fringilla Vigo, the younger, friendly, naturally graceful and modestly elegant one, with green eyes and hair as black as Yennefer's but less luxuriant, cut shorter and brushed down smoothly.

Neither of the Nilfgaardians gave the impression of being lost among the complexities of Ciri's story, even though Yennefer's account was lengthy and tangled, beginning with the infamous love affair between Pavetta of Cintra and the young man magically transformed into Urcheon. She recounted Geralt's role and the Law of Surprise, and the destiny linking the Witcher and Ciri. Yennefer talked about Ciri and Geralt meeting in Brokilon, about the war, about her being lost and found, and about Kaer Morhen. About Rience and the Nilfgaardian agents hunting the girl. About her education in the Temple of Melitele, and about Ciri's mysterious abilities.

They're listening with such inscrutable expressions, Triss thought, looking at Assire and Fringilla. *Like sphinxes. But they are clearly hiding something. I wonder what. Their astonishment? Since they couldn't have known who Emhyr had brought to Nilfgaard. Or is it that they've known all this for a long time, perhaps even better than we do? Yennefer will soon reach Ciri's arrival on Thanedd, and the prophecy she gave while in a trance, which sowed so much confusion. About the*

bloody fighting in Garstang, which left Geralt severely beaten and Ciri abducted.

Then the dissembling will be over, Triss thought, *and the masks will fall. Everyone knows that Nilfgaard was behind the events on Thanedd. And when all eyes turn towards you, Nilfgaardians, you won't have a choice, you'll have to talk. And then certain matters will be explained and perhaps I shall find out more. Like how Yennefer managed to vanish from Thanedd, and why she suddenly appeared here, in Montecalvo, with Francesca. Who is Ida Emean, she-elf, Aen Saevherne from the Blue Mountains, and what role is she playing here? Why do I have the impression Philippa Eilhart reveals less than she knows, even though she declares her devotion and loyalty to magic, and not to Dijkstra . . . with whom she remains in unceasing contact?*

And perhaps I'll finally learn who Ciri really is. Ciri; the Queen of the North to them, but the flaxen-haired witcher-girl of Kaer Morhen to me. A girl I still think of as a younger sister.

Fringilla Vigo had heard something about witchers: individuals who earned their keep by killing monsters and beasts. She listened attentively to Yennefer's story and to the sound of her voice, and observed her face. She didn't let herself be deceived. The strong emotional relationship between Yennefer and Ciri – whom everyone found so fascinating – was clear as day. Interestingly enough, the relationship between the sorceress and the Witcher she had mentioned was equally clear and equally strong. Fringilla began to reflect on this, but was interrupted by raised voices.

She had already worked out that some of the assembled company had been in opposing camps during the rebellion on Thanedd, so was not at all surprised by the antipathy expressed in the form of biting comments, directed at Yennefer as she spoke. Just as an argument seemed inevitable, Philippa Eilhart cut it short by unceremoniously slapping the table, which made the cups jingle.

'Enough!' she shouted. 'Be quiet, Sabrina! Don't let her goad you, Francesca! That's quite enough about Thanedd and Garstang. It's history!'

History, Fringilla thought, with an astonishing sense of hurt. *But history, which they – even though they belonged to different camps – had a hand in. They made their mark. They knew what they were doing and why. And we, imperial sorceresses, don't know anything. We really are like errand girls, who know what they are being sent to do, but don't know why. It's good that this lodge is coming into being,* she deemed.

The devil only knows how it will end, but at least it's beginning, here and now.

'Yennefer, continue,' Philippa summoned.

'I don't have anything else to say,' the black-haired sorceress answered through pursed lips. 'I repeat: Tissaia de Vries ordered me to bring Ciri to Garstang.'

'It's easy to blame the dead,' Sabrina Glevissig snarled, but Philippa quietened her with a sharp gesture.

'I didn't want to meddle in Aretuza's business,' Yennefer said, pale and clearly disturbed. 'I wanted to take Ciri and escape Thanedd. But Tissaia convinced me that the girl's appearance in Garstang would be a shock to many and that her prophecy would pour oil on troubled waters. I'm not blaming her, however, because I agreed with her then. Both of us made a mistake. Mine was greater, though. Had I left Ciri in Rita's care . . .'

'What's done cannot be undone,' Philippa interrupted. 'Anyone can make a mistake. Even Tissaia de Vries. When did Tissaia see Ciri for the first time?'

'Three days before the conclave began,' Margarita Laux-Antille replied. 'In Gors Velen. I also made her acquaintance then. And I knew she was a remarkable individual the moment I saw her!'

'Extremely remarkable,' said the previously silent Ida Emean aep Sivney. 'For the legacy of remarkable blood is concentrated in her. Hen Ichaer, the Elder Blood. Genetic material determining the carrier's uncommon abilities. Determining the great role she will play. That she *must* play.'

'Because that is what elven legends, myths and prophecies demand?' Sabrina Glevissig asked with a sneer. 'Since the very beginning, this whole matter has smacked of fairy-tales and fantasies! Now I have no doubts. My dear ladies, I suggest we discuss something important, rational and real for a change.'

'I bow before sober rationality; the power and source of your race's great superiority,' Ida Emean said, smiling faintly. 'Nonetheless, here, in the company of individuals capable of using a power which does not always lend itself to rational analysis or explanations, it seems somewhat improper to disregard the elves' prophecies. Neither our race nor our power draws its strength from rationality. In spite of that it has endured for tens of thousands of years.'

‘The genetic material called the Elder Blood, of which we are talking, turned out to be a little less hardy, however,’ Sheala de Tancarville observed. ‘Even elven legends and prophecies, which I in no way disregard, consider the Elder Blood to be utterly atrophied. Extinct. Am I right, Mistress Ida? There is no more Elder Blood in the world. The last person in whose veins it flowed was Lara Dorren aep Shiadhal, and we all know the legend of Lara Dorren and Cregennan of Lod.’

‘Not all of us,’ Assire var Anahid said, speaking for the first time. ‘I only studied your mythology cursorily and have never come across that legend.’

‘It is not a legend,’ Philippa Eilhart said, ‘but a true story. And there is one among us who not only knows the tale of Lara and Cregennan very well, but also what came after, which will certainly interest you all. Would you take up the story, Francesca?’

‘From what you say’ – the queen of the elves smiled – ‘it would seem you know this tale no less thoroughly than I do.’

‘Quite possibly. But I would nonetheless ask you to tell it.’

‘In order to test my honesty and loyalty to the lodge,’ Enid an Gleanna said, nodding. ‘Very well. I would ask you all to make yourselves comfortable, for the story will not be a short one.’

‘The story of Lara and Cregennan is a true story, although today it is so overgrown with fairy-tale ornamentation it is difficult to recognise. There is also enormous variance between the legend’s human and elven versions; chauvinism and racial hatred can be heard in both of them, though. Thus I shall refrain from embellishments and limit myself to dry facts. Cregennan of Lod was a sorcerer. Lara Dorren aep Shiadhal was an elven sorceress, an Aen Saevherne, a Sage, one of the carriers of the Elder Blood, which is even mysterious to we elves. The friendship – and later romance – between the two of them was at first joyfully acknowledged by both races, but there soon appeared opponents to their union. Sworn enemies to the idea of melding human and elven magic, who regarded it as betrayal. With the wisdom of hindsight, there were also feuds of a personal nature at work: jealousy and envy. Put simply: Cregennan was assassinated and Lara Dorren, hounded and hunted, died of exhaustion in a wilderness after giving birth to a daughter. The baby was saved by a miracle. She was taken in by Cerro, the Queen of Redania—’

‘Only because she was terrified of the curse Lara cast when she refused to help and drove Lara out into the cold of winter,’ Keira Metz said, butting in. ‘Had Cerro not adopted the child, terrible calamities would have fallen on her and her entire family—’

‘Those are precisely the fantastic ornaments Francesca has dispensed with,’ Philippa Eilhart interrupted. ‘Let us stick to facts.’

‘The prophetic abilities of the Sages of the Elder Blood are facts,’ Ida Emean said, raising her eyes towards Philippa. ‘And the evocative motif of prophecy which appears in every version of the legend is food for thought.’

‘It is now, and it was in the past,’ Francesca confirmed. ‘The rumours of Lara’s curse never died away, and were even recalled seventeen years later when Riannon – the little girl Cerro had adopted – grew into a young woman whose beauty eclipsed even her mother’s legendary looks. She bore the official title of Princess of Redania, and many ruling houses were interested in making a match with her. When Riannon finally chose Goidemar, the young King of Temeria, from among many suitors, it would not have taken much for rumours of the curse to thwart the marriage. However, the rumours only became common knowledge three years after their wedding. During the Falka Rebellion.’

Fringilla, who had never heard of Falka or the rebellion, raised her eyebrows. Francesca noticed it.

‘For the northern kingdoms,’ she explained, ‘these are tragic and bloody events, which live on in the memory, though more than a century has passed. In Nilfgaard, with whom the North had almost no contact at that time, the matter is probably not known so I will take the liberty of briefly restating certain facts. Falka was the daughter of Vridank, the King of Redania, and the issue of a marriage he dissolved when he took a fancy to the beautiful Cerro – the same Cerro who later adopted Lara’s child. A document survives, lengthily and circuitously stating the reasons for the divorce, but a surviving miniature of Vridank’s first wife, an undoubtedly half-elf Kovirian noblewoman with predominantly human traits, says a lot more. It depicts her with the eyes of a deranged hermit, the hair of a drowned corpse and the mouth of a lizard. To cut a long story short: an ugly woman was sent back to Kovir with her year-old daughter, Falka. And soon after, the one and the other were both forgotten.’

‘Falka,’ Enid an Gleanna picked up after a while, ‘gave cause to be remembered five-and-twenty years later, when she launched an

uprising and murdered her own father, Cerro and two of her stepbrothers, allegedly with her own hands. The armed rebellion initially broke out as an attempt by the legally firstborn daughter, supported by some of the Temerian and Kovirian nobility, to gain the throne which was rightly hers. But it was soon transformed into a peasants' revolt of immense proportions. Both sides committed gruesome atrocities. Falka passed into legend as a bloodthirsty demon, although actually it is more likely she simply lost control of the situation and of the slogans displayed on the insurrectionary standards. "Death To Kings"; "Death To Sorcerers"; "Death To Priests, Nobility, Gentry and Anybody Well-To-Do"; and soon after: "Death To Everyone and Everything", for it became impossible to curb the blood-drenched evil mob. Then the rebellion began to spread to other countries . . .'

'Nilfgaardian historians have written about that,' Sabrina Glevissig interrupted with a distinct sneer. 'And Mistresses Assire and Vigo have undoubtedly read it. Keep it brief, Francesca. Move on to Riannon and the Houtborg triplets.'

'But of course. Riannon, issue of Lara Dorren, adopted daughter of Cerro, now the wife of Goidemar, King of Temeria, was accidentally seized by Falka's rebels and imprisoned in Houtborg Castle. She was pregnant at the time of her capture. The castle was still under siege long after the rebellion had been suppressed and Falka executed, but Goidemar finally took it by storm and rescued his wife. And three children: two little girls, who were already walking, and a boy, who was learning to. Riannon had been driven insane. The furious Goidemar put all the captives on the rack and from the shreds of their testimonies, interspersed with groans, constructed a plausible picture.

'Falka, who had inherited her looks more from her elven grandmother than her mother, had generously bestowed her charms on all her officers in command, from the noblemen to ordinary captains and thugs; by so doing ensuring their faithfulness and loyalty to her. She finally fell pregnant and gave birth to a child, precisely at the same moment that Riannon – who was imprisoned in Houtborg – had twins. Falka ordered her infant to be raised with Riannon's children. As she was later alleged to have said, only queens were worthy of the honour of being wet nurses to her bastards, and a similar fate would await every queen and princess in the new order Falka would build following her victory.

'The problem was that no one, not even Riannon, knew which of the "triplets" was Falka's. It was surmised that it was most likely

one of the girls, because Riannon had reputedly given birth to a girl and a boy. I repeat, most likely, since in spite of Falka's boast the children were suckled by ordinary, peasant wet nurses. Riannon could hardly remember anything when her insanity was finally cured. Yes, she gave birth. Yes, the triplets were occasionally brought to her bed and shown to her. But nothing more.

'Sorcerers were summoned to examine the triplets and establish which was which. Goidemar was so unwavering that he intended – after ascertaining which was Falka's bastard – to publicly execute the child. We could not allow it. After the uprising's suppression, unspeakable brutality had been inflicted on the captured rebels, and it was time to put an end to it. The execution of a child before its second birthday? Can you imagine? What legends would have sprung up! And anyway it had already been rumoured that Falka herself had been born a monster as a result of Lara Dorren's curse. Nonsense, of course, since Falka had been born before Lara had even met Cregennan. But few people could be bothered to count the years. Pamphlets and other ridiculous documents were written about it and published clandestinely in Oxenfurt Academy. But I will return to the examination Goidemar ordered us to carry out—'

'Us?' Yennefer asked, looking up. 'Who precisely was that?'

'Tissaia de Vries, Augusta Wagner, Leticia Charbonneau and Hen Gedymdeith,' Francesca said calmly. 'I was later added to that body. I was a young sorceress, but a pureblood elf. And my father . . . my biological father, who disowned me . . . he was a Sage. I knew what the Elder Blood gene was.'

'And that gene was found in Riannon, when you examined her and the king before studying the children,' Sheala de Tancarville stated. 'And in two of the children – although to different extents – which allowed Falka's bastard to be identified. How did you save the child from the king's wrath?'

'Very simply,' the she-elf smiled. 'By feigning ignorance. We told the king that the matter was complicated, that we were still doing tests, but that tests of that kind demanded time . . . A great deal of time. Goidemar, an irascible but fundamentally good and noble man, quickly cooled down and put no pressure on us while the triplets were growing and running around the palace, bringing joy to the royal couple and the entire court. Amavet, Fiona and Adela. The triplets were as alike as three sparrows. They were watched attentively, of course, and there were frequent suspicions, particularly if one of the children was getting up to mischief. Fiona once tipped the contents of a chamber pot from a window right

onto the Great Constable. He called her “a demonic bastard” and kissed goodbye to his post. Sometime later Amavet smeared tallow on the stairs, and then, when a splint was put on the arm of a certain lady-in-waiting, she groaned something about “accursed blood” and soon afterwards said farewell to the court. More lowborn loudmouths made the acquaintance of the whipping post and the horsewhip. Thus everyone swiftly learned to hold their tongues. There was even a baron from an ancient family, who Adela shot in the backside with an arrow, who confined himself to—’

‘That’s enough about the children’s pranks,’ Philippa Eilhart interjected. ‘When was Goidemar finally told the truth?’

‘He was never told. He never asked, which suited us.’

‘But you knew which of the children was Falka’s bastard?’

‘Of course. It was Adela.’

‘Not Fiona?’

‘No. Adela. She died of the plague. The demonic bastard, the accursed blood, the daughter of the diabolical Falka helped the priests in the infirmary beyond the castle walls during an epidemic – in spite of the king’s protests. She caught the plague from the sick children she was treating and died. She was seventeen. A year later her pseudo-brother Amavet became romantically involved with Countess Anna Kameny and was murdered by assassins hired by her husband. The same year Riannon died, distraught and inconsolable after the death of two of her beloved children. Then Goidemar summoned us once more. For the King of Cintra, Coram, was showing an interest in the last of the famous triplets: Princess Fiona. He wanted her to marry his son, also Coram, but knew of the rumours and didn’t want to go ahead with the match in case Fiona was indeed Falka’s bastard. We staked our reputation on the fact that Fiona was a legitimate child. I don’t know if he believed us, but the young couple grew to like each other and thus Riannon’s daughter, Ciri’s great-great-great-grandmother, became the Queen of Cintra.’

‘Introducing your celebrated gene to the Coram dynasty.’

‘Fiona,’ Enid an Gleanna said calmly, ‘was not a carrier of the Elder Blood gene, which we had begun to call the Lara gene.’

‘What do you mean exactly?’

‘Well, Amavet carried the Lara gene, so our experiment went on. For Anna Kameny, who inadvertently caused the death of both her

lover and husband, gave birth to twins while still in mourning. A boy and a girl. Their father must have been Amavet, for the baby girl was a carrier. She was named Muriel.'

'Muriel the Impure?' Sheala de Tancarville asked in astonishment.

'She became that much later.' Francesca smiled. 'At first she was Muriel the Delightful. Indeed, she was a sweet, charming child. When she was fourteen they were already calling her Doe-Eyed Muriel. Many men drowned in those eyes. She was finally given in marriage to Robert, Count of Garramone.'

'And the boy?'

'Crispin. He wasn't a carrier, so he was of no interest to us. If my memory serves, he fell in combat somewhere, for his passion was warfare.'

'Just a moment,' Sabrina said, ruffling her hair vigorously. 'Wasn't Muriel the Impure the mother of Adalia the Seer?'

'Indeed,' Francesca confirmed. 'An interesting one, was Adalia. A powerful Source, excellent material for a sorceress. But she didn't want to be one, unfortunately. She preferred to be a queen.'

'And the gene?' Assire var Anahid asked. 'Did she bear it?'

'Interestingly not.'

'As I thought,' Assire said, nodding. 'Lara's gene can only be passed on inviolately down the female line. If the carrier is a man, the gene disappears in the second, or – at most – the third generation.'

'But wait—'

'It activates later, however,' Philippa Eilhart broke in. 'After all, Adalia, who didn't have the gene, was Calanthe's mother, and Calanthe, Ciri's grandmother, carried the Lara gene.'

'She was the first carrier after Riannon,' Sheala de Tancarville said, suddenly joining the discussion. 'You made a mistake, Francesca. There were two genes. One, the true gene, was latent, quiescent. You were beguiled by Amavet's powerful, distinct gene. However, what Amavet had wasn't a gene, but an activator. Mistress Assire is right. The activator travelling down the male line was so faint in Adalia you didn't identify it at all. Adalia was Muriel's first child; her later-born definitely didn't have even a trace of the activator. Fiona's latent gene would probably also have vanished in her male descendants at most in the third generation. But it didn't, and I know why.'

‘Bloody hell,’ Yennefer hissed through her teeth.

‘I’m lost,’ Sabrina Glevissig declared. ‘In this tangle of genetics and genealogy.’

Francesca drew a fruit bowl towards herself, held out a hand and murmured a spell.

‘I apologise for this vulgar display of psychokinesis,’ she said with a smile, making a red apple rise high above the table. ‘But the fruit will help me demonstrate your mistake. Red apples are the Lara gene, the Elder Blood. Green apples represent the latent gene. Pomegranates are the pseudo-gene, the activator. Let us begin. This is Riannon, the red apple. Her son, Amavet, is the pomegranate. Amavet’s daughter, Muriel, and his granddaughter, Adalia, are still pomegranates, the last of which is very faint. And here is Fiona’s line, Riannon’s daughter: a green apple. Her son, Corbett, the King of Cintra, is green. Dagorad, Corbett and Elen of Kaedwen’s son, is green too. As you have observed, in two successive generations there are exclusively male descendants. The gene is very weak, and vanishes. So at the very bottom, here, we finish with a pomegranate and a green apple; Adalia, the Princess of Maribor, and Dagorad, the King of Cintra. And the couple’s daughter was Calanthe. A red apple. The revived, powerful Lara gene.’

‘Fiona’s latent gene’ – Margarita Laux-Antille nodded – ‘met Amavet’s activator gene through marital incest. Did no one notice their kinship? Did none of the royal heraldists or chroniclers pay any attention to this blatant incest?’

‘It wasn’t as blatant as it seems. After all, Anna Kameny didn’t advertise that her twins were bastards, because her husband’s family would have deprived her and her children of their coat of arms, titles and fortune. Of course there were persistent rumours, and not just among the peasantry. That’s why they had to search for a husband for Calanthe, who was contaminated by incest, in distant Ebbing, beyond the rumours’ reach.’

‘Add two more red apples to your pyramid, Enid,’ Margarita said. ‘Now, as Mistress Assire has astutely indicated, we can see the reborn Lara gene moving smoothly down the female line.’

‘Yes. Here is Pavetta, Calanthe’s daughter. And Pavetta’s daughter, Cirilla, the sole inheritor of the Elder Blood, carrier of the Lara gene.’

‘The sole inheritor?’ Sheala de Tancarville asked abruptly. ‘You’re very confident, Enid.’

‘What do you mean by that?’

Sheala suddenly stood up, snapped her beringed fingers towards the fruit bowl and made the remaining fruit levitate, disrupting Francesca’s model and transforming it into a multi-coloured confusion.

‘This is what I mean,’ she said coldly, pointing at the jumble of fruit. ‘Here we have all of the possible genetic combinations and permutations. And we know as much as we can see here. Namely nothing. Your mistake backfired, Francesca, and it caused an avalanche of errors. The gene only reappeared by accident after a century, during which time we have no idea what may have occurred. Secret, hidden, hushed-up events. Premarital children, extramarital children, adoptive children – even changelings. Incest. The crossbreeding of races, the blood of forgotten ancestors returning in later generations. In short: a hundred years ago you had the gene within arm’s reach, even in your hands. And it gave you the slip. That was a mistake, Enid, a terrible mistake! Too much confusion, too many accidents. Too little control, too little interference in the randomness of it all.’

‘We weren’t dealing,’ Enid an Gleanna said through pursed lips, ‘with rabbits, which we could pair off and put in a hutch.’

Fringilla, following Triss Merigold’s gaze, noticed Yennefer’s hands suddenly clenching her chair’s carved armrests.

So this is what Yennefer and Francesca have in common, Triss thought feverishly, still avoiding her close friend’s gaze. *Cynical duplicity. For, after all, pairing off and breeding turned out to be unavoidable. Indeed, their plans for Ciri and the Prince of Kovir, although apparently improbable, are actually quite realistic. They’ve done it before. They’ve placed whoever they wanted on thrones, created the marriages and dynasties they desired and which were convenient for them. Spells, aphrodisiacs and elixirs were all used. Queens and princesses suddenly entered bizarre – often morganatic – marriages, contrary to all plans, intentions and agreements. And later those who wanted children, but ought not to have them, were secretly given contraceptive agents. Those who didn’t want children, but ought to have them, were given placebos of liquorice water instead of the promised agents. Which resulted in all of those improbable connections: Calanthe, Pavetta . . . and now Ciri. Yennefer was involved in this. And now she regrets it. She’s right to. Damn it, were Geralt to find out . . .*

Sphinxes, Fringilla Vigo thought. *The sphinxes carved on the chairs' armrests. Yes, they ought to be the lodge's emblem. Wise, mysterious, silent. They are all sphinxes. They will easily achieve what they want. It's a trifle for them to marry Kovir off to that Ciri of theirs. They have the power to. They have the expertise. And the means. The diamond necklace around Sabrina Glevissig's neck is probably worth almost as much as the entire income of forested, rocky Kaedwen. They could easily carry out their plans. But there is one snag . . .*

Aha, Triss Merigold thought, *at last we've reached the topic we should have started with: the sobering and discouraging fact that Ciri is in Nilfgaard, in Emhyr's clutches. Far away from the plans being hatched here . . .*

'There is no question that Emhyr had been hunting for Cirilla for many years,' Philippa continued. 'Everyone assumed his goal was a political union with Cintra and control of the fiefdom which is her legal heritage. However, one cannot rule out that rather than politics it concerns the gene of the Elder Blood, which Emhyr wants to introduce to the imperial line. If Emhyr knows what we do, he may want the prophecy to manifest itself in his dynasty, and the future Queen of the World to be born in Nilfgaard.'

'A correction,' Sabrina Glevissig interrupted. 'It's not Emhyr who wants it, but the Nilfgaardian sorcerers. They alone were capable of tracking down the gene and making Emhyr aware of its significance. I'm sure the Nilfgaardian ladies here present will want to confirm that and explain their role in the intrigue.'

'I am astonished,' Fringilla burst out, 'by your tendency to search for the threads of intrigue in distant Nilfgaard, while the evidence requires us to search for conspirators and traitors much closer to you.'

'An observation as blunt as it is apt,' Sheala de Tancarville said, silencing with a glance Sabrina, who was preparing a riposte. 'All the evidence suggests that the facts about the Elder Blood were leaked to Nilfgaard from us. Is it possible you've forgotten about Vilgefortz, ladies?'

'Not I,' Sabrina said, a flame of hatred flaring in her black eyes for a second. 'I have not forgotten!'

'All in good time,' Keira Metz said, flashing her teeth malevolently. 'But for the moment it's not about him, but about the fact that Emhyr var Emreis, Imperator of Nilfgaard, has Ciri – and

thus the Elder Blood that is so important to us – in his grasp.'

'The Imperator,' Assire declared calmly, glancing at Fringilla, 'doesn't have anything in his grasp. The girl being held in Darn Rowan is not the carrier of any extraordinary gene. She's ordinary to the point of commonness. Beyond a shadow of doubt she is not Ciri of Cintra. She is not the girl the Imperator was seeking. For he was clearly seeking a girl who carries the gene; he even had some of her hair. I examined it and found something I didn't understand; now I do.'

'So Ciri isn't in Nilfgaard,' Yennefer said softly. 'She's not there.'

'She's not there,' Philippa Eilhart repeated gravely. 'Emhyr was tricked; a double was planted on him. I've known as much since yesterday. However, I'm pleased by Mistress Assire's disclosure. It confirms that our lodge is now functioning.'

Yennefer had great difficulty controlling the trembling of her hands and mouth. *Keep calm,* she told herself. *Keep calm; don't reveal anything; wait for an opportunity. Keep listening. Collect information. A sphinx. Be a sphinx.*

'So it was Vilgefortz,' Sabrina said, slamming her fist down on the table. 'Not Emhyr, but Vilgefortz. That charmer, that handsome scoundrel! He duped Emhyr and us!'

Yennefer calmed herself by breathing deeply. Assire var Anahid, the Nilfgaardian sorceress, feeling understandably uncomfortable in her tight-fitting dress, was talking about a young Nilfgaardian nobleman. Yennefer knew who it was and involuntarily clenched her fists. A black knight in a winged helmet, the nightmare from Ciri's hallucinations . . . She sensed Francesca and Philippa's eyes on her. However, Triss – whose gaze she was trying to attract – was avoiding her eyes. *Bloody hell*, Yennefer thought, trying hard to remain impassive, *I've landed myself in it. What bloody predicament have I tangled the girl up in? Shit, how will I ever be able to look the Witcher in the eye . . . ?*

'Thus, we'll have a perfect opportunity,' Keira Metz called in an excited voice, 'to rescue Ciri and strike at Vilgefortz at the same time. We'll scorch the ground beneath the rascal's arse!'

'Any scorching of ground must be preceded by the discovery of Vilgefortz's whereabouts,' Sheala de Tancarville, the sorceress from Kovir whom Yennefer had never felt much affection for, said mockingly. 'And no one's managed it so far. Not even some of the ladies sitting at this table, who have devoted both their time and

their extraordinary abilities to looking for it.'

'Two of Vilgefortz's numerous hideouts have already been found,' Philippa Eilhart responded coldly. 'Dijkstra is searching intensively for the remaining ones, and I wouldn't write him off. Sometimes spies and informers succeed where magic fails.'

One of the agents accompanying Dijkstra looked into the dungeon, stepped back sharply, leant against the wall and went as white as a sheet, looking as though he would faint at any moment. Dijkstra made a mental note to transfer the milksop to office work. But when he looked into the cell himself, he changed his mind. He felt his bile rising. He couldn't embarrass himself in front of his subordinates, however. He unhurriedly removed a perfumed handkerchief from his pocket, held it against his nose and mouth, and leant over the naked corpse lying on the stone floor.

'Belly and womb cut open,' he diagnosed, struggling to maintain his calm and a cold tone. 'Very skilfully, as if by a surgeon's hand. The foetus was removed from the girl. She was alive when they did it, but it was not done here. Are all of them like that? Lennep, I'm talking to you.'

'No . . .' the agent said with a shudder, tearing his eyes away from the corpse. 'The others had been garrotted. They weren't pregnant . . . But we shall perform post-mortems . . .'

'How many were found, in total?'

'Apart from this one, four. We haven't managed to identify any of them.'

'That's not true,' Dijkstra countered from behind his handkerchief. 'I've already managed to identify this one. It's Jolie, the youngest daughter of Count Lanier. The girl who disappeared without a trace a year ago. I'll take a glance at the other ones.'

'Some of them are partially burnt,' Lennep said. 'They will be difficult to identify . . . But, sire, apart from this . . . we found . . .'

'Speak. Don't stammer.'

'There are bones in that well,' the agent said, pointing at a hole gaping in the floor. 'A large quantity of bones. We have not removed or examined them, but we can be sure they all belonged to young women. Were we to ask sorcerers for aid we might be able to identify them . . . and inform those parents who are still looking for their missing daughters . . .'

‘Under no circumstances,’ Dijkstra said, swinging around. ‘Not a word about what’s been found here. To anyone. Particularly not to any mages. I’m beginning to lose faith in them after what I’ve seen here. Lennep, have the upper levels been thoroughly searched? Has nothing been found that might help us in our quest?’

‘Nothing, sire,’ Lennep said and lowered his head. ‘As soon as we received word, we rushed to the castle. But we arrived too late. Everything had burnt down. Consumed by a fearful conflagration. Magical, without any doubt. Only here, in the dungeons, did the spell not destroy everything. I don’t know why . . .’

‘But I do. The fuse wasn’t lit by Vilgefortz, but by Rience or another of the sorcerer’s factotums. Vilgefortz wouldn’t have made such a mistake, he wouldn’t have left anything but the soot on the walls. Oh yes, he knows that fire purifies . . . and covers tracks.’

‘Indeed it does,’ Lennep muttered. ‘There isn’t even any evidence that Vilgefortz was here at all . . .’

‘Then fabricate some,’ Dijkstra said, removing the handkerchief from his face. ‘Must I teach you how it’s done? I know that Vilgefortz was here. Did anything else survive in the dungeons apart from the corpses? What’s behind that iron door?’

‘Step this way, sire,’ the agent said, taking a torch from one of the assistants. ‘I will show you.’

There was no doubt that the magical spark which had been meant to turn everything in the dungeon to ashes had been placed right there, in the spacious chamber behind the iron door. An error in the spell had largely thwarted the plan, but the fire had still been powerful and fierce. The flames had charred the shelves occupying one of the walls, destroyed and fused the glass vessels, turning everything into a stinking mass. The only thing left unaffected in the chamber was a table with a metal top and two curious chairs set into the floor. Curious, but leaving no doubt as to their function.

‘They are constructed,’ Lennep said swallowing, and pointing at the chairs and the clasps attached to them, ‘so as to hold . . . the legs . . . apart. Wide apart.’

‘Bastard,’ Dijkstra snapped through clenched teeth. ‘Damned bastard . . .’

‘We found traces of blood, faeces and urine in the gutter beneath the wooden chair,’ the agent continued softly. ‘The steel one is brand new, most probably unused. I don’t know what to make of it . . .’

‘I do,’ Dijkstra said. ‘The steel one was constructed for somebody special. Someone that Vilgefortz suspected of special abilities.’

‘In no way do I disregard Dijkstra or his secret service,’ Sheala de Tancarville said. ‘I know that finding Vilgefortz is only a matter of time. However, passing over the motif of personal vengeance which seems to fascinate some of you, I’ll take the liberty of observing that it is not at all certain that Vilgefortz has Ciri.’

‘If it’s not Vilgefortz, then who? She was on the island. None of us, as far as I know, teleported her away from there. Neither Dijkstra nor any of the kings have her, we know that for sure. And her body wasn’t found in the ruins of the Tower of Gulls.’

‘Tor Lara,’ Ida Emean said slowly, ‘once concealed a very powerful teleportal. Could the girl have escaped Thanedd through that portal?’

Yennefer veiled her eyes with her eyelashes and dug her nails into the heads of the sphinxes on the chair’s armrests. *Keep calm*, she thought. *Just keep calm*. She felt Margarita’s eyes on her, but did not raise her head.

‘If Ciri entered the teleportal in the Tower of Gulls,’ the rectoress of Aretuza said in a slightly altered voice, ‘I fear we can forget our plans and projects. We may never see Ciri again. The now-destroyed portal of Tor Lara was damaged. It's warped. Lethal.’

‘What are we talking about here?’ Sabrina exploded. ‘In order to uncover the teleportal in the tower, in order to see it at all, would require fourth-level magic! And the abilities of a grandmaster would be necessary to activate the portal! I don’t know if Vilgefortz is capable of that, never mind a fifteen-year-old filly. How can you even imagine something like that? Who is this girl, in your opinion? What potential does she hold?’

‘Is it so important,’ Stephan Skellen, also called Tawny Owl, the Coroner of Imperator Emhyr var Emreis said, stretching, ‘what potential she holds, Master Bonhart? Or even if any? I’d rather she wasn’t around at all. And I’m paying you a hundred florins to make my wish come true. If you want, examine her – after killing her or before, up to you. Either way the fee won't change, I give you my solemn word.’

‘And were I to supply her alive?’

‘It still won’t.’

The man called Bonhart twisted his grey whiskers. He was of immense height, but as bony as a skeleton. His other hand rested on his sword the entire time, as though he wanted to hide the ornate pommel of the hilt from Skellen’s eyes.

‘Am I to bring you her head?’

‘No,’ Tawny Owl said, wincing. ‘Why would I want her head? To preserve in honey?’

‘As proof.’

‘I’ll take you at your word. You are well known for your reliability, Bonhart.’

‘Thank you for the recognition,’ the bounty hunter said, and smiled. At the sight of his smile, Skellen, who had twenty armed men waiting outside the tavern, felt a shiver running down his spine. ‘Rarely received, although well deserved. I have to bring the barons and the lords Varnhagens the heads of all the Rats I catch or they won’t pay. If you have no need of Falka’s head, you won’t, I imagine, have anything against my adding it to the set.’

‘To claim the other reward? What about your professional ethics?’

‘Honoured sir,’ Bonhart said, narrowing his eyes, ‘I am not paid for killing, but for the service I render by killing. A service I’ll be rendering both you and the Varnhagens.’

‘Fair enough,’ Tawny Owl agreed. ‘Do whatever you think’s right. When can I expect you to collect the bounty money?’

‘Soon.’

‘Meaning?’

‘The Rats are heading for the Bandit’s Trail, with plans to winter in the mountains. I’ll cut off their route. Twenty days, no more.’

‘Are you certain of the route they’re taking?’

‘They’ve been seen near Fen Aspra, where they robbed a convoy and two merchants. They’ve been prowling near Tyffi. Then they stopped off at Druigh for one night, to dance at a village fair. They finally ended up in Loredo, where your Falka hacked a fellow to pieces, in such a fashion that they’re still talking about it through chattering teeth. Which is why I asked what there is to this Falka.’

‘Perhaps you and she are very much alike,’ Stephan Skellen mocked. ‘But no, forgive me. After all, you don’t take money for

killing, but for services rendered. You're a true craftsman, Bonhart, a genuine professional. A trade, like any other? A job to be done? They pay for it, and everyone has to make a living? Eh?'

The bounty hunter looked at him long and hard. Until Tawny Owl's smirk finally vanished.

'Indeed,' he said. 'Everyone has to make a living. Some earn money doing what they've learned. Others do what they have to. But not many craftsmen have been as lucky in life as I am: they pay me for a trade I truly and honestly enjoy. Not even whores can say that.'

Yennefer welcomed Philippa's suggestion of a break for a bite to eat and to moisten throats dried out by speaking with relief, delight and hope. It soon turned out, however, that her hopes were in vain. Philippa quickly dragged away Margarita – who clearly wanted to talk to Yennefer – to the other end of the room, and Triss Merigold, who had drawn closer to her, was accompanied by Francesca. The she-elf unceremoniously controlled the conversation. Yennefer saw anxiety in Triss's cornflower-blue eyes, however, and was certain that even without witnesses it would have been futile to ask for help. Triss was undoubtedly already committed, heart and soul, to the lodge. And doubtlessly sensed that Yennefer's loyalty was still wavering.

Triss tried to cheer her up by assuring her that Geralt, safe in Brokilon, was returning to health thanks to the dryads' efforts. As usual, she blushed at the mention of his name. *He must have pleased her back then*, Yennefer thought, not without malice. *She had never known anyone like him before and she won't forget him in a hurry. And a good thing too.*

She dismissed the revelations with an apparently indifferent shrug of her shoulders. She wasn't concerned by the fact that neither Triss nor Francesca believed her indifference. She wanted to be alone, and wanted them to see that.

They did just that.

She stood at the far end of the food table, devoting herself to oysters. She ate cautiously, still in pain from her compression. She was reluctant to drink wine, not knowing how she might react.

'Yennefer?'

She turned around. Fringilla Vigo smiled faintly, looking down at

the short knife Yennefer was gripping tightly.

'I can see and sense,' she said, 'that you'd rather prise me open than that oyster. Still no love lost?'

'The lodge,' Yennefer replied coolly, 'demands mutual loyalty. Friendship is not compulsory.'

'It isn't and shouldn't be,' the Nilfgaardian sorceress said, and looked around the chamber. 'Friendship is either the result of a lengthy process or is spontaneous.'

'The same goes for enmity,' Yennefer said, opening the oyster and swallowing the contents along with some seawater. 'Occasionally one happens to see another person for only a split second, right before going blind, and one takes a dislike to them instantly.'

'Oh, enmity is considerably more complicated,' Fringilla said, squinting. 'Imagine someone you don't know at all standing at the top of a hill, and ripping a friend of yours to shreds in front of your eyes. You neither saw them nor know them at all, but you still don't like them.'

'So it goes,' Yennefer said, shrugging. 'Fate has a way of playing tricks on you.'

'Fate,' Fringilla said quietly, 'is unpredictable indeed, like a mischievous child. Friends sometimes turn their backs on us, while an enemy comes in useful. You can, for example, talk to them face to face. No one tries to interfere, no one interrupts or eavesdrops. Everyone wonders what the two enemies could possibly be talking about. About nothing important. Why, they're mouthing platitudes and twisting the occasional barb.'

'No doubt,' Yennefer said, nodding, 'that's what everyone thinks. And they're absolutely right.'

'Which means it'll be even easier,' Fringilla said, quite relaxed, 'to bring up a particularly important and remarkable matter.'

'What matter would that be?'

'That of the escape attempt you're planning.'

Yennefer, who was opening another oyster, almost cut her finger. She looked around furtively, and then glanced at the Nilfgaardian from under her eyelashes. Fringilla Vigo smiled slightly.

'Be so kind as to lend me the knife. To open an oyster. Your oysters are excellent. It's not easy for us to get such good ones in the south. Particularly not now, during the wartime blockade . . . A

blockade is a very bad thing, isn't it?'

Yennefer gave a slight cough.

'I've noticed,' Fringilla said, swallowing the oyster and reaching for another. 'Yes, Philippa's looking at us. Assire too, probably worrying about my loyalty to the lodge. My endangered loyalty. She's liable to think I'll yield to sympathy. Let us see . . . Your sweetheart was seriously injured. The girl you treat as a daughter has disappeared, is possibly being imprisoned . . . perhaps her life's in danger. Or perhaps she'll just be played as a card in a rigged game? I swear, I couldn't stand it. I'd flee at once. Please, take the knife back. That's enough oysters, I have to watch my figure.'

'A blockade, as you have deigned to observe,' Yennefer whispered, looking into the Nilfgaardian sorceress's eyes, 'is a very bad thing. Simply beastly. It doesn't allow one to do what one wants. But a blockade can be overcome, if one has . . . the means. Which I don't.'

'Do you expect me to give the means to you?' the Nilfgaardian asked, examining the rough shell of the oyster, which she was still holding. 'Oh no, not a chance. I'm loyal to the lodge, and the lodge, naturally, doesn't wish you to hurry to the aid of your loved ones. Furthermore, I'm your enemy. How could you forget that, Yennefer?'

'Indeed. How could I?'

'I would warn a friend,' Fringilla said quietly, 'that even if she were in possession of the components for teleportation spells, she wouldn't be able to break the blockade undetected. An operation of that kind demands time and is too conspicuous. An unobtrusive but energetic attractor is a little better. I repeat: a *little* better. Teleportation using an improvised attractor, as you are no doubt aware, is very risky. I would try to dissuade a friend from taking such a risk. But you aren't a friend.'

Fringilla spilt a sprinkling of seawater from the shell she was holding onto the table.

'And on that note, we'll end our banal conversation,' she said. 'The lodge demands mutual loyalty from us. Friendship, fortunately, isn't compulsory.'

'She teleported,' Francesca Findabair stated coldly and unemotionally, when the confusion caused by Yennefer's

disappearance had calmed down. ‘There’s nothing to get het up about, ladies. And there’s nothing we can do about it now. She’s too far away. It’s my mistake. I suspected her obsidian star masked the echo of spells—’

‘How did she bloody do it?’ Philippa yelled. ‘She could muffle an echo, that isn’t difficult. But how did she manage to open the portal? Montecalvo has a blockade!’

‘I’ve never liked her,’ Sheala de Tancarville said, shrugging her shoulders. ‘I’ve never approved of her lifestyle. But I’ve never questioned her abilities.’

‘She’ll tell them everything!’ Sabrina Glevissig yelled. ‘Everything about the lodge! She’ll fly straight to—’

‘Nonsense,’ Triss Merigold interrupted animatedly, looking at Francesca and Ida Emean. ‘Yennefer won’t betray us. She didn’t escape to betray us.’

‘Triss is right,’ Margarita Laux-Antille added, backing her up. ‘I know why she escaped and who she wants to rescue. I’ve seen them, she and Ciri, together. And I understand.’

‘But I don’t understand any of this!’ Sabrina yelled and everything became heated again.

Assire var Anahid leant towards her friend.

‘I won’t ask why you did it,’ she whispered. ‘I won’t ask how you did it. I’ll only ask: where is she headed?’

Fringilla Vigo smiled faintly, stroking the carved head of the sphinx on the chair’s armrest with her fingers.

‘And how could I possibly know,’ she whispered back, ‘which coast these oysters came from?’

***Ithlina**, actually Ithlinne Aegli: daughter of Aevenien, the legendary elven healer, astrologist and soothsayer, famous for her predictions and prophecies, of which Aen Ithlinnespeath, Ithlina's Prophecy, is the best known. It has been written down many times and published in numerous forms. The Prophecy enjoyed great popularity at certain moments, and the commentaries, clues and clarifications appended to it adapted the text to contemporary events, which strengthened convictions about its great clairvoyance. In particular it is believed **I.** predicted the Northern Wars (1239–1268), the Great Plagues (1268, 1272 and 1294), the bloody War of the Two Unicorns (1309–1318) and the Haak Invasion (1350). **I.** was also supposed to have prophesied the climatic changes observed from the end of the thirteenth century, known as the Great Frost, which superstition always claimed was a sign of the end of the world and linked to the prophesied coming of the Destroyer (q.v.). This passage from **I.'s** Prophecy gave rise to the infamous witch hunts (1272–76) and contributed to the deaths of many women and unfortunate girls mistaken for the incarnation of the Destroyer. Today **I.** is regarded by many scholars as a legendary figure and her 'prophecies' as very recently fabricated apocrypha, and a cunning literary fraud.*

Effenberg and Talbot,

Encyclopaedia Maxima Mundi, Volume X

Chapter Seven

The children gathered in a ring around the wandering storyteller Stribog showed their disapproval by making a dreadful, riotous uproar. Finally Connor, the blacksmith's son, the oldest, strongest and bravest of the children, and also the one who brought the storyteller a pot full of cabbage soup and potatoes sprinkled with scraps of fried bacon, stepped forward as the spokesman and exponent of the general opinion.

'How's that?' he yelled. 'What do you mean "that's your lot"? Is it fair to end the tale there? To leave us hungry for more? We want to know what happened next! We can't wait till you visit our village again, for it might be in six months or a whole year! Go on with the story!'

'The sun's gone down,' the old man replied. 'It's time for bed, young 'uns. When you start to yawn and grumble over your chores tomorrow, what will your parents say? I know what they'll say: "Old Stribog was telling them tales till past midnight, wearying the children's heads with songs, and didn't let them get to bed. So when he wends his way to the village again, don't give him nothing; no kasha, no dumplings, no bacon. Just drive him off, the old gimmer, because nothing comes from his tales but woe and trouble—" '

'They won't say that!' the children all shouted. 'Tell us more! Pleeease!'

'Mmm,' the old man mumbled, looking at the sun disappearing behind the treetops on the far bank of the Yaruga. 'Very well then. But here's the bargain: one of you's to hurry over to the cottage and fetch some buttermilk for me to moisten my throat. The rest of you, meanwhile, are to decide whose story I'll tell, for I shan't tell everyone's tale today, even were I to spin yarns till morning. You have to decide: who do I tell of now, and who another time.'

The children began to yell again, each trying to outshout the others.

'Silence!' Stribog roared, brandishing his stick. 'I told you to choose, not shriek like jays: skaak-skaak-skaak! What'll it be? Whose story shall I tell?'

'Yennefer's,' Nimue squeaked. She was the youngest in the audience, nicknamed 'Squirt' owing to her height, and was stroking a kitten that was asleep on her lap. 'Tell us what happened to the sorceress afterwards. How she used magic to flee from the cov-cov-

coven on Bald Mountain to rescue Ciri. I'd love to hear that. I want to be a sorceress when I grow up!'

'No chance!' shouted Bronik, the miller's son. 'Wipe your nose first, Squirt. They don't take snot-noses for sorcerers' apprentices! And you, old man, don't talk about Yennefer, but about Ciri and the Rats, when they went a-robbing and beat up—'

'Quiet,' Connor said, glum and pensive. 'You're all stupid, and that's that. If we're to hear one thing more tonight, let there be some order. Tell us about the Witcher and his band, when the company set off from the Yaruga—'

'I want to hear about Yennefer,' Nimue squealed.

'Me too,' Orla, her elder sister, joined in. 'I want to hear about her love for the Witcher. How they doted on each other. But be sure it's a happy ending! Nowt about fighting, oh no!'

'Quiet, you silly thing, who cares about love? We want war and fighting!'

'And the Witcher's sword!'

'No, Ciri and the Rats!'

'Shut your traps,' Connor said and looked around fiercely. 'Or I'll get a stick and give you a thrashing, you little snots! I said: let there be some order. Let him carry on about the Witcher, when he was travelling with Dandelion and Milva—'

'Yes!' Nimue squealed again. 'I want to hear about Milva, about Milva! Because if the sorceresses don't take me, I'm going to be an archer!'

'So we've decided,' Connor said. 'Look at him nodding, nose dipping like a corncrake's . . . Hey, old man! Wake up! Tell us about the Witcher, about Geralt the Witcher, I mean. When he formed his fellowship on the bank of the Yaruga.'

'But first,' Bronik interrupted, 'to salve our curiosity, tell us a little about the others. About what happened to them. Then it'll be easier for us to wait till you come back and continue the story. Just a little about Yennefer and Ciri. Please.'

'Yennefer' – Stribog giggled – 'flew from the enchanted castle, which was called Bald Mountain, using a spell. And she plopped straight into the ocean. Into the rough seas, among cruel rocks. But don't be afeared, it was a trifle for the enchantress. She didn't drown. She landed up on the Skellige Islands and found allies there. For you must know that a great fury arose in her against the Wizard

Vilgefortz. Convinced he had kidnapped Ciri, she vowed to track him down, exact a terrible vengeance and free Ciri. And that's that. I'll tell you more another time.'

'And Ciri?'

'Ciri was still prowling with the Rats, calling herself "Falka". She had gained a taste for the robbers' life. For though no one knew it then, there was fury and cruelty in that girl. The worst of everything that hides in a person emerged from her and slowly got the upper hand. Oh, the witchers of Kaer Morhen made a great mistake by teaching her how to kill! And Ciri herself – dealing out death – didn't even suspect that the Grim Reaper was hot on her trail. For the terrible Bonhart was tracking her, hunting her. The meeting of these two, Bonhart and Ciri, was meant to be. But I shall recount their tale another time. For tonight you shall hear the tale of the Witcher.'

The children calmed down and crowded around the old man in a tight circle. They listened. Night was falling. The hemp shrubs, the raspberry bushes and hollyhocks growing near the cottage – friendly during the day – were suddenly transformed into an extraordinary, sinister forest. What was rustling there? Was it a mouse, or a terrible, fiery-eyed elf? Or perhaps a striga or a witch, hungry for children's flesh? Was it an ox stamping in the cowshed, or the hooves of cruel invaders' warhorses, crossing the Yaruga as they had a century before? Was that a nightjar flitting above the thatched roof, or perhaps a vampire, thirsty for blood? Or perhaps a beautiful sorceress, flying towards the distant sea with the aid of a magic spell?

'Geralt the Witcher,' the storyteller began, 'set out with his company towards the bogs and forests of Angren. And you must know that in those days there were truly wild forests in Angren, oh my, not like now, there aren't any forests like that left, unless in Brokilon . . . The company trekked eastwards, up the Yaruga, towards the wildernesses of the Black Forest. Things went well at first, but later, oh my . . . you'll learn what happened later . . .'

The tale of long-past, forgotten times unravelled and flowed. And the children listened.

The Witcher sat on a log at the top of a cliff from which unfolded a view over the wetlands and reed beds lining the bank of the Yaruga. The sun was sinking. Cranes soared up from the marshes, whooping, flying in a skein.

Everything's gone to pot, the Witcher thought, looking at the ruins of a woodman's shack and the thin ribbon of smoke rising from Milva's campfire. *Everything's fallen through. And it was going so well. My companions were strange, but at least they stood by me. We had a goal to achieve; close at hand, realistic, defined. Eastwards through Angren, towards Caed Dhu. It was going pretty well. But it had to get fucked up. Was it bad luck, or fate?*

The cranes sounded their bugle call.

Emiel Regis Rohellec Terzieff-Godefroy led the way, riding a Nilfgaardian bay captured by the Witcher near Armeria. The horse, although at first somewhat tetchy with the vampire and his herby smell, quickly became accustomed to him and didn't cause any more problems than Roach, who was walking alongside and was capable of bucking wildly if stung by a horsefly. Dandelion followed behind Regis and Geralt on Pegasus, with a bandaged head and a warlike mien. As he rode, the poet composed a heroic ballad, in whose melody and rhymes could be heard his recollections of their recent adventures. The song clearly implied that the author and performer had been the bravest of the brave during the adventures. Milva and Cahir Mawr Dyffryn aep Ceallach brought up the rear. Cahir was riding his recovered chestnut, pulling the grey laden with some of their modest accoutrement.

They finally left the riverside marshes, heading towards higher and drier, hilly terrain from which they could see the sparkling ribbon of the Great Yaruga to the south, and to the north the high, rocky approaches to the distant Mahakam massif. The weather was splendid, the sun was warm, and the mosquitoes had stopped biting and buzzing around their ears. Their boots and trousers had dried out. On the sunny slope brambles were black with fruit and the horses found grass to eat. The streams tumbling down from the hills flowed with crystal-clear water and were full of trout. When night fell, they were able to make a fire and even lie beside it. In short, everything was wonderful and their moods ought to have improved right away. But they didn't. The reason why became apparent at one of the first camps.

'Wait a moment, Geralt,' the poet began, looking around and clearing his throat. 'Don't rush back to the camp. Milva and I would like to talk to you in private. It's about . . . you know . . . Regis.'

'Ah,' the Witcher said, laying a handful of brushwood on the

ground. ‘So now you’re afraid? It’s a bit late for that.’

‘Stop that,’ Dandelion said with a grimace. ‘We’ve accepted him as a companion; he’s offered to help us search for Ciri. He saved my neck from the noose, which I shall never forget. But hell’s bells, we are feeling something like fear. Does that surprise you? You’ve spent your entire life hunting and killing his like.’

‘I did not kill him. And I’m not planning to. Does that declaration suffice? If it doesn’t, even though my heart’s brimming with sorrow for you, I can’t cure you of your anxieties. Paradoxically, Regis is the only one among us capable of curing anything.’

‘Stop that,’ the troubadour repeated, annoyed. ‘You aren’t talking to Yennefer; you can drop the tortuous eloquence. Give us a simple answer to a simple question.’

‘Then ask it. Without any tortuous eloquence.’

‘Regis is a vampire. It’s no secret what vampires feed on. What will happen when he gets seriously hungry? Yes, yes, we saw him eating fish soup, and since then he’s been eating and drinking with us, as normal as anyone. But . . . will he be able to control his craving . . . Geralt, do I have to spell it out to you?’

‘He controlled his blood lust, when gore was pouring from your head. He didn’t even lick his fingers after he’d finished applying the dressing. And during the full moon, when we’d been drinking his mandrake moonshine and were sleeping in his shack, he had the perfect opportunity to get his hands on us. Have you checked for puncture marks on your swanlike neck?’

‘Don’t take the piss, Witcher,’ Milva growled. ‘You know more about vampires than we do. You’re mocking Dandelion, so tell me. I was raised in the forest, I didn’t go to school. I’m ignorant. But it’s no fault of mine. It’s not right to mock. I – I’m ashamed to say – am also a bit afraid of . . . Regis.’

‘Not unreasonably,’ Geralt said, nodding. ‘He’s a so-called higher vampire. He’s extremely dangerous. Were he our enemy, I’d be afraid of him too. But, bloody hell, for reasons unknown to me, he’s our companion. Right now, he’s leading us to Caed Dhu, to the druids, who may be able to help me get information about Ciri. I’m desperate, so I want to seize the chance and certainly not give up on it. Which is why I’ve agreed to his vampiric company.’

‘Only because of that?’

‘No,’ he answered, with a trace of reluctance. Then he finally

decided to be frank. ‘Not just that. He . . . he behaves decently. He didn’t hesitate to act during that girl’s trial at the camp by the Chotla. Although he knew it would unmask him.’

‘He took that red-hot horseshoe from the fire,’ Dandelion recalled. ‘Why, he held it in his hand for a good few seconds without even flinching. None of us would be able to repeat that trick; not even with a roast potato.’

‘He’s invulnerable to fire.’

‘What else is he capable of?’

‘He can become invisible if he wishes. He can bewitch with his gaze, and put someone in a deep sleep. He did that to the guards in Vissegerd’s camp. He can assume the form of a bat and fly. I presume he can only do those things at night, during a full moon, but I could be wrong. He’s already surprised me a few times, so he might still have something up his sleeve. I suspect he’s quite remarkable even among vampires. He imitates humans perfectly, and has done so for years. He baffles horses and dogs – which can sense his true nature – using the smell of the herbs he keeps with him at all times. Though my medallion doesn’t react to him either, and it ought to. I tell you; he defies easy classification. Talk to him if you want to know more. He’s our companion. There should be nothing left unsaid between us, particularly not mutual mistrust or fear. Let’s get back to the camp. Help me with this brushwood.’

‘Geralt?’

‘Yes, Dandelion.’

‘If . . . and I’m asking purely theoretically . . . If . . .’

‘I don’t know,’ the Witcher replied honestly and frankly. ‘I don’t know if I’d be capable of killing him. I truly would prefer not to be forced to try.’

Dandelion took the Witcher’s advice to heart, deciding to clear up the uncertainty and dispel their doubts. He began as soon as they set off. With his usual tact.

‘Milva!’ he suddenly called as they were riding, sneaking a glance at the vampire. ‘Why don’t you ride on ahead with your bow, and bring down a fawn or wild boar. I’ve had enough of damned blackberries and mushrooms, fish and mussels. I fancy eating a hunk of real meat for a change. How about you, Regis?’

‘I beg your pardon?’ the vampire said, lifting his head from the

horse's neck.

'Meat!' the poet repeated emphatically. 'I'm trying to persuade Milva to go hunting. Fancy some fresh meat?'

'Yes, I do.'

'And blood. Would you like some fresh blood?'

'Blood?' Regis asked, swallowing. 'No. I'll decline the blood. But, if you have a taste for some, feel free.'

Geralt, Milva and Cahir observed an awkward, sepulchral silence.

'I know what this is about, Dandelion,' Regis said slowly. 'And let me reassure you. I'm a vampire, but I don't drink blood.'

The silence became as heavy as lead. But Dandelion wouldn't have been Dandelion if he had remained silent.

'You must have misunderstood me,' he said seemingly light-heartedly. 'I didn't mean . . .'

'I don't drink blood,' Regis interrupted. 'Haven't for many years. I gave it up.'

'What do you mean, gave it up?'

'Just that.'

'I really don't understand . . .'

'Forgive me. It's a personal matter.'

'But . . .'

'Dandelion,' the Witcher burst out, turning around in the saddle. 'Regis just told you to fuck off. He just said it more politely. Be so good as to shut your trap.'

However, the seeds of anxiety and doubts that had been sown now germinated and sprouted. When they stopped for the night, the ambience was still heavy and tense, which even Milva shooting down a plump barnacle goose by the river couldn't relieve. They covered the catch in clay, roasted and ate it, gnawing even the tiniest bones clean. They had sated their hunger, but the anxiety remained. The conversation was awkward despite Dandelion's titanic efforts. The poet's chatter became a monologue, so obviously apparent that even he finally noticed it and stopped talking. Only the sound of the horses crunching their hay disturbed the deathly silence around the campfire.

In spite of the late hour no one seemed to be getting ready for bed. Milva was boiling water in a pot above the fire and straightening the crumpled fletchings of her arrows in the steam. Cahir was repairing a torn boot buckle. Geralt was whittling a piece of wood. And Regis swept his eyes over all of them in turn.

'Very well,' he said at last. 'I see it is inevitable. It would appear I ought to have explained a few things to you long ago . . .'

'No one expects it of you,' Geralt said. He threw the stick he had been lengthily and enthusiastically carving into the fire and looked up. 'I don't need explanations. I'm the old-fashioned type. When I hold my hand out to someone and accept him as a comrade, it means more to me than a contract signed in the presence of a notary.'

'I'm old-fashioned too,' Cahir said, still bent over his boot.

'I don't know any other custom,' Milva said drily, placing another arrow in the steam rising up from the pot.

'Don't worry about Dandelion's chatter,' the Witcher added. 'He can't help it. And you don't have to confide in us or explain anything. We haven't confided in you either.'

'I nonetheless think' – the vampire smiled faintly – 'that you'd like to hear what I have to say, even though no one's forcing you to. I feel the need for openness towards the individuals I extend a hand to and accept as my comrades.'

This time no one said anything.

'I ought to begin by saying,' Regis said a moment later, 'that all fears linked to my vampiric nature are groundless. I won't attack anybody, nor will I creep around at night trying to sink my teeth into somebody's neck. And this does not merely concern my comrades, to whom my relationship is no less old-fashioned than theirs is to me. I don't touch blood. Not at all and never. I stopped drinking it when it became a problem for me. A serious problem, which I had difficulty solving.

'In fact, the problem arose and acquired negative characteristics in true textbook style,' he continued a moment later. 'Even during my youth I enjoyed . . . er . . . the pleasures of good company, in which respect I was no different to the majority of my peers. You know what it's like; you were young too. With humans, however, there exists a system of rules and restrictions: parental authority, guardians, superiors and elders – morals, ultimately. We have nothing like that. Youngsters have complete freedom and exploit it.

They create their own patterns of behaviour. Stupid ones, you understand. It's real youthful foolishness. "Don't fancy a drink? And you call yourself a vampire?" "He doesn't drink? Don't invite him, he'll spoil the party!" I didn't want to spoil the party, and the thought of losing social approval terrified me. So I partied. Revelries and frolics, shindigs and booze-ups; every full moon we'd fly to a village and drink from anyone we found. The foulest, the worst class of . . . er . . . fluid. It made no difference to us whose it was, as long as there was . . . er . . . haemoglobin . . . It can't be a party without blood, after all! And I was terribly shy with vampire girls, too, until I'd had a drop.'

Regis fell silent, lost in thought. No one responded. Geralt felt a terrible urge to have a drink himself.

'It got rowdier and rowdier,' the vampire continued. 'And worse and worse as time went on. Occasionally I went on such benders that I didn't return to the crypt for three or four nights in a row. A tiny amount of fluid and I lost control, which, of course, didn't stop me from continuing the party. My friends? Well, you know what they're like. Some of them tried to make me see reason, so I took offence. Others were a bad influence, and dragged me out of the crypt to revels. Why, they even set me up with . . . er . . . playthings. And they enjoyed themselves at my expense.'

Milva, still busy restoring her arrows' flattened fletchings, murmured angrily. Cahir had finished repairing his boot and seemed to be asleep.

'Later on,' Regis continued, 'more alarming symptoms appeared. Parties and company began to play an absolutely secondary role. I noticed I could manage without them. Blood was all I needed, was all that mattered, even when it was . . .'

'Just you and your shadow?' Dandelion interjected.

'Worse than that,' Regis answered calmly. 'I don't even cast one.'

He was silent for a while.

'Then I met a special vampire girl. It might have been – I think it was – serious. I settled down. But not for long. She left me. So I began to double my intake. Despair and grief, as you know, are perfect excuses. Everyone thinks they understand. Even I thought I understood. But I was merely applying theory to practice. Am I boring you? I'll try to make it short. I finally began to do absolutely unacceptable things, the kind of things no vampire does. I flew under the influence. One night the boys sent me to the village to

fetch some blood, and I missed my target: a girl who was walking to the well. I smashed straight into the well at top speed . . . The villagers almost beat me to death, but fortunately they didn't know how to go about it . . . They punctured me with stakes, chopped my head off, poured holy water all over me and buried me. Can you imagine how I felt when I woke up?'

'We can,' Milva said, examining an arrow. Everyone looked at her strangely. The archer coughed and looked away. Regis smiled faintly.

'I won't be long now,' he said. 'In the grave I had plenty of time to rethink things . . .'

'Plenty?' Geralt asked. 'How much?'

Regis looked at him.

'Professional curiosity? Around fifty years. After I'd regenerated I decided to pull myself together. It wasn't easy, but I did it. And I haven't drunk since.'

'Not at all?' Dandelion said, and stuttered. But his curiosity got the better of him. 'Not at all? Never? But . . . ?'

'Dandelion,' Geralt said, slightly raising his eyebrows. 'Get a grip and think. In silence.'

'I beg your pardon,' the poet grunted.

'Don't apologise,' the vampire said placatingly. 'And, Geralt, don't chasten him. I understand his curiosity. I – by which I mean I and my myth – personify all his human fears. One cannot expect a human to rid himself of them. Fear plays a no less important role in the human psyche than all the other emotions. A psyche without fears would be crippled.'

'But,' Dandelion said, regaining his poise, 'you don't frighten me. Does that make me a cripple?'

For a moment Geralt expected Regis to show his fangs and cure Dandelion of his supposed disability, but he was wrong. The vampire wasn't inclined towards theatrical gestures.

'I was talking about fears deeply lodged in the consciousness and the subconscious,' he explained calmly. 'Please don't be hurt by this metaphor, but a crow isn't afraid of a hat and coat hung on a stick, after it has overcome that fear and alighted on them. But when the wind jerks the scarecrow, the bird flees.'

'The crow's behaviour might be seen as a struggle for life,' Cahir

observed from the darkness.

‘Struggle, schmuggle.’ Milva snorted. ‘The crow isn’t afraid of the scarecrow. It’s afraid of men, because men throw stones and shoot at it.’

‘A struggle for life.’ Geralt nodded. ‘But in human – not corvine – terms. Thank you for the explanation, Regis, we accept it wholeheartedly. But don’t go rooting about in the depths of the human subconscious. Milva’s right. The reasons people react in panic-stricken horror at the sight of a thirsty vampire aren’t irrational, they are a result of the will to survive.’

‘Thus speaks an expert,’ the vampire said, bowing slightly towards him. ‘An expert whose professional pride would not allow him to take money for fighting imaginary fears. The self-respecting witcher who only hires himself out to fight real, unequivocally dangerous evil. This professional will probably want to explain why a vampire is a greater threat than a dragon or a wolf. They have fangs too, don’t forget.’

‘Perhaps because the latter two use their fangs to stave off hunger or in self-defence, but never for fun or for breaking the ice or overcoming shyness towards the opposite sex.’

‘People know nothing about that,’ riposted Regis. ‘You have known it for some time, but the rest of our company have only just discovered the truth. The remaining majority are deeply convinced that vampires do not drink for fun but feed on blood, and nothing but blood. Needless to say, human blood. Blood is a life-giving fluid; its loss results in the weakening of the body, the seeping away of a vital force. You reason thus: a creature that spills our blood is our deadly enemy. And a creature that attacks us for our blood, because it lives on it, is doubly evil. It grows in vital force at the expense of ours. For its species to thrive, ours must fade away. Ultimately a creature like that is repellent to you humans, for although you are aware of blood’s life-giving qualities, it is disgusting to you. Would any of you drink blood? I doubt it. And there are people who grow weak or even faint at the sight of blood. In some societies women are considered unclean for a few days every month and they are isolated—’

‘Among savages, perhaps,’ Cahir interrupted. ‘And I think only Nordlings grow faint at the sight of blood.’

‘We’ve strayed,’ the Witcher said, looking up. ‘We’ve deviated from a straight path into a tangle of dubious philosophy. Do you think, Regis, that it would make a difference to humans were they

to know you don't treat them as prey, but as a watering hole? Where do you see the irrationality of fears here? Vampires drink human blood; that particular fact cannot be challenged. A human treated by a vampire as a demijohn of vodka loses his strength, that's also clear. A totally drained human – so to speak – loses his vitality definitively. He dies. Forgive me, but the fear of death can't be lumped together with an aversion to blood. Menstrual or otherwise.'

'Your talk's so clever it makes my head spin,' Milva snorted. 'And all your wisdom comes down to what's under a woman's skirt. Woeful philosophers.'

'Let's cast aside the symbolism of blood for a moment,' Regis said. 'For here the myths really do have certain grounds in facts. Let's focus on those universally accepted myths with no grounds in fact. After all, everyone knows that if someone is bitten by a vampire and survives they must become a vampire themselves. Right?'

'Right,' Dandelion said. 'There's even a ballad—'

'Do you understand basic arithmetic?'

'I've studied all seven liberal arts, and was awarded a degree summa cum laude.'

'After the Conjunction of the Spheres there remained approximately one thousand two hundred higher vampires in your world. The number of teetotallers – because there is a considerable number of them – balances the number who drink excessively, as I did in my day. Generally, the statistically average vampire drinks during every full moon, for the full moon is a holy day for us, which we usually . . . er . . . celebrate with a drink. Applying the matter to the human calendar and assuming there are twelve full moons a year gives us the theoretical sum of fourteen thousand four hundred humans bitten annually. Since the Conjunction – once again calculating according to your reckoning – one thousand five hundred years have passed. A simple calculation will show that at the present moment, twenty-one million six hundred thousand vampires ought to exist in the world. If that figure is augmented by exponential growth . . .'

'That'll do.' Dandelion sighed. 'I don't have an abacus, but I can imagine the number. Actually I can't imagine it, and you're saying that infection from a bite is nonsense and a fabrication.'

'Thank you,' Regis said, bowing. 'Let's move on to the next myth, which states that a vampire is a human being who has died – but

not completely. He doesn't rot or crumble to dust in the grave. He lies there as fresh as a daisy and ruddy-faced, ready to go forth and bite a victim. Where does that myth come from, if not from your subconscious and irrational aversion to your dearly departed? You surround the dead with veneration and memory, you dream of immortality, and in your myths and legends there's always someone being resurrected, conquering death. But were your esteemed late great-grandfather really to suddenly rise from the grave and order a beer, panic would ensue. And it doesn't surprise me. Organic matter, in which the vital processes have ceased, succumbs to degradation, which manifests itself very unpleasantly. The corpse stinks and dissolves into slime. The immortal soul, an indispensable element of your myths, abandons the stinking carcass in disgust and spirits away, forgive the pun. The soul is pure, and one can easily venerate it. But then you invented a revolting kind of spirit, which doesn't soar, doesn't abandon the cadaver, why, it doesn't even stink. That's repulsive and unnatural! For you, the living dead is the most revolting of revolting anomalies. Some moron even coined the term "the undead", which you're ever so keen to bestow on us.'

'Humans,' Geralt said, smiling slightly, 'are a primitive and superstitious race. They find it difficult to fully understand and appropriately name a creature that resurrects, even though it's had stakes pushed through it, had its head removed and been buried in the ground for fifty years.'

'Yes, indeed,' said the vampire, impervious to the derision. 'Your mutated race is capable of regenerating its fingernails, toenails, hair and epidermis, but is unable to accept the fact that other races are more advanced in that respect. That inability is not the result of your primitiveness. Quite the opposite: it's a result of egotism and a conviction in your own perfection. Anything that is more perfect than you must be a repulsive aberration. And repulsive aberrations are consigned to myths, for sociological reasons.'

'I don't understand fuck all,' Milva announced calmly, brushing the hair from her forehead with an arrow tip. 'I hear you're talking about fairy-tales, and even I know fairy-tales, though I'm a foolish wench from the forest. So it astonishes me that you aren't afraid of the sun, Regis. In fairy-tales sunlight burns a vampire to ash. Should I lump it together with the other fairy-tales?'

'Of course you should,' Regis confirmed. 'You believe a vampire is only dangerous at night, that the first rays of the sun turn him into ash. At the root of this myth, invented around primeval campfires, lies your heliophilia, by which I mean love of warmth; the circadian

rhythm, which relies upon diurnal activity. For you the night is cold, dark, sinister, menacing, and full of danger. The sunrise, however, represents another victory in the fight for life, a new day, the continuation of existence. Sunlight carries with it light and the sun; and the sun's rays, which are invigorating for you, bring with them the destruction of hostile monsters. A vampire turns to ash, a troll succumbs to petrifaction, a werewolf turns back into a human, and a goblin flees, covering his eyes. Nocturnal predators return to their lairs and cease to be a threat. The world belongs to you until sunset. I repeat and stress: this myth arose around ancient campfires. Today it is only a myth, for now you light and heat your dwelling places. Even though you are still governed by the solar rhythm, you have managed to appropriate the night. We, higher vampires, have also moved some way from our primeval crypts. We have appropriated the day. The analogy is complete. Does this explanation satisfy you, my dear Milva?'

'Not in the slightest,' the archer replied, throwing the arrow away. 'But I think I've got it. I'm learning. I'll be learned one day. Sociolation, petrificology, werewolfation, crap-ology. In schools they lecture and birch you. It's more pleasant learning with you lot. My head hurts a bit, but my arse is still in one piece.'

'One thing is beyond question and is easy to observe,' Dandelion said. 'The sun's rays don't turn you into ash, Regis. The sun's warmth has as much effect on you as that red-hot horseshoe you so nimbly removed from the fire with your bare hands. Returning, however, to your analogies, for us humans the day will always remain the natural time for activity, and the night the natural time for rest. That is our physical structure. During the day, for example, we see better than at night. Except Geralt, who sees just as well at all times, but he's a mutant. Was it also a question of mutation among vampires?'

'One could call it that,' Regis agreed. 'Although I would argue that when mutation is spread over a sufficiently long period it ceases to be mutation and becomes evolution. But what you said about physical structure is apt. Adapting to sunlight was an unpleasant necessity for us. In order to survive, we had to become like humans in that respect. Mimicry, I'd call it. Which had its consequences. To use a metaphor: we lay down in the sick man's bed.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'There are reasons to believe that sunlight is lethal in the long run. There's a theory that in about five thousand years, at a

conservative estimate, this world will only be inhabited by lunar creatures, which are active at night.'

'I'm glad I won't be around that long.' Cahir sighed, then yawned widely. 'I don't know about you, but the intensive diurnal activity is reminding me of the need for nocturnal sleep.'

'Me too,' the Witcher said, stretching. 'And there are only a few hours left until the dawning of the murderous sun. But before sleep overcomes us . . . Regis, in the name of science and the spread of knowledge, puncture some other myths about vampirism. Because I bet you've still got at least one.'

'Indeed.' The vampire nodded. 'I have one more. It's the last, but in no sense any less important. It is the myth behind your sexual phobias.'

Cahir snorted softly.

'I left this myth until the end,' Regis said, looking him up and down. 'I would have tactfully passed over it, but since Geralt has challenged me, I won't spare you. Humans are most powerfully influenced by fears with a sexual origin. The virgin fainting in the embrace of a vampire who drinks her blood. The young man falling prey to the vile practices of a female vampire running her lips over his body. That's how you imagine it. Oral rape. Vampires paralyse their victims with fear and force them to have oral sex. Or rather, a revolting parody of oral sex. And there is something disgusting about sex like that, which, after all, rules out procreation.'

'Speak for yourself,' the Witcher muttered.

'An act crowned not by procreation, but by sensual delight and death,' Regis continued. 'You have turned it into a baleful myth. You unconsciously dream of something like it, but shy away from offering it to your lovers. So it's done for you by the mythological vampire, who as a result swells to become a fascinating symbol of evil.'

'Didn't I say it?' Milva yelled, as soon as Dandelion had finished explaining to her what Regis had been talking about. 'It's all they ever have on their minds! It starts off brainy, but always comes back to humping!'

The distant trumpeting of cranes slowly died away.

The next day, the Witcher recalled, *we set off in much better humour. And then, utterly unexpectedly, war caught up with us again.*

They travelled through a practically deserted and strategically unimportant country covered in huge, dense forests, unappealing to invaders. Although Nilfgaard was close at last, and they were only separated from the imperial lands by the broad waters of the Great Yaruga, it was difficult terrain to cover. Their astonishment was all the greater because of that.

War appeared in a less spectacular way than it had in Brugge and Sodden, where the horizon had glowed with fires at night, and during the day columns of black smoke had slashed the blue sky. It was not so picturesque here in Angren. It was much worse. They suddenly saw a murder of crows circling over the forest with a horrible cawing, and soon after they happened upon some corpses. Although the bodies had been stripped of their clothing and were impossible to identify, they bore the infallible and clear marks of violent death. Those people had been killed in combat. And not just killed. Most of the corpses were lying in the undergrowth, but some, cruelly mutilated, hung from trees by their arms or legs, lay sprawled on burnt-out pyres, or were impaled on stakes. And they stank. The whole of Angren had suddenly begun to reek with the monstrous, repulsive stench of barbarity.

It wasn't long before they had to hide in ravines and thick undergrowth, for to their left and right, and in front and behind them, the earth shook with cavalry horses' hooves, and more and more units passed their hideout, stirring up dust.

'Once again,' Dandelion said, shaking his head, 'once again we don't know who's fighting who and why. Once again we don't know who's behind us or who's ahead of us, or what direction they're headed. Who's attacking and who's retreating. The pox take it all. I don't know if I've ever told you, but I see it like this: war is no different to a whorehouse with a fire raging through it—'

'You have,' Geralt interrupted. 'A hundred times.'

'What are they fighting over?' the poet asked, spitting violently. 'Juniper bushes and sand? I mean, this exquisite country hasn't got anything else to offer.'

'There were elves among the bodies in the bushes,' Milva said. 'Scoia'tael commandos march this way, they always have. This is the route volunteers from Dol Blathanna and the Blue Mountains take when they head for Temeria. Someone wants to block their

path. That's what I think.'

'It's likely,' Regis admitted, 'that the Temerian Army would try to ambush the Squirrels here. But I'd say there are too many soldiers in the area. I surmise the Nilfgaardians have crossed the Yaruga.'

'I surmise the same,' the Witcher said, grimacing a little as he looked at Cahir's stony countenance. 'The bodies we saw this morning carried the marks of Nilfgaardian combat methods.'

'They're all as bad as each other,' Milva snapped, unexpectedly taking the side of the young Nilfgaardian. 'And don't look daggers at Cahir, because now you're bound by the same, bizarre fate. He dies if he falls into the Blacks' clutches, and you escaped a Temerian noose a while back. So it's no use trying to find out which army is in front of us and which behind, who are our comrades, who are our enemies, who's good and who's evil. Now they're all our common foes, no matter what colours they're wearing.'

'You're right.'

'Strange,' Dandelion said, when the next day they had to hide in another ravine and wait for another cavalcade to pass. 'The army are rumbling over the hills, and yet woodmen are felling trees by the Yaruga as if nothing was happening. Can you hear it?'

'Perhaps they aren't woodmen,' Cahir wondered. 'Perhaps it's the army, and they're sappers.'

'No, they're woodmen,' Regis said. 'It's clear nothing is capable of interrupting the mining of Angren gold.'

'What gold?'

'Take a closer look at those trees,' the vampire said, once again assuming the tone of an all-knowing, patronising sage instructing mere mortals or the simple-minded. He often acquired that tone, which Geralt found somewhat irritating. 'Those trees,' Regis repeated, 'are cedars, sycamores and Angren pines. Very valuable material. There are timber ports all around here, from which logs are floated downstream. They're felling trees everywhere and axes are thudding away day and night. The war we can see and hear is beginning to make sense. Nilfgaard, as you know, has captured the mouth of the Yaruga, Cintra and Verden, as well as Upper Sodden. At this moment probably also Brugge and part of Lower Sodden. That means that the timber being floated from Angren is already supplying the imperial sawmills and shipyards. The northern

kingdoms are trying to halt the process, while the Nilfgaardians, on the contrary, want to fell and float as much as possible.'

'And we, as usual, have found ourselves in a tight spot,' Dandelion said, nodding. 'Seeing as we have to get to Caed Dhu, right through the very centre of Angren and this timber war. Isn't there another bloody way?'

I asked Regis the same question, the Witcher recalled, staring at the sun setting over the Yaruga, *as soon as the thudding of hooves had faded into the distance, things had calmed down and we were finally able to continue our journey.*

'Another way to Caed Dhu?' the vampire pondered. 'Which avoids the hills and keeps out of the soldiers' way? Indeed, there is such a way. Not very comfortable and not very safe. And it's longer too. But I guarantee we won't meet any soldiers there.'

'Go on.'

'We can turn south and try to get across a low point in one of the Yaruga's meanders. Across Ysgith. Do you know Ysgith, Witcher?'

'Yes.'

'Have you ever ridden through those forests?'

'Of course.'

'The calm in your voice,' the vampire said, clearing his throat, 'would seem to signify you accept the idea. Well, there are five of us, including a witcher, a warrior and an archer. Experience, two swords and a bow. Too little to take on a Nilfgaardian raiding party, but it ought to be sufficient for Ysgith.'

Ysgith, the Witcher thought. *More than thirty square miles of bogs and mud, dotted with tarns. And murky forests full of weird trees dividing up the bogs. Some have trunks covered in scales. At the base they're as bulbous as onions, thinning towards the top, ending in dense, flat crowns. Others are low and misshapen, crouching on piles of roots twisted like octopuses, with beards of moss and shrivelled bog lichen hanging on their bare branches. Those beards sway, not from the wind though, but from poisonous swamp gas. Ysgith means mud hole. 'Stink hole' would be more appropriate.*

And the mud and bogs, the tarns and lakes overgrown with duckweed and pondweed teem with life. Ysgith isn't just inhabited

by beavers, frogs, tortoises and water birds. It is swarming with much more dangerous creatures, armed with pincers, tentacles and prehensile limbs, which they use to catch, mutilate, drown and tear apart their prey. There are so many of these creatures that no one has ever been able to identify and classify them all. Not even witchers. Geralt himself had rarely hunted in Ysgith and never in Lower Angren. The land was sparsely populated, and the few humans who lived on the fringes of the bogs were accustomed to treating the monsters as part of the landscape. They kept their distance, but it rarely occurred to them to hire a witcher to exterminate the monstrosities. Rarely, however, did not mean never. So Geralt knew Ysgith and its dangers.

Two swords and a bow, he thought. *And experience, my witcher's expertise. We ought to manage in a group. Especially when I'll be riding in the vanguard and keeping close watch on everything. On the rotten tree trunks, piles of weed, scrub, tussocks of grass; and the plants, orchids included. For in Ysgith even the orchids sometimes only look like plants, but are actually venomous crab spiders. I'll have to keep Dandelion on a short leash, and make sure he doesn't touch anything. Particularly since there's no shortage of plant life which likes to supplement its chlorophyll diet with morsels of meat. Plants whose shoots are as deadly as a crab spider's venom when they come into contact with skin. And the gas, of course. Not to mention poisonous fumes. We shall have to find a way to cover our mouths and noses . . .*

'Well?' Regis asked, pulling him out of his reverie. 'Do you accept the plan?'

'Yes, I do. Let's go.'

Something finally prompted me, the Witcher recalled, *not to talk to the rest of the company about the plan to cross Ysgith. And to ask Regis not to mention it either. I don't know why I was reluctant. Today, when everything is absolutely and totally screwed up, I might claim to have been aware of Milva's behaviour. Of the problems she was having. Of her obvious symptoms. But it wouldn't be true; I didn't notice anything, and what I did notice I ignored. Like a blockhead. So we continued eastwards, reluctant to turn towards the bogs.*

On the other hand it was good that we lingered, he thought, drawing his sword and running his thumb over the razor-sharp blade. *Had we headed straight for Ysgith then, I wouldn't have this weapon today.*

They hadn't seen or heard any soldiers since dawn. Milva led the way, riding far ahead of the rest of the company. Regis, Dandelion and Cahir were talking.

'I just hope those druids will deign to help us find Ciri,' the poet said worriedly. 'I've met druids and, believe me, they are uncooperative, tight-lipped, unfriendly, eccentric recluses. They might not talk to us at all, far less use magic to help us.'

'Regis knows one of the druids from Caed Dhu,' the Witcher reminded them.

'Are you sure the friendship doesn't go back three or four centuries?'

'It's considerably more recent than that,' the vampire assured them with a mysterious smile. 'Anyhow, druids enjoy longevity. They're always out in the open, in the bosom of primordial and unpolluted nature, which has a marvellous effect on the health. Breathe deeply, Dandelion, fill your lungs with forest air and you'll be healthy too.'

'I'll soon grow fur in this bloody wilderness,' Dandelion said sneeringly. 'When I sleep, I dream of inns, drinks and bathhouses. A primordial pox on this primordial nature. I really have my doubts about its miraculous effect on the health, particularly mental health. The said druids are the best example, because they're eccentric madmen. They're fanatical about nature and protecting it. I've witnessed them petitioning the authorities more times than I care to remember. Don't hunt, don't cut down trees, don't empty cesspits into rivers and other similar codswallop. And the height of idiocy was the visit of a delegation all arrayed in mistletoe wreathes to the court of King Ethain in Cidaris. I happened to be there . . .'

'What did they want?' Geralt asked, curious.

'Cidaris, as you know, is a kingdom where most people make a living from fishing. The druids demanded that the king order the use of nets with mesh of a specific size, and harshly punish anyone who used finer nets than instructed. Ethain's jaw dropped, and the mistletoers explained that limiting the size of mesh was the only way to protect fish stocks from depletion. The king led them out onto the terrace, pointed to the sea and told them how his bravest sailor had once sailed westwards for two months and only returned because supplies of fresh water had run out on his vessel, and there still wasn't a sign of land on the horizon. Could the druids, he asked, imagine the fish stocks in a sea like that being exhausted? By all means, the mistletoers confirmed. For though there was no

doubt sea fishery would endure the longest as a means of acquiring food directly from nature, the time would come when fish would run out and hunger would stare them all in the face. Then it would be absolutely necessary to fish using nets with large mesh, to only catch fully grown specimens, and protect the small fry. Ethain asked when, in the druids' opinion, this dreadful time of hunger would occur, and they said in about two thousand years, according to their forecasts. The king bade them a courteous farewell and requested that they drop by in around a thousand years, when he would think it over. The mistletoers didn't get the joke and began to protest, so they were thrown out.'

'They're like that, those druids,' Cahir agreed. 'Back home, in Nilfgaard—'

'Got you!' Dandelion cried triumphantly. 'Back home, in Nilfgaard! Only yesterday, when I called you a Nilfgaardian, you leapt up as though you'd been stung by a hornet! Perhaps you could finally decide who you are, Cahir.'

'To you,' Cahir said, shrugging, 'I have to be a Nilfgaardian, for as I see nothing will convince you otherwise. However, for the sake of precision please know that in the Empire such a title is reserved exclusively for indigenous residents of the capital and its closest environs, lying by the lower reaches of the Alba. My family originates in Vicovaro, and thus—'

'Shut your traps!' Milva commanded abruptly and not very politely from the vanguard.

They all immediately fell silent and reined in their horses, having learned by now that it was a sign the girl had seen, heard or instinctively sensed something edible, provided it could be stalked and shot with an arrow. Milva had indeed raised her bow to shoot, but had not dismounted. That meant it was not about food. Geralt approached her cautiously.

'Smoke,' she said bluntly.

'I can't see it.'

'Sniff it then.'

The archer's sense of smell had not deceived her, even though the scent of smoke was faint. It couldn't have been the smoke from the conflagration behind them.

This smoke, Geralt observed, *smells nice. It's coming from a campfire on which something is being roasted.*

‘Do we steer clear of it?’ Milva asked quietly.

‘After we’ve taken a look,’ he replied, dismounting from his mare and handing the reins to Dandelion. ‘It would be good to know what we’re steering clear of. And who we have behind us. Come with me, Maria. The rest of you stay in your saddles. Be vigilant.’

From the brush at the edge of the forest unfolded a view of a vast clearing with logs piled up in even cords of wood. A very thin ribbon of smoke rose from between the woodpiles. Geralt calmed down somewhat, as nothing was moving in his field of vision and there was too little space between the woodpiles for a large group to be hiding there. Milva shared his opinion.

‘No horses,’ she whispered. ‘They aren’t soldiers. Woodmen, I’d say.’

‘Me too. But I’ll go and check. Cover me.’

When he approached, cautiously picking his way around the piles of logs, he heard voices. He came closer. And was absolutely amazed. But his ears hadn’t let him down.

‘Half a contract in diamonds!’

‘Small slam in diamonds!’

‘Barrel!’

‘Pass. Your lead! Show your hand! Cards on the table! What the . . . ?’

‘Ha-ha-ha! Just the knave and some low numbers. Got you right where it hurts! I’ll make you suffer, before you get a small slam!’

‘We’ll see about that. My knave. What? It’s been taken? Hey, Yazon, you really got fucked over!’

‘Why didn’t you play the lady, shithead? Pshaw, I ought to take my rod to you . . .’

The Witcher, perhaps, might still have been cautious; after all, various different individuals could have been playing Barrel, and many people might have been called Yazon. However, a familiar hoarse squawking interrupted the card players’ excited voices.

‘’Uuuckkk . . . me!’

‘Hello, boys,’ Geralt said, emerging from behind the woodpile. ‘I’m delighted to see you. Particularly as you’re at full force again, including the parrot.’

‘Bloody hell!’ Zoltan Chivay said, dropping his cards in

astonishment, then quickly leaping to his feet, so suddenly that Field Marshal Windbag, who was sitting on his shoulder, fluttered his wings and shrieked in alarm. ‘The Witcher, as I live and breathe! Or is it a mirage? Percival, do you see what I see?’

Percival Schuttenbach, Munro Bruys, Yazon Varda and Figgis Merluzzo surrounded Geralt and seriously strained his right hand with their iron-hard grips. And when the rest of the company emerged from behind the logs, the shouts of joy increased accordingly.

‘Milva! Regis!’ Zoltan shouted, embracing them all. ‘Dandelion, alive and kicking, even if your skull’s bandaged! And what do you say, you bloody busker, about this latest melodramatic banality? Life, it turns out, isn’t poetry! And do you know why? Because it’s so resistant to criticism!’

‘Where’s Caleb Stratton?’ Dandelion asked, looking around.

Zoltan and the others fell silent and grew solemn.

‘Caleb,’ the dwarf finally said, sniffing, ‘is sleeping in a birch wood, far from his beloved peaks and Mount Carbon. When the Blacks overwhelmed us by the Ina, his legs were too slow and he didn’t make it to the forest . . . He caught a sword across the head and when he fell they dispatched him with bear spears. But come on, cheer up, we’ve already mourned him and that’ll do. We ought to be cheerful. After all, you got out of the madness in the camp in one piece. Why, the company’s even grown, I see.’

Cahir inclined his head a little under the dwarf’s sharp gaze, but said nothing.

‘Come on, sit you down,’ Zoltan invited. ‘We’re roasting a lamb here. We happened upon it a few days ago, lonely and sad. We stopped it from dying a miserable death from hunger or in a wolf’s maw by slaughtering it mercifully and turning it into food. Sit down. And I’d like a few words with you, Regis. And Geralt, if you would.’

Two women were sitting behind the woodpile. One of them, who was suckling an infant, turned away in embarrassment at the sight of them approaching. Nearby, a young woman with an arm wrapped in none too clean rags was playing with two children on the sand. As soon as she raised her misty, blank eyes to him the Witcher recognised her.

‘We untied her from the wagon, which was already in flames,’ the dwarf explained. ‘It almost finished the way that priest wanted. You

know, the one who was after her blood. She passed through a baptism of fire, nonetheless. The flames were licking at her, scorching her to the raw flesh. We dressed her wounds as well as we could. We covered her in lard, but it's a bit messy. Barber-surgeon, if you would . . . ?'

'Right away.'

When Regis tried to peel off the dressing the girl whimpered, retreating and covering her face with her good hand. Geralt approached to hold her still, but the vampire gestured him to stop. He looked deeply into the girl's vacant eyes, and she immediately calmed down and relaxed. Her head drooped gently on her chest. She didn't even flinch when Regis carefully peeled off the dirty rag and smeared an intense and strange smelling ointment on her burnt arm.

Geralt turned his head, pointed with his chin at the two women and the two children, and then bored his eyes into the dwarf. Zoltan cleared his throat.

'We came across the two young 'uns and the women here in Angren,' he explained in hushed tones. 'They'd got lost during their escape. They were alone, fearful and hungry, so we took them on board, and we're looking after them. It just seemed to happen.'

'It just seemed to happen,' Geralt echoed, smiling faintly. 'You're an incorrigible altruist, Zoltan Chivay.'

'We all have our faults. I mean, you're still determined to rescue your girl.'

'Indeed. Although it's become more complicated than that . . . .'

'Because of that Nilfgaardian, who was tracking you and has now joined the company?'

'Partly. Zoltan, where are those fugitives from? Who were they fleeing? Nilfgaard or the Squirrels?'

'Hard to say. The kids know bugger all, the women aren't too talkative and get upset for no reason at all. If you swear near them or fart they go as red as beetroots . . . Never mind. But we've met other fugitives – woodmen – and they say the Nilfgaardians are prowling around here. It's our old friends, probably, the troop that came from the west, from across the Ina. But apparently there are also units here that arrived from the south. From across the Yaruga.'

'And who are they fighting?'

'It's a mystery. The woodmen talked of an army being

commanded by a White Queen or some such. That queen's fighting the Blacks. It's said she and her army are even venturing onto the far bank of the Yaruga, taking fire and sword to imperial lands.'

'What army could that be?'

'No idea,' Zoltan said and scratched an ear. 'See, every day some company or other comes through, messing up the tracks with their hooves. We don't ask who they are, we just hide in the bushes . . .'

Regis, who was dealing with the burns on the girl's arm, interrupted their conversation.

'The dressing must be changed daily,' he said to the dwarf. 'I'll leave you the ointment and some gauze which won't stick to the burns.'

'Thank you, barber-surgeon.'

'Her arm will heal,' the vampire said softly, looking at the Witcher. 'With time the scar will even vanish from her young skin. What's happening in the poor girl's head is worse, though. My ointments can't cure that.'

Geralt said nothing. Regis wiped his hands on a rag.

'It's a curse,' he said in hushed tones, 'to be able to sense a sickness – the entire essence of it – in the blood, but not be able to treat it . . .'

'Indeed.' Zoltan sighed. 'Patching up the skin is one thing, but when the mind's addled, you're helpless. All you can do is give a damn and look after them. . . Thank you for your aid, barber-surgeon. I see you've also joined the Witcher's company.'

'It just seemed to happen.'

'Mmm,' Zoltan said and stroked his beard. 'And which way will you head in search of Ciri?'

'We're heading east, to Caed Dhu, to the druids' circle. We're counting on the druids' help . . .'

'No help,' said the girl with the bandaged arm in a ringing, metallic voice. 'No help. Only blood. And a baptism of fire. Fire purifies. But also kills.'

Zoltan was dumbfounded. Regis gripped his arm tightly and gestured him to remain silent. Geralt, who could recognise a hypnotic trance, said nothing and did not move.

'He who has spilt blood and he who has drunk blood,' the girl

said, her head still lowered, ‘shall pay in blood. Within three days one shall die in the other, and something shall die in each. They shall die inch by inch, piece by piece . . . And when finally the iron-shod clogs wear out and the tears dry, then the last shreds will pass. Even that which never dies shall die.’

‘Speak on,’ Regis said softly and gently. ‘What can you see?’

‘Fog. A tower in the fog. It is the Tower of Swallows . . . on a lake bound by ice.’

‘What else do you see?’

‘Fog.’

‘What do you feel?’

‘Pain . . .’

Regis had no time to ask another question. The girl jerked her head, screamed wildly, and whimpered. When she raised her eyes there really was nothing but fog in them.

Zoltan, Geralt recalled, still running his fingers over the rune-covered blade, *started to respect Regis more after that incident, altogether dropping the familiar tone he normally used in conversations with the barber-surgeon.*

Regis requested they did not say a single word to the others about the strange incident. The Witcher was not too concerned about it. He had seen similar trances in the past and tended towards the view that the ravings of people under hypnosis were not prophecy but the regurgitation of thoughts they had intercepted and the suggestions of the hypnotist. Of course in this case it was not hypnosis but a vampire spell, and Geralt mused over what else the girl might have picked up from Regis’s mind, had the trance lasted any longer.

They marched with the dwarves and their charges for half a day. Then Zoltan Chivay stopped the procession and took the Witcher aside.

‘It is time to part company,’ he declared briefly. ‘We have made a decision, Geralt. Mahakam is looming up to the north, and this valley leads straight to the mountains. We’ve had enough adventures. We’re going back home. To Mount Carbon.’

‘I understand.’

‘It’s nice that you want to understand. I wish you and your

company luck. It's a strange company, if you don't mind me saying so.'

'They want to help,' the Witcher said softly. 'That's something new for me. Which is why I've decided not to enquire into their motives.'

'That's wise,' Zoltan said, removing the dwarven sihil in its lacquered scabbard, wrapped in catskins, from his back. 'Here you go, take it. Before we go our separate ways.'

'Zoltan . . .'

'Don't say anything, just take it. We'll sit out the war in the mountains. We have no need of hardware. But it'll be pleasant to recall, from time to time, that this Mahakam-forged sihil is in safe hands and whistles in a just cause. That it won't bring shame on itself. And when you use the blade to slaughter your Ciri's persecutors, take one down for Caleb Stratton. And remember Zoltan Chivay and the dwarven forges.'

'You can be certain I will,' Geralt said, taking the sword and slinging it across his back. 'You can be certain I'll remember. In this rotten world, Zoltan Chivay, goodness, honesty and integrity become deeply engraved in the memory.'

'That is true,' the dwarf said, narrowing his eyes. 'Which is why I won't forget about you and the marauders in the forest clearing, nor about Regis and the horseshoe in the coals. While we're talking about reciprocity . . .'

He broke off, coughed, hawked and spat.

'Geralt, we robbed a merchant near Dillingen. A wealthy man, who'd got rich as a hawker. We waylaid him after he'd loaded his gold and jewels onto a wagon and fled the city. He defended his property like a lion and was yelling for help, so he took a few blows of an axe butt to the pate and became as quiet as a lamb. Do you remember the chest we lugged along, then carried on the wagon, and finally buried in the earth by the River O? Well, it contained his goods. Stolen loot, which we intend to build our future on.'

'Why are you telling me this, Zoltan?'

'Because I reckon you were still being misled by false appearances not so long ago. What you took for goodness and integrity was rottenness hidden under a pretty mask. You're easy to deceive, Witcher, because you don't look into motives. But I don't want to deceive you. So don't look at those women and children . . . don't

take the dwarf who's standing in front of you as virtuous and noble. Before you stands a thief, a robber and possibly even a murderer. Because I can't be certain the hawker we roughed up didn't die in the ditch by the Dillingen highway.'

A lengthy silence followed, as they both looked northwards at the distant mountains enveloped in clouds.

'Farewell, Zoltan,' Geralt finally said. 'Perhaps the forces, the existence of which I'm slowly becoming convinced about, will permit us to meet again one day. I hope our paths cross again. I'd like to introduce Ciri to you, I'd like her to meet you. But even if it never happens, know that I won't forget you. Farewell, dwarf.'

'Will you shake my hand? Me, a thief and a thug?'

'Without hesitation. Because I'm not as easy to deceive as I once was. Although I don't enquire into people's motives, I'm slowly learning the art of looking beneath masks.'

Geralt swung the sihil and bisected a moth that was flying past.

After parting with Zoltan and his group, he recalled, *we happened upon a group of wandering peasants in the forest. Some of them took flight on seeing us, but Milva stopped a few by threatening them with her bow. The peasants, it turned out, had been captives of the Nilfgaardians not long before. They had been forced to fell cedar trees, but a few days ago their guards had been attacked and overcome by a unit of soldiers who freed them. Now they were going home. Dandelion insisted they describe their liberators. He pushed them aggressively and asked sharp questions.*

'Those soldiers,' the peasant repeated, 'they serve the White Queen. They're giving the Black infantry a proper hiding! They said they're carrying out baboon attacks on the enemy's rear lines.'

'What?'

'I'm telling you, aren't I? Baboon attacks.'

'Bollocks to those baboons,' Dandelion said, grimacing and waving a hand. 'Good people . . . I asked you what banners the army were bearing.'

'Divers ones, sire. Mainly cavalry. And the infantry were wearing something crimson.'

The peasant picked up a stick and described a rhombus in the

sand.

‘A lozenge,’ Dandelion, who was well versed in heraldry, said in astonishment. ‘Not the Temerian lily, but a lozenge. Rivia’s coat of arms. Interesting. It’s two hundred miles from here to Rivia. Not to mention the fact that the armies of Lyria and Rivia were utterly annihilated during the fighting in Dol Angra and at Aldersberg, and Nilfgaard has since occupied the country. I don’t understand any of this!’

‘That’s normal,’ the Witcher interrupted. ‘Enough talking. We need to go.’

‘Ha!’ the poet cried. He had been pondering and analysing the information extracted from the peasants the whole time. ‘I’ve got it! Not baboons – guerrillas! Partisans! Do you see?’

‘We see.’ Cahir nodded. ‘In other words, a Nordling partisan troop is operating in the area. A few units, probably formed from the remains of the Lyrian and Rivian armies, which were defeated at Aldersberg in the middle of July. I heard about that battle while I was with the Squirrels.’

‘I consider the news heartening,’ Dandelion declared, proud he had been able to solve the mystery of the baboons. ‘Even if the peasants had confused the heraldic emblems, we don’t seem to be dealing with the Temerian Army. And I don’t think news has reached the Rivian guerrillas about the two spies who recently cheated Marshal Vissegerd’s gallows. Should we happen upon those partisans we have a chance to lie our way out of it.’

‘Yes, we have a chance . . .,’ Geralt agreed, calming the frolicking Roach. ‘But, to be honest, I’d prefer not to try our luck.’

‘But they’re your countrymen, Witcher,’ Regis said. ‘I mean, they call you Geralt of Rivia.’

‘A slight correction,’ he replied coldly. ‘I call myself that to make my name sound fancier. It’s an addition that inspires more trust in my clients.’

‘I see,’ the vampire said, smiling. ‘And why exactly did you choose Rivia?’

‘I drew sticks, marked with various grand-sounding names. My witcher preceptor suggested that method to me, although not initially. Only after I’d insisted on adopting the name Geralt Roger Eric du Haute-Bellegarde. Vesemir thought it was ridiculous;

pretentious and idiotic. I dare say he was right.'

Dandelion snorted loudly, looking meaningfully at the vampire and the Nilfgaardian.

'My full name,' Regis said, a little piqued by the look, 'is authentic. And in keeping with vampire tradition.'

'Mine too,' Cahir hurried to explain. 'Mawr is my mother's given name, and Dyffryn my great-grandfather's. And there's nothing ridiculous about it, poet. And what's your name, by the way? Dandelion must be a pseudonym.'

'I can neither use nor betray my real name,' the bard replied mysteriously, proudly putting on airs. 'It's too celebrated.'

'It always sorely annoyed me,' added Milva, who after being silent and gloomy for a long while had suddenly joined in the conversation, 'when I was called pet names like Maya, Manya or Marilka. When someone hears a name like that they always think they can pinch a girl's behind.'

It grew dark. The cranes flew off and their trumpeting faded into the distance. The breeze blowing from the hills subsided. The Witcher sheathed the sihil.

It was only this morning. This morning. And all hell broke loose in the afternoon.

We should have suspected earlier, he thought. *But which of us, apart from Regis, knew anything about this kind of thing? Naturally everyone noticed that Milva often vomited at dawn. But we all ate grub that turned our stomachs. Dandelion puked once or twice too, and on one occasion Cahir got the runs so badly he feared it was dysentery. And the fact that the girl kept dismounting and going into the bushes, well I took it as a bladder infection . . .*

I was an ass.

I think Regis realised the truth. But he kept quiet. He kept quiet until he couldn't keep quiet any longer. When we stopped to make camp in a deserted woodmen's shack, Milva led him into the forest, spoke to him at length and at times in quite a loud voice. The vampire returned from the forest alone. He brewed up and mixed some herbs, and then abruptly summoned us all to the shack. He began rather vaguely, in his annoying patronising manner.

‘I’m addressing all of you,’ Regis said. ‘We are, after all, a fellowship and bear collective responsibility. The fact that the one who bears ultimate responsibility . . . direct responsibility, so to speak . . . is probably not with us doesn’t change anything.’

‘Spit it out,’ Dandelion said, irritated. ‘Fellowship, responsibility . . . What’s the matter with Milva? What’s she suffering from?’

‘She’s not suffering from anything,’ Cahir said softly.

‘At least not strictly speaking,’ Regis added. ‘Milva’s pregnant.’

Cahir nodded to show it was as he suspected. Dandelion, however, was dumbstruck. Geralt bit his lip.

‘How far gone is she?’

‘She declined, quite rudely, to give any dates at all, including the date of her last period. But I’m something of an expert. The tenth week.’

‘Then refrain from your pompous appeals to direct responsibility,’ Geralt said sombrely. ‘It’s not one of us. If you had any doubts at all in this regard, I hereby dispel them. You were absolutely right, however, to talk about collective responsibility. She’s with us now. We have suddenly been promoted to the role of husbands and fathers. So let’s listen carefully to what the physician says.’

‘Wholesome, regular meals,’ Regis began to list. ‘No stress. Sufficient sleep. And soon the end of horseback riding.’

They were all quiet for a long time.

‘We hear you, Regis,’ Dandelion finally said. ‘My fellow husbands and fathers, we have a problem.’

‘It’s a bigger problem than you think,’ the vampire said. ‘Or a lesser one. It all depends on one’s point of view.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Well you ought to,’ Cahir muttered.

‘She demanded,’ Regis began a short while later, ‘that I prepare and give her a strong and powerful . . . medicament. She considers it a remedy for the problem. Her mind is made up.’

‘And have you?’

Regis smiled.

‘Without talking to the other fathers?’

‘The medicine she’s requesting,’ Cahir said quietly, ‘isn’t a

miraculous panacea. I have three sisters, so I know what I'm talking about. She thinks, it seems to me, that she'll drink the decoction in the evening, and the next morning she'll ride on with us. Not a bit of it. For about ten days there won't be a chance of her even sitting on a horse. Before you give her that medicine, Regis, you have to tell her that. And we can only give her the medicine after we've found a bed for her. A clean bed.'

'I see,' Regis said, nodding. 'One voice in favour. What about you, Geralt?'

'What about me?'

'Gentlemen.' The vampire swept across them with his dark eyes. 'Don't pretend you don't understand.'

'In Nilfgaard,' Cahir said, blushing and lowering his head, 'the woman decides. No one has the right to influence her decision. Regis said that Milva is certain she wants the . . . medicament. Only for that reason, absolutely only for that reason, have I begun – in spite of myself – to think of it as an established fact. And to think about the consequences. But I'm a foreigner, who doesn't know . . . I ought not to get involved. I apologise.'

'What for?' the troubadour asked, surprised. 'Do you think we're savages, Nilfgaardian? Primitive tribes, obeying some sort of shamanic taboo? It's obvious that only the woman can make a decision like that. It's her inalienable right. If Milva decides to—'

'Shut up, Dandelion,' the Witcher snapped. 'Please shut up.'

'You don't agree?' the poet said, losing his temper. 'Are you planning to forbid her or—'

'Shut your bloody mouth, or I won't be answerable for my actions! Regis, you seem to be conducting something like a poll among us. Why? You're the physician. The agent she's asking for . . . yes, the agent. The word medicament doesn't suit me somehow . . . Only you can prepare and give her this agent. And you'll do it should she ask you for it again. You won't refuse.'

'I've already prepared the agent,' Regis said, showing them all a little bottle made of dark glass. 'Should she ask again, I shall not refuse. Should she ask again,' he repeated with force.

'What's this all about then? Unanimity? Total agreement? Is that what you're expecting?'

'You know very well what it's about,' the vampire answered. 'You sense perfectly what ought to be done. But since you ask, I shall tell

you. Yes, Geralt, that's precisely what it's about. Yes, that's precisely what ought to be done. And no, it's not me that's expecting it.'

'Could you be clearer?'

'No, Dandelion,' the vampire snapped. 'I can't be any clearer. Particularly since there's no need. Right, Geralt?'

'Right,' the Witcher said, resting his forehead on his clasped hands. 'Yes, too bloody right. But why are you looking at me? You want me to do it? I don't know how. I can't. I'm not suited for this role at all . . . Not at all, get it?'

'No,' Dandelion interjected. 'I don't get it at all. Cahir? Do you get it?'

The Nilfgaardian looked at Regis and then at Geralt.

'I think I do,' he said slowly. 'I think so.'

'Ah,' the troubadour said, nodding. 'Ah. Geralt understood right away and Cahir thinks he understands. I, naturally, demand to be enlightened, but first I'm told to be quiet, and then I hear there's no need for me to understand. Thank you. Twenty years in the service of poetry, long enough to know there are things you either understand at once, even without words; or you'll never understand them.'

The vampire smiled.

'I don't know anyone,' he said, 'who could have put it more elegantly.'

It was totally dark. The Witcher got to his feet.

It's now or never, he thought. *I can't run away from it. There's no point putting it off. It's got to be done. And that's an end to it.*

Milva sat alone by the tiny fire she had started in the forest, in a pit left by a fallen tree, away from the woodmen's shack where the rest of the company were sleeping. She didn't move when she heard his footsteps. It was as though she was expecting him. She just shifted along, making space for him on the fallen tree trunk.

'Well?' she said harshly, not waiting for him to say anything. 'We're in a fix, aren't we, eh?'

He didn't answer.

‘You didn’t expect this when we set off, did you? When you let me join the company? You thought: “So what if she’s a peasant; a foolish, country wench?” You let me join. “I won’t be able to talk to her about brainy things on the road,” you thought, “but she might come in useful. She’s a healthy, sturdy lass. She shoots a straight arrow, she won’t get a sore arse from the saddle, and if it gets nasty she won’t shit her britches. She’ll come in useful.” And it turns out she’s no use, just a hindrance. A millstone. A typical bloody woman!’

‘Why did you come after me?’ he asked softly. ‘Why didn’t you stay in Brokilon? You must have known . . .’

‘I did,’ she interrupted. ‘I mean, I was with the dryads, they always know what’s wrong with a girl; you can’t keep anything secret from them. They realised quicker than me . . . But I never thought I’d start feeling poorly so soon. I thought I’d drink some ergot or some other decoction, and you wouldn’t even notice, wouldn’t even guess . . .’

‘It’s not that simple.’

‘I know. The vampire told me. I spent too long dragging my feet, meditating, hesitating. Now it won’t be so easy . . .’

‘That’s not what I meant.’

‘Bollocks,’ she said a moment later. ‘Imagine this. I had more than one string to my bow . . . I saw how Dandelion puts on a brave face; but thought him weak, soft, not used to hardship. I was just waiting for him to give up and then we’d have to offload him. I thought if it got hard I’d go back with Dandelion . . . Now just look: Dandelion’s the hero, and I’m . . .’

Her voice suddenly cracked. Geralt embraced her. And he knew at once it was the gesture she had been waiting for, which she needed more than anything else. The roughness and hardness of the Brokilon archer disappeared just like that, and what remained was the trembling, gentle softness of a frightened girl. But it was she who interrupted the lengthening silence.

‘And that’s what you told me . . . in Brokilon. That I would need a . . . a shoulder to lean on. That I would call out, in the darkness . . . You’re here, I can feel your arm next to mine . . . And I still want to scream . . . Oh dear, oh dear . . . Why are you trembling?’

‘It’s nothing. A memory.’

‘What will become of me?’

He didn't answer. The question wasn't meant for him.

'Daddy once showed me . . . Where I come from there's a black wasp that lives by the river and lays its eggs in a live caterpillar. The young wasps hatch and eat the caterpillar alive . . . from the inside. . . Something like that's in me now. In me, inside me, in my own belly. It's growing, it keeps growing and it's going to eat me alive . . .'

'Milva—'

'Maria. I'm Maria, not Milva. What kind of Red Kite am I? A mother hen with an egg, not a Kite . . . Milva laughed with the dryads on the battleground, pulled arrows from bloodied corpses. Waste of a good arrow shaft or a good arrowhead! And if someone was still breathing, a knife across the throat! Milva was treacherous, she led those people to their fate and laughed . . . Now their blood calls. That blood, like a wasp's venom, is devouring Maria from the inside. Maria is paying for Milva.'

He remained silent. Mainly because he didn't know what to say. The girl snuggled up closer against his shoulder.

'I was guiding a commando to Brokilon,' she said softly. 'It was in Burnt Stump, in June, on the Sunday before summer solstice. We were chased, there was a fight, seven of us escaped on horseback. Five elves, one she-elf and me. About half a mile to the Ribbon, but the cavalry were behind us and in front of us, darkness all around, swamps, bogs . . . At night we hid in the willows, we had to let ourselves and the horses rest. Then the she-elf undressed without a word, lay down . . . and the first elf lay with her . . . It froze me, I didn't know what to do . . . Move away, or pretend I couldn't see? The blood was pounding in my temples, but I heard it when she said: "Who knows what tomorrow will bring? Who will cross the Ribbon and who will perish? *En'ca minne*." *En'ca minne*, a little love. Only this way, she said, can death be overcome. Death or fear. They were afraid, she was afraid, I was afraid . . . So I undressed too and lay down nearby. I placed a blanket under my back . . . When the first one embraced me I clenched my teeth, for I wasn't ready, I was terrified and dry . . . But he was wise – an elf, after all – he only seemed young . . . wise . . . tender . . . He smelled of moss, grass and dew . . . I held my arms out towards the second one myself . . . desiring . . . a little love? The devil only knows how much love there was in it and how much fear, but I'm certain there was more fear . . . For the love was fake. Perhaps well faked, but fake even so, like a pantomime, where if the actors are skilled you soon forget what's playacting and what's the truth. But there was fear. There

was real fear.'

Geralt remained silent.

'Nor did we manage to defeat death. They killed two of them at dawn, before we reached the bank of the Ribbon. Of the three who survived I never saw any of them again. My mother always told me a wench knows whose fruit she's bearing . . . But I don't know. I didn't even know the names of those elves, so how could I tell? How?'

He said nothing. He let his arm speak for him.

'And anyway, why do I need to know? The vampire will soon have the draft ready . . . The time will come for me to be left in some village or other . . . No, don't say a word; be silent. I know what you're like. You won't even give up that skittish mare, you won't leave her, you won't exchange her for another, even though you keep threatening to. You aren't the kind that leaves others behind. But now you have no choice. After I drink it I won't be able to sit in the saddle. But know this; when I've recovered I'll set off after you. For I would like you to find your Ciri, Witcher. To find her and get her back, with my help.'

'So that's why you rode after me,' he said, wiping his forehead. 'That's why.'

She lowered her head.

'That's why you rode after me,' he repeated. 'You set off to help rescue someone else's child. You wanted to pay; to pay off a debt, that you intended to incur even when you set off . . . Someone else's child for your own, a life for a life. And I promised to help you should you be in need. But, Milva, I can't help you. Believe me, I cannot.'

This time she remained silent. But he could not. He felt compelled to speak.

'Back there, in Brokilon, I became indebted to you and swore I'd repay you. Unwisely. Stupidly. You offered me help in a moment when I needed help very much. There's no way of paying off a debt like that. It's impossible to repay something that has no price. Some say everything in the world – everything, with no exception – has a price. It's not true. There are things with no price, things that are priceless. But you realise it belatedly: when you lose them, you lose them forever and nothing can get them back for you. I have lost many such things. Which is why I can't help you today.'

‘But you have helped me,’ she replied, very calmly. ‘You don’t even know how you’ve helped me. Now go, please. Leave me alone. Go away, Witcher. Go, before you destroy my whole world.’

When they set off again at dawn, Milva rode at the head, calm and smiling. And when Dandelion, who was riding behind her, began to strum away on his lute, she whistled the melody.

Geralt and Regis brought up the rear. At a certain moment the vampire glanced at the Witcher, smiled, and nodded in acknowledgement and admiration. Without a word. Then he took a small bottle of dark glass out of his medical bag and showed it to Geralt. Regis smiled again and threw the bottle into the bushes.

The Witcher said nothing.

When they stopped to water the horses, Geralt led Regis away to a secluded place.

‘A change of plans,’ he informed briefly. ‘We aren’t going through Ysgith.’

The vampire remained silent for a moment, boring into him with his black eyes.

‘Had I not known,’ he finally said, ‘that as a witcher you are only afraid of real hazards, I should have thought you were worried by the preposterous chatter of a deranged girl.’

‘But you do know. And you’re sure to be guided by logic.’

‘Indeed. However, I should like to draw your attention to two matters. Firstly, Milva’s condition, which is neither an illness nor a disability. The girl must, of course, take care of herself, but she is utterly healthy and physically fit. I would even say more than fit. The hormones—’

‘Drop the patronising, superior tone,’ Geralt interrupted, ‘because it’s getting on my nerves.’

‘That was the first matter of the two I intended to bring up,’ Regis continued. ‘Here’s the second: when Milva notices your overprotectiveness, when she realises you’re making a fuss and mollycoddling her, she’ll be furious. And then she’ll feel stressed; which is absolutely inadvisable for her. Geralt, I don’t want to be patronising. I want to be rational.’

Geralt did not answer.

‘There’s also a third matter,’ Regis added, still watching the Witcher carefully. ‘We aren’t being compelled to go through Ysgith by enthusiasm or the lust for adventure, but by necessity. Soldiers are roaming the hills, and we have to make it to the druids in Caed Dhu. I understood it was urgent. That it was important for you to acquire the information and set off to rescue your Ciri as quickly as possible.’

‘It is,’ Geralt said, looking away. ‘It’s very important to me. I want to rescue Ciri and get her back. Until recently I thought I’d do it at any price. But no. I won’t pay that price, I won’t consent to taking that risk. We won’t go through Ysgith.’

‘The alternative?’

‘The far bank of the Yaruga. We’ll go upstream, far beyond the swamps. And we’ll cross the Yaruga again near Caed Dhu. If it turns out to be difficult, only the two of us will meet the druids. I’ll swim across and you’ll fly over as a bat. Why are you staring at me like that? I mean, rivers being obstacles to vampires is another myth and superstition. Or perhaps I’m wrong.’

‘No, you are not wrong. But I can only fly during a full moon, not at any other time.’

‘That’s only two weeks away. When we reach the right place it’ll almost be full moon.’

‘Geralt,’ the vampire said, still not taking his eyes away from the Witcher. ‘You’re a strange man. To make myself clear, I wasn’t being critical. Right, then. We give up on Ysgith, which is dangerous for a woman with child. We cross to the far bank of the Yaruga, which you consider safer.’

‘I’m capable of assessing the level of risk.’

‘I don’t doubt it.’

‘Not a word to Milva or the others. Should they ask, it’s part of our plan.’

‘Of course. Let us begin to look for a boat.’

They didn’t have to look for long, and the result of their search surpassed their expectations. They didn’t find just a boat, but a ferryboat. Hidden among the willows, craftily camouflaged with branches and bunches of bulrushes, it was betrayed by the painter connecting it to the left bank.

The ferryman was also found. While they were approaching he quickly hid in the bushes, but Milva spotted him and dragged him from the undergrowth by the collar. She also flushed out his helper, a powerfully built fellow with the shoulders of an ogre and the face of an utter simpleton. The ferryman shook with fear, and his eyes darted around like a couple of mice in an empty granary.

'To the far bank?' he whined, when he found out what they wanted. 'Not a chance! That's Nilfgaardian territory and there's a war on! They'll catch us and stick us on a spike! I'm not going! You can kill me, but I'm not going!'

'We can kill you,' Milva said, grinding her teeth. 'We can also beat you up first. Open your trap again and you'll see what we can do.'

'I'm sure the fact there's a war on,' the vampire said, boring his eyes into the ferryman, 'doesn't interfere with smuggling, does it, my good man? Which is what your ferry is for, after all, craftily positioned as it is far from the royal and Nilfgaardian toll collectors. Am I right? Go on, push it into the water.'

'That would be wise,' Cahir added, stroking his sword hilt. 'Should you hesitate, we shall cross the river ourselves, without you, and your ferry will remain on the far bank. To get it back you'll have to swim across doing the breaststroke. This way you ferry us across and return. An hour of fear and then you can forget all about it.'

'But if you resist, you halfwit,' Milva snapped, 'I'll give you such a beating you won't forget us till next winter!'

The ferryman yielded in the face of these hard, indisputable arguments, and soon the entire company was on the ferry. Some of the horses, particularly Roach, resisted and refused to go aboard, but the ferryman and his dopey helper used twitches made of sticks and rope. The skill with which they calmed the animals proved it was not the first time they had smuggled stolen mounts across the Yaruga. The giant simpleton got down to turning the wheel which drove the ferry, and the crossing began.

When they reached the peaceful waters and felt the gentle breeze, their moods improved. Crossing the Yaruga was something new, a clear milestone, marking progress in their trek. In front of them was the Nilfgaardian bank, the frontier, the border. They all suddenly cheered up. It even affected the ferryman's foolish helper, who began to whistle an inane tune. Even Geralt was strangely euphoric, as though Ciri would emerge at any moment from the alder grove

on the far bank and shout out joyfully on seeing him.

Instead of that the ferryman began shouting. And not joyfully in the least.

‘By the Gods! We’re done for!’

Geralt looked towards where he was pointing and cursed. Suits of armour flashed and hooves thudded among the alders on the high bank. A moment later the jetty on the left bank was teeming with horsemen.

‘Black Riders!’ the ferryman screamed, paling and releasing the wheel. ‘Nilfgaardians! Death! Gods, save us!’

‘Hold the horses, Dandelion!’ Milva yelled, trying to remove her bow from her saddle with one hand. ‘Hold the horses!’

‘They aren’t imperial forces,’ Cahir said. ‘I don’t think . . .’

His voice was drowned out by the shouts of the horsemen on the jetty and the ferryman’s yelling. Urged on by the yelling, the daft helper seized a hatchet, swung it and brought the blade down powerfully on the rope. The ferryman came forward to help him with another hatchet. The horsemen on the jetty noticed it and also began to yell. Several of them rode into the water, to seize the rope. Others began swimming towards the ferry.

‘Leave that rope alone!’ Dandelion shouted. ‘It’s not Nilfgaard! Don’t cut it—’

It was too late, however. The loose end of the rope sank heavily into the water, the ferry turned a little and began to float downstream. The horsemen on the bank started yelling.

‘Dandelion’s right,’ Cahir said grimly. ‘They aren’t imperial forces . . . They’re on the Nilfgaardian bank, but it isn’t Nilfgaard.’

‘Of course they aren’t!’ Dandelion called. ‘I recognise their livery! Eagles and lozenges! It’s Lyria’s coat of arms! They’re the Lyrian guerrillas! Hey, you men . . .’

‘Get down, you idiot!’

The poet, as usual, rather than listen to the warning, wanted to know what it was all about. And right then arrows whistled through the air. Some of them thudded into the side of the ferry, some of them flew over the deck and splashed into the water. Two flew straight for Dandelion, but the Witcher already had his sword in his hand, leapt forward and deflected both of them with swift blows.

‘By the Great Sun,’ Cahir grunted. ‘He deflected two arrows!

Remarkable! I've never seen anything like it . . .'

'And you never will again! That's the first time I've ever managed two in a row! Now get down, will you!'

However, the soldiers by the jetty had stopped shooting, seeing the current pushing the drifting ferryboat straight towards their bank. Water foamed beside the horses which had been driven into the river. The ferry station was filling up with more horsemen. There were at least two hundred of them.

'Help!' the ferryman yelled. 'Seize the poles, m'lords! We're being carried to the bank!'

They understood at once, and fortunately there were plenty of poles. Regis and Dandelion held the horses, and Milva, Cahir and the Witcher aided the efforts of the ferryman and his duffer of an assistant. Pushed off by five poles, the ferryboat turned and began to move more quickly, clearly heading towards the midstream. The soldiers on the bank started yelling again, and took up their bows once again. Again, several arrows whistled past and one of their horses neighed wildly. The ferryboat, carried away by a more powerful current, was fortunately travelling quickly and began to move further from the bank, beyond the range of an effective arrow shot.

They were now floating in the middle of the river, on calm waters. The ferryboat was spinning like a turd in an ice hole and the horses stamped and whinnied, tugging at the reins, which were being held by Dandelion and the vampire. The horsemen on the bank yelled and shook their fists at them. Geralt suddenly noticed a rider on a white steed among them, who was waving a sword and issuing orders. A moment later the cavalcade withdrew into the forest and galloped along the edge of the high bank. Their armour flashed among the riverside undergrowth.

'They aren't letting us go,' the ferryman groaned. 'They know that the rapids round the corner will push us over towards the bank again . . . Keep those poles at the ready, m'lords! When it turns towards the right bank, we'll have to help the old tub get the better of the current and land . . . Else we're doomed . . .'

They floated, turning, drifting slightly towards the right bank; a steep, high bluff, bristling with crooked pine trees. The left bank, the one that was moving away from them, had become flat and jutted into the river in a semi-circular, sandy spit. Horsemen galloped onto the spit, their momentum taking them into the water. By the spit there was clearly a sand-bank channel, a shallow, and

before the water had reached the height of the horses' bellies, the horsemen had ridden quite far into the river.

'We're in arrow range,' Milva judged grimly. 'Get down.'

Arrows began whistling again and some of them thumped into the planks. But the current, pushing them away from the channel, quickly carried the ferryboat towards a sharp bend on the right.

'To the poles!' the trembling ferryman ordered. 'With a will. Let's land before the rapids carry us away!'

It wasn't so easy. The current was swift, the water deep and the ferryboat large, heavy and cumbersome. At first it did not react to their efforts at all, but finally the poles found more purchase on the riverbed. It looked as though they might succeed, when Milva suddenly dropped her pole and pointed wordlessly at the right bank.

'This time . . .' Cahir said, wiping sweat from his brow. 'This time it's definitely Nilfgaard.'

Geralt saw it too. The horsemen who had suddenly appeared on the right bank were wearing black and green cloaks, and the horses had typical Nilfgaardian blinders. There were at least a hundred of them.

'Now we're done for . . .' the ferryman whimpered. 'Mother of mine, it's the Black Riders!'

'To the poles!' the Witcher roared. 'To the poles and into the current! Away from the bank!'

Once again it turned out to be a difficult task. The current by the right bank was powerful and pushed the ferryboat straight under the high bluff, from which the shouts of the Nilfgaardians could be heard. A moment later, when Geralt, who was leaning on his pole, looked upwards, he saw pine branches above his head. An arrow shot from the top of the bluff penetrated the ferryboat's deck almost vertically, two feet from him. He deflected another, which was heading for Cahir, with a blow of his sword.

Milva, Cahir, the ferryman and his assistant pushed away – not from the riverbed, but from the bank where the bluff was. Geralt dropped his sword, caught up a pole and helped them, and the ferryboat began to drift towards the calm waters again. But they were still dangerously close to the right bank and to their pursuers galloping along the edge of it. Before they could move away, the bluff ended and Nilfgaardians flooded onto the flat, reedy bank.

Fletchings screamed through the air.

‘Get down!’

The ferryman’s helper suddenly coughed strangely, dropping his pole into the water. Geralt saw a bloodied arrowhead and four inches of shaft sticking out of his back. Cahir’s chestnut reared, neighed in pain, jerking its penetrated neck, knocked Dandelion down and leaped overboard. The remaining horses also neighed and thrashed, and the ferryboat shook from the impact of their hooves.

‘Hold the horses!’ the vampire yelled. ‘Three—’

He suddenly broke off, fell backwards against the planks, and sat down with his head lolling. A black-feathered arrow was sticking out of his chest.

Milva saw it too. She screamed with fury, picked up her bow, knelt and emptied the quiver of arrows right on the deck. Then she began to shoot. Quickly. Arrow after arrow. Not one missed its target.

There was confusion on the bank, the Nilfgaardians retreating into the forest, leaving their dead and wounded in the reeds. Hidden in the undergrowth they continued to shoot, but their arrows were barely reaching the ferryboat, which was being carried towards the midstream by the swift current. The distance was too great for the Nilfgaardian archers to shoot accurately. But not too great for Milva.

Among the Nilfgaardians suddenly appeared an officer in a black cape and a helmet with raven’s wings flapping on it. He was yelling, brandishing a mace and pointing downstream. Milva stood, took a broader stance, pulled the bowstring to her ear and quickly took aim. The arrow hissed in the air, and the officer bent backwards in his saddle and sagged in the arms of the soldiers holding him up. Milva drew her bow again and released her fingers from the bowstring. One of the Nilfgaardians holding up the officer screamed piercingly and lurched back off his horse. The others disappeared into the forest.

‘Masterful shots,’ Regis said calmly from behind the Witcher’s back. ‘But it’d be better if you grabbed the poles. We’re still too close to the bank and we’re being carried into the shallows.’

The archer and Geralt turned around.

‘Aren’t you dead?’ they asked in in chorus.

‘Did you think,’ the vampire said, showing them the black-

fletched shaft, ‘I could be harmed by any old bit of wood?’

There was no time to be surprised. The ferryboat was once again turning around in the current and moving along the calm waters. But on the bend in the river another beach appeared, a sandbank and shallow channel, and the bank teemed with black-clad Nilfgaardians again. Some of them were riding into the river and preparing to shoot. Everyone, including Dandelion, rushed for the poles, which soon could not reach the bottom as – owing to the combined effort – the current finally carried the ferryboat towards swifter water.

‘Good,’ Milva panted, dropping her pole. ‘Now they won’t be able to reach us . . .’

‘One of them’s made it to the sandbank!’ Dandelion cried. ‘He’s going to shoot! Get out of sight!’

‘He’ll miss,’ Milva said coldly.

The arrow splashed into the water two yards from the ferryboat’s bow.

‘He’s doing it again!’ the troubadour yelled, peeping out from above the saxboard. ‘Look out!’

‘He’ll miss,’ Milva repeated, straightening the bracer on her left forearm. ‘He’s got a good bow, but he’s as much an archer as my old grannie. He’s overexcited. After he releases, he trembles and shakes like a woman with a slug wriggling up her arse. Hold onto the horses, so I don’t get knocked over.’

This time the Nilfgaardian shot too high and the arrow whistled over the ferryboat. Milva raised her bow, her stance firm, quickly pulled the bowstring to her cheek and released it gently, not changing her position by even a fraction of an inch. The Nilfgaardian tumbled into the water as though struck by lightning and began to float with the current. His black cape billowed out like a balloon.

‘That’s how it’s done,’ Milva said and lowered her bow. ‘But it’s too late for him to learn.’

‘The others are galloping after us,’ Cahir said, pointing towards the right bank. ‘And I vouch they won’t stop chasing us. Not now that Milva’s shot their officer. The river’s meandering and the current will carry us towards their bank again on the next bend. They know it and they’ll be waiting . . .’

‘Right now we have another worry,’ the ferryman moaned,

getting up from his knees and throwing off his dead helper. ‘We’re being pushed straight for the left bank . . . By the Gods, we’re caught between two fires . . . And all because of you, m’lords! The blood will fall on your heads . . .’

‘Shut your trap and grab a pole!’

The flat, left bank, which was now nearer, was teeming with horsemen, identified by Dandelion as Lyrian partisans. They were yelling and waving their arms. Geralt noticed a rider on a white horse among them. He wasn’t certain, but he thought the rider was a woman. A fair-haired woman in armour, but without a helmet.

‘What are they yelling?’ Dandelion said, straining to listen. ‘Something about a queen, is it?’

The shouting on the left bank intensified. They could also hear the clanging of steel distinctly now.

‘It’s a battle,’ Cahir said bluntly. ‘Look. Those are imperial forces running out of the forest. The Nordlings were fleeing from them, and now they’ve been caught in a trap.’

‘The way out of the trap,’ Geralt said, spitting into the water, ‘was the ferry. I think they wanted to save at least their queen and their officers by ferrying them onto the other bank. And we hijacked the ferry. Oh, they won’t like us now, no, no . . .’

‘But they ought to!’ Dandelion said. ‘The ferry wouldn’t have saved anyone, just carried them straight into the clutches of the Nilfgaardians on the right bank. Let’s avoid the right bank too. We can parley with the Lyrians, but the Blacks will beat us to death without a second thought . . .’

‘It’s carrying us quicker and quicker,’ Milva said, spitting into the water too and watching her saliva drift away. ‘And right down the centre of the run. They can kiss our arses, both armies. The bends are gentle, the banks are level and overgrown with willows. We’re heading down the Yaruga and they won’t catch up with us. They’ll soon get bored.’

‘Bullshit,’ the ferryman groaned. ‘The Red Port is ahead of us . . . There’s a bridge there! And shallows! The ferry will get stuck . . . If they overtake us, they’ll be waiting for us . . .’

‘The Nordlings won’t overtake us,’ Regis said, pointing at the left bank from the stern. ‘They have their own worries.’

Indeed, a fierce battle was raging on the right bank. Most of the fighting took place in the forest and only betrayed itself by battle

cries, but here and there the black and colourfully uniformed horsemen were delivering blows to each other in the water near the bank. Bodies were splashing into the Yaruga. The tumult and clang of steel quietened, and the ferryboat majestically, but quite quickly, headed downstream.

Finally no soldiers could be seen on the overgrown banks, and no sounds of their pursuers could be heard. Only when Geralt was starting to hope everything would end well did they see a wooden bridge spanning the two banks. The river flowed beneath the bridge, past sandbars and islands, the largest of which supported the bridge's piers. On the right bank lay the timber port; they could see thousands of logs piled up there.

'It's shallow all around,' the ferryman panted. 'We can only get through the middle, to the right of the island. The current is carrying us there now, but grab the poles, they might help if we get stuck . . .'

'There are soldiers on the bridge,' Cahir said, shielding his eyes with his hand. 'On the bridge and in the port . . .'

They could all see the soldiers. And they all saw the band of horsemen in black and green cloaks flooding out of the forest behind the port. They were even close enough to hear the noise of battle.

'Nilfgaard,' Cahir confirmed drily. 'The men who were pursuing us. So the men in the port are Nordlings . . .'

'To the poles!' the ferryman yelled. 'Maybe we'll sneak through while they're fighting!'

They did not manage to. They were very close to the bridge when it suddenly began to shake from the boots of running soldiers. The footmen were wearing white tunics, decorated with red lozenges over their hauberks. Most of them had crossbows, which they rested on the railing and aimed at the ferryboat approaching the bridge.

'Don't shoot, boys!' Dandelion yelled at the top of his voice. 'Don't shoot! We're with you!'

The soldiers did not hear, or did not want to hear.

The salvo of quarrels turned out to have tragic results. The only human to be hit was the ferryman, who was still trying to steer with his pole. A bolt pierced him right through. Cahir, Milva and Regis ducked down behind the side in time. Geralt seized his sword and deflected one quarrel, but there were too many of them. By an

inexplicable miracle Dandelion, who was still yelling and waving his arms, was not hit. However, the hail of missiles caused real carnage among the horses. The grey slumped to its knees, struck by three quarrels. Milva's black fell, kicking. Regis's bay too. Roach, shot in the withers, reared and leaped overboard.

'Don't shoot!' Dandelion bellowed. 'We're with you!'

This time it worked.

The ferryboat, carried by the current, ploughed into a sandbank with a grinding sound and came to rest. They all jumped onto the island or into the water, escaping the hooves of the agonised, thrashing horses. Milva was the last, for her movements had suddenly become horrifyingly slow. *She's been hit,* the Witcher thought, seeing the girl clambering clumsily over the side and dropping inertly on the sand. He leapt towards her, but the vampire was quicker.

'Something's broken off in me,' the girl said very slowly. And very unnaturally. And then she pressed her hands to her womb. Geralt saw the leg of her woollen trousers darkening with blood.

'Pour that over my hands,' Regis said, handing Geralt a small bottle he had removed from his bag. 'Pour that over my hands, quickly.'

'What is it?'

'She's miscarrying. Give me a knife. I have to cut open her clothes. And go away.'

'No,' Milva said. 'I want him to stay . . .'

A tear trickled down her cheek.

The bridge above them thundered with soldiers' boots.

'Geralt!' Dandelion yelled.

The Witcher, seeing what the vampire was doing to Milva, turned his head away in embarrassment. He noticed soldiers in white tunics rushing across the bridge at great speed. An uproar could still be heard from the right bank and the timber port.

'They're running away,' Dandelion panted, running to him and tugging his sleeve. 'The Nilfgaardians are already on the right bridgehead! The battle is still raging there, but most of the army are fleeing to the left bank! Do you hear? We have to flee too!'

'We can't,' he said through clenched teeth. 'Milva's miscarried. She can't walk.'

Dandelion swore.

‘We’ll have to carry her then,’ he declared. ‘It’s our only chance . . .’

‘Not our only one,’ Cahir said. ‘Geralt, onto the bridge.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘We’ll hold back their flight. If those Nordlings can hold the right bridgehead long enough, perhaps we’ll be able to escape by the left one.’

‘How do you plan to do it?’

‘I’m an officer, don’t forget. Climb up that pier and onto the bridge!’

On the bridge, Cahir demonstrated that he was indeed experienced at bringing panicked soldiers under control.

‘Where are you going, scum? Where are you going, bastards?’ he yelled. Each roar was accompanied by a punch, as he knocked a fleeing soldier down onto the bridge’s boards. ‘Stop! Stop, you fucking swine!’

Some – but far from all – of the fleeing soldiers stopped, terrified by the roaring and flashing of the sword Cahir was whirling dramatically. Others tried to sneak behind his back. But Geralt had already drawn his sword and joined the spectacle.

‘Where are you going?’ he shouted, catching one of the soldiers in his tracks in a powerful grip. ‘Where? Stand fast! Get back there!’

‘Nilfgaard, sire!’ the soldier screamed. ‘It’s a bloodbath! Let me go!’

‘Cowards!’ Dandelion roared in a voice Geralt had never heard, as he clambered onto the bridge. ‘Base cowards! Chickenhearts! Would you flee to save your skins? To live out your days in ignominy, you varlets?’

‘They are too many, Sir Knight! We stand no chance!’

‘The centurion’s fallen . . .’ another of them moaned. ‘The decurions have taken flight! Death is coming!’

‘We must run!’

‘Your comrades,’ Cahir yelled, brandishing his sword, ‘are still fighting on the bridgehead and at the port! They are still fighting! Dishonour will be his who does not go to their aid! Follow me!’

‘Dandelion,’ the Witcher hissed. ‘Get down onto the island. You

and Regis will have to get Milva onto the left bank somehow. Well, what are you waiting for?'

'Follow me, boys!' Cahir repeated, whirling his sword. 'Follow me if the Gods are dear to you! To the timber port! Death to the dogs!'

About a dozen soldiers shook their weapons and took up the cry, their voices expressing very varied degrees of conviction. About a dozen of the men who had already run away turned back in shame and joined the ragtag army on the bridge. An army which was suddenly being led by the Witcher and the Nilfgaardian.

They might really have set off for the timber port, but the bridgehead was suddenly black with the cavalrymen's cloaks. The Nilfgaardians broke through the defence and forced their way onto the bridge. Horseshoes thudded on the planking. Some of the soldiers who had been stopped darted away, others stood indecisively. Cahir cursed. In Nilfgaardian. But no one apart from the Witcher paid any attention to it.

'What has been started must be finished,' Geralt snapped, gripping his sword tightly. 'Let's get them! We have to spur our men into action.'

'Geralt,' Cahir said, stopping and looking at him uncertainly. 'Do you want me to . . . to kill my own? I can't . . .'

'I don't give a shit about this war,' the Witcher said, grinding his teeth. 'This is about Milva. You joined the company, so make a choice. Follow me or join the black cloaks. But do it quickly.'

'I'm coming with you.'

And so it was that a witcher and a Nilfgaardian roared savagely, whirled their swords and leapt forward together without a second thought – two brothers in arms, two allies and comrades – in an encounter with their common foe, in an uneven battle. And that was their baptism of fire. A baptism of shared fighting, fury, madness and death. They were going to their deaths, the two of them. Or so they thought. For they could not know that they would not die that day, on that bridge over the River Yaruga. They did not know that they were both destined for other deaths, in other places and times.

The Nilfgaardians had silver scorpions embroidered on their sleeves. Cahir slashed two of them with quick blows of his long sword, and Geralt cut up two more with blows of his sihil. Then he jumped onto the bridge's railing, running along it to attack the rest. He was a witcher and keeping his balance was a trifle to him, but

his acrobatic feat astonished the attackers. And amazed they died, from blows of his dwarven blade, which cut through their hauberks as though they were made of wool, their blood splashing the bridge's polished timbers.

Seeing their commanders' valour the now larger army on the bridge raised a cheer, a roar which expressed returning morale and a growing fighting spirit. And so it was that the previously panicked fugitives attacked the Nilfgaardians like fierce wolves, slashing with swords and battle-axes, stabbing with spears and halberds and striking with clubs and maces. The railing broke and horses plunged into the river with their black-cloaked riders. The roaring army hurtled onto the bridgehead, pushing their chance commanders ahead of them, not letting Geralt and Cahir do what they wanted to do. For they wanted to withdraw quietly, return to help Milva and flee to the left bank.

A battle was still raging at the timber port. The Nilfgaardians had surrounded and cut off the soldiers – who had not yet fled – from the bridge. Those in turn were defending themselves ferociously behind barricades built from cedar and pine logs. At the sight of the reinforcements the handful of soldiers raised a joyful cry. A little too hastily, however. The tight wedge of reinforcements swept the Nilfgaardians off the bridge. But now a flanking cavalry counter-attack began on the bridgehead. Had it not been for the barricades and timber port's woodpiles, which inhibited both escape and the cavalry's momentum, the infantry would have been scattered in an instant. Pressed against the woodpiles, the soldiers took up a fierce fight.

For Geralt it was something he did not know, a completely new kind of fighting. Swordsmanship was out of the question, it was simply a chaotic melee; a ceaseless parrying of blows falling from every direction. However, he continued to take advantage of the rather undeserved privilege of being the commander; the soldiers crowded around him covering his flanks, protected his back and cleared the area in front of him, creating space for him to strike and mortally wound. But it was becoming more and more cramped. The Witcher and his army found themselves fighting shoulder to shoulder with the bloody and exhausted handful of soldiers – mainly dwarven mercenaries – defending the barricade. They fought, surrounded on all sides.

And then came fire.

One side of the barricade, located between the timber port and the bridge, had been a huge pile of pine branches, as spiky as a

hedgehog, an unsurmountable obstacle to horses and infantry. Now that pile was on fire; someone had thrown a burning brand into it. The defenders retreated, assaulted by flames and smoke. Crowded together, blinded, hampering each other, they began to die under the blows of the attacking Nilfgaardians.

Cahir saved the day. Making use of his military experience, he did not allow the soldiers gathering around him on the barricade to be surrounded. He had been cut off from Geralt's group, but was now returning. He had even managed to acquire a horse in a black caparison, and now, hacking in all directions with his sword, he charged at the flank. Behind him, yelling wildly, halberdiers and spearmen in red-lozenged tunics forced their way into the gap.

Geralt put his fingers together and struck the burning pile with the Aard Sign. He did not expect any great effect, since he had been forced to make do without his witcher elixirs for several weeks. But he succeeded nonetheless. The pile of branches exploded and fell apart, showering sparks around.

'Follow me!' he roared, slashing a Nilfgaardian's temple when the man was trying to push his way onto the barricade. 'Follow me! Through the fire!'

And so they set off, scattering the still-burning pyre with their spears, throwing the flaming brands they had picked up with their bare hands at the Nilfgaardian horses.

A baptism of fire, the Witcher thought, furiously striking and parrying blows. *I was meant to pass through fire for Ciri. And I'm passing through fire in a battle which is of no interest to me at all. Which I don't understand in any way. The fire that was meant to purify me is just scorching my hair and face.*

The blood he was splattered with hissed and steamed.

'Onward, comrades! Cahir! To me!'

'Geralt!' Cahir shouted, sweeping another Nilfgaardian from the saddle. 'To the bridge! Force your way through to the bridge! We'll close ranks . . .'

He did not finish, for a cavalryman in a black breastplate, without a helmet, with flowing, bloodied hair, galloped at him. Cahir parried a blow of the rider's long sword, but was thrown from his horse, which sat down on its haunches. The Nilfgaardian leant over to pin him to the ground with his sword. But he did not. He stayed his thrust. The silver scorpion on his breastplate flashed.

‘Cahir!’ he cried in astonishment. ‘Cahir aep Ceallach!’

‘Morteisen . . .’ no less astonishment could be heard in the voice of Cahir, spread-eagled on the ground.

A dwarven mercenary running alongside Geralt in a blackened and charred tunic with a red lozenge didn’t waste time being astonished by anything. He plunged his bear spear powerfully into the Nilfgaardian’s belly, unseating the enemy with the impetus of the blow. Another leapt forward, stamping on the fallen cavalryman’s black breastplate with a heavy boot, and thrust his spear’s blade straight into his throat. The Nilfgaardian wheezed, puking blood and raking the sand with his spurs.

At the same moment the Witcher received a blow in the base of his spine with something very heavy and very hard. His knees buckled beneath him. Falling, he heard a great, triumphant roar. He saw the horsemen in black cloaks fleeing into the trees. He heard the bridge thundering beneath the hooves of the cavalry arriving from the left bank, carrying a banner with an eagle surrounded by red lozenges.

And thus, for Geralt, ended the great battle for the bridge on the Yaruga. A battle which later chroniclers did not, of course, even mention.

‘Don’t worry, my lord,’ the field surgeon said, tapping and feeling the Witcher’s back. ‘The bridge is down. We aren’t in danger of being attacked from the other bank. Your comrades and the woman are also safe. Is she your wife?’

‘No.’

‘Oh, and I thought . . . For it’s always dreadful, sire, when pregnant women suffer in wars . . .’

‘Be silent. Not a word about it. What are those banners?’

‘Don’t you know who you were fighting for? Who would have thought such a thing were possible . . . That’s the Lyrian Army. See, the black Lyrian eagle and the red Rivian lozenges. Good, I’m done here. It was only a bump. Your back will hurt a little, but it’s nothing. You’ll recover.’

‘Thanks.’

‘I should be thanking you. Had you not held the bridge, Nilfgaard would have slaughtered us on the far bank, forcing us back into the water. We wouldn’t have been able to flee from them . . . You saved

the queen! Well, farewell, sire. I have to go, others need me to tend to their wounds.'

'Thanks.'

He sat on a log in the port, weary, sore and apathetic. Alone. Cahir had disappeared somewhere. The golden-green Yaruga flowed between the piers of the ruined bridge, sparkling in the light of the sun, which was setting in the west.

He raised his head, hearing steps, the clatter of horseshoes and the clanking of armour.

'This is he, Your Majesty. Let me help you dismount . . .'

'Thtay away.'

Geralt lifted up his eyes. Before him stood a woman in a suit of armour, a woman with very pale hair, almost as pale as his own. He saw that the hair was not fair, but grey, although the woman's face did not bear the marks of old age. A mature age, indeed. But not old age.

The woman pressed a batiste handkerchief with lace hems to her lips. The handkerchief was heavily blood-stained.

'Rise, sire,' one of the knights standing alongside whispered to Geralt. 'And pay homage. It is the Queen.'

The Witcher stood up. And bowed, overcoming the pain in his lower back.

'Did you thafeguard the bridge?'

'I beg your pardon?'

The woman took the handkerchief away from her mouth and spat blood. Several red drops fell on her ornamented breastplate.

'Her Royal Highness Meve, Queen of Lyria and Rivia,' said a knight in a purple cloak decorated with gold embroidery, standing beside the woman, 'is asking if you led the heroic defence of the bridge on the Yaruga?'

'It just seemed to happen.'

'Theemed to happen?' the queen said, trying to laugh, but not having much success. She scowled, swore foully but indistinctly, and spat again. Before she had time to cover her mouth he saw a nasty wound, and noticed she lacked several teeth. She caught his eye.

'Yes,' she said behind her handkerchief, looking him in the eye.

‘Thome thon-of-a-bitch thmacked me right in the fathe. A trifle.’

‘Queen Meve,’ the knight in the purple cloak announced, ‘fought in the front line, like a man, like a knight, opposing the superior forces of Nilfgaard! The wound hurts, but does not shame her! And you saved her and our corps. After some traitors had captured and hijacked the ferryboat, that bridge became our only hope. And you defended it valiantly . . .’

‘Thtop, Odo. What ith your name, hero?’

‘Mine?’

‘Certainly,’ the knight in purple said, looking at him menacingly. ‘What is the matter with you? Are you wounded? Injured? Were you struck in the head?’

‘No.’

‘Then answer the Queen! You see, do you not, that she is wounded in the mouth and has difficulty speaking!’

‘Thtop that, Odo.’

The purple knight bowed and then glanced at Geralt.

‘Your name?’

Very well, he thought. *I’ve had enough of this. I will not lie.*

‘Geralt.’

‘Geralt from where?’

‘From nowhere.’

‘Has no one bethtowed a knighthood on you?’ Meve asked, once more decorating the sand beneath her feet with a red splash of saliva mixed with blood.

‘I beg your pardon? No, no. Nobody has. Your Majesty.’

Meve drew her sword.

‘Kneel.’

He obeyed, still unable to believe what was happening. He was still thinking of Milva and the route he had chosen for her, fearing the swamps of Ysgith.

The queen turned to the Purple Knight.

‘You will thpeak the formula. I am toothleth.’

‘For outstanding valour in the fight for a just cause,’ the Purple Knight recited with emphasis. ‘For showing proof of virtue, honour

and loyalty to the Crown, I, Meve, by grace of the Gods the Queen of Lyria and Rivia, by my power, right and privilege dub you a knight. Serve us faithfully. Bear this blow, shirk not away from pain.'

Geralt felt the touch of the blade on his shoulder. He looked into the queen's pale green eyes. Meve spat thick red gore, pressed the handkerchief to her face, and winked at him over the lace.

The Purple Knight walked over to her and whispered something. The Witcher heard the words: 'predicate', 'Rivian lozenges', 'banner' and 'virtue'.

'That ith tho,' Meve said, nodding. She spoke more and more clearly, overcoming the pain and sticking her tongue in the gap left by missing teeth. 'You held the bridge with tholdierth of Rivia, valiant Geralt of nowhere. It jutht theemed to happen, ha, ha. Well, it hath come to me to give you a predicate for that deed: Geralt of Rivia. Ha, ha.'

'Bow, sir knight,' the Purple Knight hissed.

The freshly dubbed knight, Geralt of Rivia, bowed low, so that Queen Meve, his suzerain, would not see the smile – the bitter smile – that he was unable to resist.

The Tower of the Swallow

Dedication

To Dun Dâre they came at dead of night
For to seek the witcher maid
They ringed the hamlet from all sides
And sealed it with a barricade

Seize her they would in perfidy
But their plans were all in vain
Ere the sun arose on the frozen road
Three dozen brigands lay slain

A beggar's song about the frightful massacre which took place in Dun Dâre on Samhain Eve

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‘I can give you everything you desire,’ said the fortune-teller. ‘Riches, power and influence, fame and a long and happy life. Choose.’

‘I wish for neither riches nor fame, neither power nor influence,’ rejoined the witcher girl. ‘I wish for a horse, as black and swift as a nightly gale. I wish for a sword, as bright and keen as a moonbeam. I wish to overstride the world on my black horse through the black night. I wish to smite the forces of Evil and Darkness with my luminous blade. This I would have.’

‘I shall give you a horse, blacker than the night and fleeter than a nightly gale,’ vowed the fortune-teller. ‘I shall give you a sword, brighter and keener than a moonbeam. But you demand much, witcher girl, thus you must pay me dearly.’

‘With what? For I have nothing.’

‘With your blood.’

Flourens Delannoy, *Fairy Tales and Stories*

CHAPTER ONE

As is generally known, the Universe – like life – describes a wheel. A wheel on whose rim eight magical points are etched, making a complete turn; the annual cycle. These points, lying on the rim in pairs directly opposite each other, include Imbolc, or Budding; Lughnasadh, or Mellowing; Beltane, or Blooming; and Samhain, or Dying. Also marked on the wheel are the two Solstices, the winter one called Midinvaerne and Midaëte, for the summer. There are also the two Equinoxes – Birke, in spring, and Velen, in autumn. These dates divide the circle into eight parts – and so in the elven calendar the year is also divided up like that.

When they landed on the beaches in the vicinity of the Yaruga and the Pontar, people brought with them their own calendar, based on the moon, which divided the year into twelve months, giving the farmer's annual working cycle – from the beginning, with the markers in January, until the end, when the frost turns the sod into a hard lump. But although people divided up the year and reckoned dates differently, they accepted the elven wheel and the eight points around its rim. Adopted from the elven calendar, Imbolc and Lughnasadh, Samhain and Beltane, both Solstices and both Equinoxes became important holidays, sacred tides for human folk. They stood out from the other dates as a lone tree stands out in a meadow.

Those dates are also set apart by magic.

It was not – and is not – a secret that the eight dates are days and nights during which the enchanted aura is greatly intensified. No longer is anyone astonished by the magical phenomena and mysterious occurrences that accompany the eight dates, in particular the Equinoxes and Solstices. Everyone is now accustomed to such phenomena and they seldom evoke a great sensation.

But that year it was different.

That year people had, as usual, celebrated the autumnal Equinox with a solemn family meal, during which all the kinds of fruits from that year's harvest had to be arrayed on the table, even if only a little of each. Custom dictated it. Having eaten and given thanks to the goddess Melitele for the harvest, the people retired for the night. And then the nightmare began.

Just before midnight a frightful storm got up and a hellish gale blew, in which a ghastly howling, screaming and wailing were heard above the rustling of trees being bent almost to the ground, the creaking of rafters and the banging of shutters. The clouds driven across the sky assumed outlandish shapes, among which the most common were silhouettes of galloping horses and unicorns. The gale did not abate for a good hour, and in the sudden silence that followed it the night came alive with the trilling and whirring of the wings of hundreds of goatsucker nightjars, those mysterious fowl which – according to folk tales – gather together to sing a demonic death knell over a dying person. This time the chorus of nightjars was as mighty and loud as if the entire world were about to expire.

The nightjars sang their death knell in clamorous voices while the horizon became shrouded in clouds, quenching the remains of the moonlight. At that moment sounded the howl of the fell beann'shie, the harbinger of imminent and violent death, and across the black sky galloped the Wild Hunt – a procession of fiery-eyed phantoms on skeleton horses, their tattered cloaks and standards fluttering behind them. So it was every few years. The Wild Hunt gathered its harvest, but it had not been this terrible for decades – in Novigrad alone over two dozen people went missing without a trace.

After the Hunt had galloped by and the clouds had dispersed, people saw the moon – on the wane, as was customary during the Equinox. But that night the moon was the colour of blood.

Simple folk had many explanations for these equinoctial phenomena, which tended to differ considerably from each other according to the specifics of local demonology. Astrologers, druids and sorcerers also had their explanations, but they were in the main erroneous and cobbled together haphazardly. Few, very few, people were able to connect the phenomena to real facts.

On the Isles of Skellige, for example, a few very superstitious people saw in the curious events a harbinger of Tedd Deireadh, the end of the world, preceded by Ragh nar Roog, the last battle between Light and Darkness. The violent storm which rocked the Islands on the night of the Autumn Equinox was regarded by the superstitious as a wave pushed by the prow of the fearsome Naglfar of Morhögg, a longship with sides built of dead men's fingernails and toenails, bearing an army of spectres and demons of Chaos. More enlightened or better informed people, however, linked the

turmoil of the heavens with the evil witch Yennefer, and her dreadful death. Others yet – who were even better informed – saw in the churned-up sea a sign that someone was dying, someone in whose veins flowed the blood of the kings of Skellige and Cintra.

The world over, the autumn Equinox was a night of spectres, nightmares and apparitions, a night of sudden, suffocating awakenings, fraught with menace, among sweat-soaked and rumpled sheets. Neither did the most illustrious escape the apparitions and awakenings; Emperor Emhyr var Emreis awoke with a cry in the Golden Towers in Nilfgaard. In the North, in Lan Exeter, King Esterad Thyssen leaped from his bed, waking his spouse, Queen Zuleyka. In Tretogor, the arch-spy Dijkstra leaped up and reached for his dagger, waking the wife of the state treasurer. In the huge castle of Montecalvo the sorceress Philippa Eilhart leaped from damask sheets, without waking the Comte de Noailles' wife. The dwarf Yarpen Zigrin in Mahakam, the old witcher Vesemir in the mountain stronghold of Kaer Morhen, the bank clerk Fabio Sachs in the city of Gors Velen and Yarl Crach an Craite on board the longboat *Ringhorn* all awoke more or less abruptly. The sorceress Fringilla Vigo came awake in Beauclair Castle, as did the priestess Sigrdrifa of the temple of the goddess Freyja on the island of Hindarsfjall. Daniel Etcheverry, Count of Garramone, awoke in the besieged fortress of Maribor. As did Zyvik, decurion of the Dun Banner, in Ban Gleann fort. And the merchant Dominik Bombastus Houvenaghel in the town of Claremont. And many, many others.

Few, though, were capable of connecting all those occurrences and phenomena with an actual, specific fact. Or a specific person. A stroke of luck meant that three such people were spending the night of the autumn Equinox under one roof. They were in the temple of the goddess Melitele in Ellander.

*

'Lich fowl . . .' groaned the scribe Jarre, staring into the darkness filling the temple grounds. 'There must be thousands of them, whole flocks. They're crying over someone's death. Over her death . . . She's dying . . .'

'Don't talk nonsense!' Triss Merigold spun around, raised a clenched fist, and, for a moment, looked as though she would shove the boy or strike him in the chest. 'Do you believe in foolish

superstitions? September is coming to an end and the nightjars are gathering before taking flight! It's quite natural!'

'She's dying . . .'

'No one is dying!' screamed the sorceress, paling in fury. 'No one, do you understand? Stop talking nonsense!'

Several young female adepts appeared in the library corridor, aroused by the nocturnal alarm. Their countenances were grave and ashen.

'Jarre.' Triss had calmed down. She placed a hand on the boy's shoulder and squeezed hard. 'You're the only man in the temple. We're all watching you, looking for support and succour from you. You must not fear, you must not panic. Master yourself. Do not let us down.'

Jarre took a deep breath, trying to calm the trembling of his hands and lips.

'It is not fear . . .' he whispered, avoiding the sorceress's gaze. 'I'm not afraid, I'm troubled! About her. I saw her in a dream.'

'I saw her too.' Triss pursed her lips. 'We had the same dream, you, I and Nenneke. Not a word about it.'

'Blood on her face . . . So much blood—'

'Be silent, I say. Nenneke approaches.'

The high priestess joined them. She looked weary. She shook her head in answer to Triss's wordless question. Seeing that Jarre had opened his mouth, she forestalled him.

'Nothing, sadly. Almost all the girls awoke when the Wild Hunt flew over the temple, but none of them had a vision. Not even one as hazy as ours. Go to bed, lad, you cannot help. Back to the dormitory, girls.'

She rubbed her face and eyes with both hands.

'Oh . . . The Equinox! This accursed night . . . Go to bed, Triss. We can do nothing.'

The sorceress clenched her fists. 'This helplessness is driving me to insanity. The thought that somewhere she is suffering, bleeding, that she's in peril . . . If I only knew what to do, dammit!'

Nenneke, high priestess of the temple of Melitele, turned around.

‘Have you tried praying?’

*

In the South, far beyond the mountains of Amell, in Ebbing, in the land called Pereplut, on the vast marshes crisscrossed by the rivers Velda, Lete and Arete, in a place eight hundred miles as the crow flies from the city of Ellander and the temple of Melitele, a nightmare jerked the old hermit Vysogota from sleep. Once awake, Vysogota could not for the life of him recall his dream, but a weird unease prevented him from falling asleep again.

*

‘It’s cold, cold, cold,’ said Vysogota to himself, as he tramped along a path among the reeds. ‘It’s cold, cold, brrr.’

Yet another trap was empty. Not a single muskrat. A most unsuccessful night. Vysogota cleaned sludge and duckweed from the trap, muttering curses and sniffing through his frozen nostrils.

‘It’s cold, brrr, hooeee!’ he said, walking towards the edge of the swamp. ‘And September not yet over! It’s but four days after the Equinox! Ah, I don’t recall such chills at the end of September, not for as long as I’ve lived. And I’ve lived a long time!’

The next – and penultimate – trap was also empty. Vysogota didn’t even feel like cursing.

‘There’s no doubt,’ he wittered on, as he walked, ‘that the climate grows colder with every passing year. And now it looks as though the cooling will progress apace. Ha, the elves predicted that long since, but who believed in elven forecasts?’

Once again small wings whirred, and incredibly swift grey shapes flashed by above the old man’s head. Once again the fog over the swamps echoed with the wild, intermittent churring of the goatsucker nightjars and the rapid slapping of their wings. Vysogota paid no attention to the birds. He was not superstitious, and there were always plenty of lich fowl on the bogs, particularly at dawn. The air was so thick with them he feared they would collide with him. No, perhaps there weren’t always as many as there were today,

perhaps they didn't always call quite so bloodcurdlingly . . . Ah well, he thought, latterly nature has been playing queer pranks, and it's been one oddity after another, each one queerer than the last.

He was just removing the last – empty – trap from the water when he heard the neighing of a horse. The nightjars suddenly all fell silent.

There were hummocks on the swamps of Pereplut: dry, raised places, with river birch, alder, dogwood and blackthorn growing on them. Most of the hummocks were surrounded so completely by the bogs that it was impossible for a horse or a rider who didn't know the paths to reach them. But the neighing – Vysogota heard it once again – was coming from one of them hillocks.

Curiosity got the better of caution.

Vysogota was no expert on horses and their breeds, but he was an aesthete, and was able to recognise and appreciate beauty. And the black horse he saw framed against the birch trunks, with its coat gleaming like anthracite, was extraordinarily beautiful. It was the sheer quintessence of beauty. It was so beautiful it seemed unreal.

But it *was* real. And quite really caught in a trap, its reins and bridle entangled in the blood-red, clinging branches of a dogwood bush. When Vysogota went closer, the horse put its ears back and stamped so hard the ground shuddered, jerking its shapely head and whirling around. Now it was clear it was a mare. There was something else. Something that made Vysogota's heart pound frantically, and invisible pincers of adrenaline tighten around his throat.

Behind the horse, in a shallow hollow, lay a body.

Vysogota dropped his sack on the ground. And was ashamed of his first thought; which was to turn tail and run. He went closer, exercising caution, because the black mare was stamping her hooves, flattening her ears, baring her teeth on the bit and just waiting for the opportunity to bite or kick him.

The corpse was that of a teenage boy. He was lying face down, with one arm pinned by his trunk, the other extended to one side with its fingers digging into the sand. The boy was wearing a short suede jacket, tight leather britches and soft knee-high elven boots with buckles.

Vysogota leaned over. And just then the corpse gave a loud

groan. The black mare gave a long-drawn-out neigh and thumped its hooves against the ground.

The hermit knelt down and cautiously turned over the injured boy. He involuntarily drew back and hissed at the sight of the ghastly mask of dirt and congealed blood where the boy's face should have been. He delicately picked moss, leaves and sand from the spittle- and mucous-covered lips, and tried to pull away the matted hair stuck with blood to his cheek. The injured boy moaned softly and tensed up. And began to shake. Vysogota peeled the hair away from the boy's face.

'A girl,' he said aloud, unable to believe what was right in front of him. 'It's a girl.'

*

That day, had someone quietly crept up at dusk to the remote cottage in the midst of the swamp with its sunken, moss-grown thatched roof, had they peered through the slits in the shutters, in the weak glow of tallow candles, they would have seen a teenage girl with her head thickly bound in bandages, lying with almost corpse-like motionlessness, on a pallet covered in animal skins. They would also have seen an old man with a grey, wedge-shaped beard and long white hair, which fell down onto his shoulders and back from the edge of a broad bald patch that extended from his soiled forehead far beyond his crown. They would have noticed the old man lighting another tallow candle, placing an hourglass on the table, sharpening a quill and hunching over a leaf of parchment. Seen him ponder and mumble something to himself, keeping a close watch on the girl lying on the pallet.

But it would not have been possible. No one could have seen it. The cottage of the hermit Vysogota was well concealed amidst the marshes, in a wilderness permanently shrouded in mist, where no one dared to venture.

*

'We shall note down as follows,' Vysogota dipped his quill in the ink, 'Third hour after my intervention. Diagnosis: *vulnus incisivum*,

an open wound, dealt with great force using an unidentified sharp instrument, probably a curved blade. It encompasses the left part of the face, beginning in the infraorbital region, running across the cheek and extending as far as the parotid plexus and masseter muscle. The wound is deepest – reaching the periosteum – in the initial part beneath the orbit on the zygomatic bone. Probable length of time from when the wound was sustained to when it was first dressed: ten hours.'

The quill scratched on the parchment, but the scratching didn't last longer than a few moments. Or lines. Vysogota did not find everything he said to himself worthy of being written down.

'Returning to the dressing of the wound,' the old man began again, staring at the flickering and smoking candle flame, 'let us write as follows: I did not excise the edges of the cut, I limited myself to the removal of shreds of dead tissue and coagulated blood. I bathed the wound with willow bark extract. I removed dirt and foreign bodies. I put in sutures. Hemp sutures. Let it be written that I did not have any other kinds of thread at my disposal. I used a poultice of wolfsbane and applied a formed muslin dressing.'

A mouse scampered out into the middle of the chamber. Vysogota threw it a piece of bread. The girl on the pallet breathed restlessly and groaned in her sleep.

*

'Eighth hour following my intervention. Condition of the patient – unchanged. Condition of the doctor . . . I mean *my* condition . . . has improved, since I have enjoyed a little sleep . . . I can continue my notes. It behoves me to commit onto these leaves some information about my patient. For posterity. Assuming that posterity reaches these swamps before everything decays and crumbles into dust.'

Vysogota sighed heavily, dipped his quill and wiped it on the edge of his inkwell.

'As far as the patient is concerned,' he muttered, 'let the following be noted down. Age, I would say, around sixteen. Tall, strikingly slim build, but by no means puny, no indication of undernourishment. Musculature and physical construction rather typical for a young elf-woman, but no mixed-blood traits found . . . Can't be more than one eighth elven. A smaller proportion of elven

blood may, of course, not leave any traces.'

Vysogota only now seemed to have realised that he hadn't written a single word on the page. He put his quill to the parchment, but the ink had dried. The old man was not bothered in the slightest.

'May it be noted,' he continued, 'that the girl has had no children. I emphasise: I refer to old scars. No shortage of fresh wounds on her body. The girl has been beaten. Flogged, and by various means, probably at her father's hand. She has probably also been kicked.

'I also found on her body quite a strange distinguishing mark . . . Hmmm . . . Let's write this down, for the good of science . . . The girl has a red rose tattooed on her loins, right by the pubic mound.'

Vysogota stared at the sharpened quill point before dipping it into the inkwell. This time, though, he did not forget why he had done it – he quickly began to cover the page with even lines of sloping script. He wrote until the quill was dry.

'She was talking and shouting in befuddlement,' he said. 'Her accent and way of expressing herself – if I pass over frequent interjections in profane criminal cant – are quite confusing, difficult to place, but I would risk the assertion that they originate rather from the North than the South. Some of the words . . .'

Once again his quill scratched over the parchment, much too briefly to write down everything he had said a short while before. And then he took up his monologue in exactly the place he had left it.

'Some of the words and names the girl mumbled in her delirium are worth remembering. And investigating. Everything suggests a very – I mean very – extraordinary person has found their way to old Vysogota's cottage . . .'

He said nothing for a while and listened.

'I just hope,' he muttered, 'that old Vysogota's cottage doesn't prove the end of her road.'

*

Vysogota bent over the parchment and even pressed his quill to it, but wrote nothing, not a single letter. He threw the quill onto the table. He breathed heavily for a while, muttered angrily and blew his nose. He looked at the pallet and listened to the sounds coming from it.

'It must be stated and noted,' he said in a weary voice, 'that things look very ill. All my endeavours may be insufficient, and my exertions in vain. My fears were well-founded. The wound is infected. The girl is most worryingly feverish. Three of the four cardinal symptoms of acute inflammation have appeared. *Rubor*, *calor* and *tumor* can easily be confirmed by eye and touch. When the post-treatment shock passes, the fourth symptom – *dolor* – will also appear. Let it be writ that almost half a century has passed since I have practiced medicine. I feel the years weighing on my memory and the dexterity of my fingers. I have little practical skill, and there is little I can do. I have painfully few resources or medicaments. The only hope lies in the young body's immune mechanisms . . .'

*

'Twelfth hour following my intervention. In accordance with expectations came the fourth cardinal symptom of inflammation: *dolor*. The patient is crying out in pain, the fever and shivers are growing stronger. I have nothing, not a single physic to give her. I have a small quantity of stink weed elixir, but the girl is too frail to survive its effects. I also have monk's hood, but monk's hood would surely kill her.'

*

'Fifteenth hour following my intervention. Dawn. Patient unconscious. The fever advances rapidly, the shivers intensify. Moreover, powerful spasms of the facial muscles are occurring. If it is tetanus the girl is done for. Let us hope it is only the facial nerve . . . Or the trigeminal nerve. Or both of them . . . The girl would be left disfigured . . . But she would live . . .'

Vysogota glanced at the parchment, on which not a single

word was written.

'On condition,' he said hollowly, 'that she survives the infection.'

*

'Twentieth hour following my intervention. The fever advances. The *rubor*, *calor*, *tumor* and *dolor* are reaching, I venture, critical limits. But the girl has no chance of survival, of even reaching those limits. Thus do I write . . . I, Vysogota of Corvo, do not believe in the existence of gods. But were they by any chance to exist, let them take this girl into their care. And may they forgive me what I have done . . . If what I did turns out to be in error.'

Vysogota put down his quill, rubbed his swollen and itchy eyelids, and pressed a fist against his temple.

'I have given her a mixture of stink weed and monk's hood,' he said hollowly. 'The next hours will determine everything.'

*

He was not sleeping, only dozing, when a knocking and a pounding accompanied by a groan wrenched him from his slumber. It was a groan more of fury than of pain.

Outside, the day was dawning. A faint light filtered through the slits in the shutters. The hourglass had run its course long before; as usual Vysogota had forgotten to turn it over. The oil lamp flickered, and the ruby glow of the hearth dimly lit the corner of the chamber. The old man stood up and moved away the makeshift screen of blankets which separated the pallet from the rest of the room, in order to give the patient peace and quiet.

The patient had already picked herself up from the floor where she had fallen a moment earlier, and was sitting hunched on the edge of her pallet, trying to scratch her face under the dressing. Vysogota cleared his throat.

'I asked you not to rise. You are too feeble. If you need anything, call. I'm always at hand.'

‘Well, I don’t want you to be at hand,’ she said softly, under her breath, but quite clearly. ‘I need to pee.’

When he returned to remove the chamber pot, she was lying on her back on the pallet, fingering the dressing attached to her cheek by strips of bandage wrapped around her forehead and neck. When he went over to her again a moment later she was in the same position.

‘Four days?’ she asked, looking at the ceiling.

‘Five. Almost a day has passed since our last conversation. You slept the whole day. That is good. You need sleep.’

‘I feel better.’

‘I’m gladdened to hear it. Let’s remove the dressing. I’ll help you sit up. Take my hand.’

The wound was healing well and cleanly. This time the removal of the bandages passed without the painful tearing of the dressing from the scab. The girl gingerly touched her cheek. She grimaced, but Vysogota knew it wasn’t only from the pain. Every time she checked the extent of the disfigurement she appreciated the gravity of the wound. She made certain – with horror – that what she had touched before had not been a fevered nightmare.

‘Do you have a looking glass?’

‘I do not,’ he lied.

She looked at him totally clear-headed, possibly for the first time.

‘You mean it’s that bad?’ she asked, cautiously running her fingers over the stitches.

‘It’s a very long cut,’ he mumbled, angry at himself that he was making excuses and justifying himself to a girl. ‘Your face is still swollen. In a few days I shall remove the sutures. Until then I shall be applying wolfsbane and extract of willow. I shall no longer bandage your entire head. It’s healing nicely. Very nicely.’

She did not reply. She moved her mouth and jaw, and wrinkled and contorted her face, testing what the wound permitted and what not.

‘I’ve made pigeon broth. Will you eat some?’

‘I will. But this time I’ll try by myself. It’s humiliating to be spoon-fed when I’m not paralysed.’

Eating took her a long time. She lifted the wooden spoon to her mouth cautiously, using as much effort as if it weighed two pounds. But she managed without the help of Vysogota, who was observing her with interest. Vysogota was inquisitive – and burning with curiosity. He knew that the girl's return to health would lead to conversations which could throw light on the whole mysterious matter. He knew it and couldn't wait for that moment. He had lived too long alone in the wilderness.

She finished eating and sank back onto her pillow. For a moment she gazed lifelessly at the ceiling and then turned her head. The extraordinarily large green eyes, Vysogota realised once again, gave her face an innocently childlike expression, now clashing violently with her hideously disfigured cheek. Vysogota knew those looks; a big-eyed, permanent child, were a physiognomy arousing an instinctive sympathetic reaction. A perennial girl, even when her twentieth, thirtieth, why, even fortieth birthday had long ago sunk into oblivion. Yes, Vysogota knew those looks well. His second wife had been like that. And his daughter, too.

'I must flee from here,' the girl suddenly said. 'Urgently. I'm being hunted. You know that, don't you?'

'I do,' he nodded. 'Those were your first words, which contrary to appearances were not ravings. To be more precise, they were among the first. First you asked about your horse and your sword. In that order. Once I had assured you that your horse and sword were in good hands, you became suspicious that I was the comrade of a certain Bonhart and wasn't treating you but inflicting the torture of hope. When, not without difficulty, I put you right, you introduced yourself as Falka and thanked me for saving you.'

'I'm glad.' She turned her head away on the pillow, as though wanting to avoid meeting his eyes. 'I'm glad I didn't forget to thank you. I remember that vaguely. I didn't know what was reality and what was a dream. I was afraid I hadn't thanked you. My name's not Falka.'

'I learned that, too, although rather accidentally. You were talking in your fever.'

'I'm a runaway,' she said, without turning around. 'A fugitive. It's dangerous to give me shelter. It's dangerous to know what I'm really called. I must get on my horse and flee, before they catch up with me . . .'

'A moment ago,' he said kindly, 'you had difficulty sitting on a

chamber pot. I don't really see you mounting a horse. But I assure you, you are safe. No one will track you here.'

'I'm certainly being pursued. They're on my trail, combing the area . . .'

'Calm down. It rains every day, no one will find your tracks. You are in a wilderness, in a hermitage. In the home of a hermit who has cut himself off from the world. To such an extent that it would also be difficult for the world to find him. If, however, you wish it, I can look for a way to send tidings about you to your family or friends.'

'You don't even know who I am—'

'You are a wounded girl,' he interrupted, 'running from somebody who does not flinch from injuring girls. Do you wish me to pass on some tidings?'

'There is no one,' she replied a moment later, and Vysogota's ear caught a change in her voice. 'My friends are dead. They were massacred.'

He made no comment.

'I am death,' she began again, in a strange-sounding voice. 'Everyone who encounters me dies.'

'Not everyone,' he contradicted, scrutinising her. 'Not Bonhart, the one whose name you screamed out in the fever, the one you are running from. Your encounter seems to have harmed *you* rather than him. Did he . . . did he cut your face?'

'No.' She pursed her lips, to stifle something which was either a groan or a curse. 'My face was cut by Tawny Owl. Stefan Skellen. But Bonhart . . . Bonhart hurt me much more gravely. More deeply. Did I talk about that in the fever?'

'Calm down. You're weak, you should avoid powerful emotions.'

'My name is Ciri.'

'I'll make you a compress of wolfsbane, Ciri.'

'Hold on . . . a moment. Give me a looking glass.'

'I told you—'

'Please!'

He did as she asked, judging that he had to, that he could

delay it no longer. He even brought the oil lamp. So she could better see what had been done to her face.

'Well, yes,' she said in an altered, trembling voice. 'Well, yes. It's just as I thought. Almost as I thought.'

He went away, pulling the makeshift screen of blankets after him.

She tried hard to sob quietly, so he wouldn't hear.

*

The following day Vysogota removed half of the stitches. Ciri touched her cheek, hissed like a viper, and complained of an intense pain in her ear and heightened sensitivity in her neck near her jaw. Nonetheless, she got up, dressed, and went outside. Vysogota did not protest. He went out with her. He didn't have to help her or hold her up. The girl was healthy and much stronger than he had expected.

She only wobbled once outside, and held on to the door frame.

'Why . . .' she said, sucking in lungfuls of air. 'What a chill! Is it a frost or what? Winter already? How long have I been lying here? A few weeks?'

'Exactly six days. It's the fifth day of October. But it promises to be a very cold October.'

'The fifth of October?' She frowned and hissed in pain. 'How can it be? Two weeks . . .'

'What? What two weeks?'

'Never mind,' she shrugged. 'Perhaps I've got something wrong . . . But perhaps I haven't. Tell me, what is it that reeks around here?'

'Pelts. I hunt muskrat, beaver, coypu and otter, and cure their hides. Even hermits have to make a living.'

'Where's my horse?'

'In the barn.'

The black mare greeted them with loud neighing, joined by the bleating of Vysogota's goat, which was greatly displeased by having

to share its lodgings with another resident. Ciri hugged the horse's neck, patted it and stroked its mane. The mare snorted and pawed the straw with a hoof.

'Where's my saddle? Saddlecloth? Harness?'

'Here.'

He did not protest, make any comments nor voice his opinion. He leaned on his stick and said nothing. He did not move when she grunted trying to lift the saddle, didn't budge when she staggered beneath the weight and flopped down heavily onto the straw-covered floor with a loud groan. He did not approach her or help her to stand. He watched intently.

'Very well,' she said through clenched teeth, pushing away the mare, which was trying to shove its nose down her collar. 'I get it. But I have to move on from here, dammit! I must!'

'Where would you go?' he asked coldly.

Still sitting on the straw next to her fallen saddle, she touched her face.

'As far away as possible.'

He nodded, as though her answer had satisfied him, made everything clear and didn't leave any room for speculation. Ciri struggled to her feet. She didn't even try to reach down to pick up the saddle or harness. She just checked that there was hay and oats in the manger, and began to rub the horse's back and sides with a wisp of straw. Vysogota stood in silence. He didn't have to wait long. The girl staggered against the post supporting the ceiling, now as white as a sheet. Without a word he handed her his stick.

'There's nothing wrong with me. It's just—'

'It's just you felt giddy, because you're sick and as weak as a kitten. Let's go back. You must lie down.'

*

Ciri went out again at sunset, after sleeping for a good few hours. Vysogota, returning from the river, happened upon her by the bramble hedge.

'Don't go too far from the cottage,' he said curtly. 'Firstly,

you're too weak—'

'I'm feeling better.'

'Secondly, it's dangerous. There is a huge marsh all around us, endless tracts of reeds. You don't know the paths, you might get lost or drown in the bog.'

'And you,' she said, pointing at the sack he was dragging, 'know the paths, of course. And you don't walk that far, so the swamp can't be so huge at all. You tan hides to support yourself, I understand. Kelpie, my mare, has oats, but I don't see any fields around here. We ate chicken and groats. And bread. Real bread, not flatbread. You couldn't have got the bread from a trapper. So there's a village nearby.'

'Unerringly deduced,' he calmly agreed. 'Indeed, I get provisions from the nearest village. The nearest, which doesn't mean it's near. It lies on the edge of the swamp. The swamp adjoins the river. I exchange pelts for food, which they bring me by boat. Bread, kasha, flour, salt, cheese, sometimes a coney or a hen. Occasionally news.'

No question was forthcoming, so he continued.

'A band of horsemen on the hunt were in the village twice. The first time they warned people not to hide you, they threatened the peasants with fire and sword if you were seized in the village. The second time they promised a reward for finding your corpse. Your pursuers are convinced that you're lying dead in the forests, in a gorge or a ravine.'

'They won't rest,' she muttered, 'until they find a body. They have to have proof that I'm dead. They won't give up without that proof. They'll root around everywhere. Until they finally end up here . . .'

'It really matters to them,' he observed. 'I'd say it matters uncommonly to them . . .'

She pursed her lips.

'Don't be afraid. I'll leave before they find me here. I won't put you at risk . . . Don't be afraid.'

'Why do you think I'm afraid?' he shrugged. 'Is there a reason to be afraid? No one will find this place, no one will track you here.

If, however, you stick your nose out of the reeds, you'll fall straight into your pursuers' hands.'

‘In other words,’ she tossed her head proudly, ‘I have to stay here? Is that what you mean?’

‘You aren’t a prisoner. You can leave when you want. More precisely: whenever you’re able to. But you can stay with me and wait. Your pursuers will eventually become disheartened. They always get disheartened, sooner or later. Always. You can believe me. I know what I’m saying.’

Her green eyes flashed when she looked at him.

‘And anyway,’ he said quickly, shrugging and avoiding her gaze, ‘you’ll do as you please. I repeat, I’m not holding you a prisoner here.’

‘I don’t think I’ll leave today,’ she said. ‘I’m too weak . . . And the sun will soon be setting . . . And anyway I don’t know the paths. So let’s go back to the cottage. I’m frozen.’

*

‘You said I’ve was lying here for six days. Is that true?’

‘Why would I lie?’

‘Don’t take on. I’m trying to count the days . . . I ran away . . . I was wounded . . . on the day of the Equinox. The twenty-third of September. If you prefer to count according to the elves, the last day of Lughnasadh.’

‘That’s impossible.’

‘Why would I lie?’ she screamed and then groaned, grabbing her face. Vysogota looked calmly at her.

‘I don’t know why,’ he said coldly. ‘But I was once a doctor, Ciri. Long ago, but I’m still capable of distinguishing between a wound inflicted ten hours ago and one inflicted four days ago. I found you on the twenty-seventh of September. So you were wounded on the twenty-sixth. The third day of Velen, if you prefer to count according to the elves. Three days after the Equinox.’

‘I was wounded on the Equinox itself.’

‘That’s impossible, Ciri. You must have got the dates wrong.’

‘I most certainly haven’t. You’ve got some antiquated hermit calendar here.’

‘Have it your way. Does the date carry such importance?’

‘No. It doesn’t.’

*

Vysogota removed the last stitches three days later. He had every reason to be pleased and proud of his work – the line was even and clean, there was no need to fear a tattoo of dirt embedded in the wound. However, the satisfaction of the surgeon was spoiled by the sight of Ciri, in sombre silence, contemplating the scar in the looking glass held at various angles and trying vainly to cover it by pulling her hair over her cheek. The scar disfigured her. It was simply a fact. Nothing could be done. Pretending that it was different could not help in any way. Still scarlet, bulging like a cord, surrounded by needle punctures and marked with the scars from the stitches, the scar looked truly horrifying. There was a chance of it undergoing gradual or even rapid improvement. Vysogota knew, though, that there was no chance of the disfiguring scar vanishing.

Ciri was feeling much better, and to Vysogota’s astonishment and pleasure did not talk about leaving at all. She led her black mare, Kelpie, out of the barn. Vysogota knew that in the North the name kelpie was borne by a water spirit, a dangerous sea monster, according to superstition able to assume the form of a splendid steed, dolphin or even a comely woman, although in reality it always looked like a heap of seaweed. Ciri saddled her mare and trotted around the yard and cottage, after which Kelpie went back to the barn to keep the goat company, while Ciri went to the cottage to keep Vysogota company. She even helped him – probably out of boredom – as he worked with the pelts. While he was segregating the coypu according to their size and colouring, she divided the muskrats up into backs and bellies, slitting the skins along slats inserted into them. Her fingers were exceptionally nimble.

While they worked they had quite a strange conversation.

*

‘You don’t know who I am. You can’t even imagine who I am.’

She repeated that banal statement several times and slightly annoyed him with it. Of course, he did not betray his annoyance – he wouldn't betray his feelings before such a chit. No, he couldn't allow that, nor could he betray the curiosity that was consuming him.

Groundless curiosity, in truth, for he could have guessed who she was without any difficulty. Gangs of youths hadn't been rare in Vysogota's younger days, either. Nor could the years that had passed eliminate the magnetic power with which gangs lured whelps, hungry for adventure and thrills. Very often to their death. Whelps flaunting scars on their faces could count their luck; torture, the noose, the hook or the stake awaited the less fortunate of them.

Since Vysogota's younger days only one thing had changed – growing emancipation. Not only teenage boys, but also reckless girls, preferring a horse, a sword and adventures to lace-making, the spinning wheel and waiting for the matchmakers.

Vysogota did not say all that straight out. He said it in a roundabout way, but so that she knew that he knew. To make her aware that if someone in the cottage was an enigma, it was certainly not her – a young thug from a band of underage thugs who had miraculously escaped a manhunt. A disfigured teenage girl trying to cloak herself in an aura of mystery . . .

'You don't know who I am. But don't worry. I'll be leaving shortly. I won't put you at risk.'

Vysogota had had enough.

'I'm not at risk,' he said dryly. 'For what peril would there be? Even if a search party were to show up here, which I doubt, what ill could befall me? Giving help to fugitive criminals is punishable, but not for a hermit, since a hermit is unaware of worldly matters. It is my privilege to give asylum to anyone who comes to my retreat. You said it correctly: I don't know who you are. How am I, a hermit, to know who you are, what mischief you've been up to and why the law is pursuing you? And which law? For I don't even know what law applies in this region, or what and whose jurisdiction I live in. And it does not concern me. I am a hermit.'

He had mentioned the hermit's life a few too many times; he sensed it. But he did not quit. Her furious green eyes pricked him like spurs.

'I am a penniless anchorite. Dead to the world and its concerns.

I'm a simple, uneducated man, unaware of worldly matters . . .'

That was an exaggeration.

'Like hell you are!' she yelled, hurling a pelt and the knife to the floor. 'Do you take me for a fool? I'm not a fool, be sure of that. A hermit, a penniless anchorite? I had a look around when you weren't here. I looked in the corner, behind that rather filthy curtain. How did learned books get on those shelves, eh, my simple, ignorant man?'

Vysogota threw a coypu skin down on the pile.

'A tax collector once lived here,' he said light-heartedly. 'They are cadasters and bookkeeping ledgers.'

'You're lying,' Ciri grimaced, massaging her scar. 'You're lying through your teeth!'

He did not reply, pretending to be assessing the hue of another hide.

'Perhaps you think,' the girl began again, 'that if you have a white beard, wrinkles and you've lived a hundred years, you can easily hoodwink a naive young maid, eh? Let me tell you: maybe you would have tricked just any lass. But I'm not just any lass.'

He raised his eyebrows in a wordless, but provocative, question. He didn't have to wait long.

'I, my dear hermit, have studied in places where there were plenty of books, including the same titles you have on your shelves. I know plenty of them.'

Vysogota raised his eyebrows even higher. She looked him straight in the eye.

'This filthy sloven, this ragged orphan,' she drawled, 'is saying strange things. Must be a thief or bandit discovered in the bushes with her mush cut up. And yet you ought to know, hermit, that I have read *The History of Roderick de Novembre*. I've looked through the *Materia Medica* several times. I know the *Herbarius* you have on your shelf. I also know what the gules cross ermine blazon on the spines of those books means. It means the book was published by the University of Oxenfurt.'

She broke off, still observing him intently. Vysogota was silent, trying not to let his face betray anything.

'Which is why I think,' she said, making her habitual sharp,

haughty toss of head, ‘that you aren’t a simple hermit at all. That you didn’t die for the world, either, but fled from it. And you’re hiding here, in the wilderness, disguised by appearances and a boundless reed bed.’

‘If that is so,’ Vysogota smiled, ‘then our fates really have become uncannily entwined, my well-read young lady. This destiny has flung us together in a highly mysterious way. After all, you’re also in hiding. You too, Ciri, are skilfully spinning a veil of deception around yourself. I am, however, an old man, full of suspicion and embittered senile mistrust . . .’

‘Mistrust regarding me?’

‘Regarding the world, Ciri. A world in which a deceptive appearance dons the mask of truth to pull the wool over the eyes of another truth – a false one, incidentally, which also tries to deceive. A world in which the arms of the University of Oxenfurt are painted on the doors of bordellos. A world in which wounded thugs pass themselves off as worldly, learned, and perhaps nobly born maidens, intellectuals and polymaths, reading Roderick de Novembre and familiar with the crest of the Academy. In spite of all appearances. In spite of the fact that they carry another mark. A bandit’s tattoo. A red rose tattooed on the groin.’

‘Indeed, you were right.’ She bit her lip, and her face turned a crimson so intense that the line of the scar seemed black. ‘You *are* an embittered old man. And a nosy old prick.’

‘On my shelf, behind the curtain–’ he nodded toward it ‘– is a copy of *Aen N’og Mab Taedh’morc*, a collection of elven fairy tales and rhyming parables. There is a story there of a venerable old raven and a youthful swallow, very fitting to our situation and conversation. Because I am a polymath like you, Ciri, let me quote an appropriate excerpt. The raven, as you certainly recall, accuses the swallow of flightiness and unseemly frivolity.

‘Hen Cerbin dic’ss aen n’og Zireael

Aark, aark, caelm foile, te veloe, ell?

Zireael—’

He broke off, rested his elbows on the table, and his chin on his interlocked fingers. Ciri jerked her head, straightened up, and

looked at him defiantly. And completed the verse.

‘. . . Zireael veloe que’ss aen en’ssan irch

Mab og, Hen Cerbin, vean ni, quirk, quirk!’

‘The embittered and mistrustful old man,’ Vysogota said a moment later, without changing his position, ‘apologises to the young polymath. The venerable old raven, sensing everywhere deceit and trickery, asks for forgiveness of the swallow, whose only crime is to be young and full of life. And very pretty.’

‘Now you’re talking drivel,’ she said crossly, involuntarily covering the scar on her cheek. ‘You can forget compliments like that. They won’t correct those wonky stitches you tacked my skin with. Don’t think, either, that you’ll gain my trust by apologising. I still don’t know who you really are. Why you lied to me about those dates and days. Or why you looked between my legs, when I’d been wounded in the face. And if looking was where it finished.’

This time she made him lose his temper.

‘What are you saying, you brat?’ he roared. ‘I could be your father!’

‘Grandfather,’ she corrected him coldly. ‘Or even great-grandfather. But you aren’t. I don’t know who you are. But you are certainly not who you pretend to be.’

‘I am he who found you on the bog, almost frozen to the moss, with a black crust instead of a face, unconscious, and filthy. I am he who took you home, although I didn’t know who you were, and was within my rights to expect the worst. Who bandaged you and put you to bed. Tended to you, when you were expiring with fever. Nursed you. Washed you. Thoroughly. In the tattoo region as well.’

She blushed again, but had no intention of changing her insolent, defiant expression.

‘In this world,’ she growled, ‘deceptive appearances occasionally feign the truth; you said it yourself. I also know the world a little, if you can imagine it. You rescued me, tended my wounds, nursed me. Thank you for that. I’m grateful for your . . . your kindness. Although I know that there is no such thing as kindness without—’

‘Without calculation or the hope of some profit,’ he finished with a smile. ‘Yes, yes, I know, I’m a worldly man. Perhaps I know the world as well as you do, Ciri? Wounded girls, of course, are robbed of everything that has any value. If they’re unconscious or too weak to defend themselves, free rein is normally given to one’s urges and lust, often in immoral and unnatural ways. Isn’t that so?’

‘Nothing is as it seems,’ answered Ciri, her cheeks reddening once more.

‘How true a statement,’ he said, throwing another pelt on one of the piles. ‘And how mercilessly does it lead us to the conclusion that we, Ciri, know nothing about each other. We know only appearances, and appearances are deceptive.’

He waited a while, but Ciri wasn’t hurrying to say anything.

‘Although both of us have managed to carry out something of a provisional inquisition, we still know nothing about each other. I don’t know who you are, you don’t know who I am . . .’

This time he waited with calculation. She looked at him, and in her eyes there was the hint of the question he was expecting. Something strange flashed in her eyes when she posed the question.

‘Who shall begin?’

*

Had someone had crept up after nightfall to the cottage with the sunken, moss-grown thatched roof, had peered inside, in the firelight and glow of the hearth they would have seen a grey-bearded old man hunched over a pile of pelts. They would have seen an ashen-haired girl with a hideous scar on her cheek, a scar which in no way suited her huge green childlike eyes.

But no one could have seen that. For the cottage stood among reeds in a swamp where no one dared to venture.

*

‘My name is Vysogota of Corvo. I was once a doctor. A surgeon. I was an alchemist. I was a scholar, a historian, a philosopher and an

ethicist. I was a professor at the Academy of Oxenfurt. I had to flee after publishing a paper which was deemed godless. At that time, fifty years ago, it was punishable by death. I had to emigrate. My wife did not want to emigrate, so she left me. And I only ceased my flight when I reached the far South, in the Nilfgaardian Empire. Later I finally became a lecturer in ethics at the Imperial Academy in Castell Graupian, a position I held for almost ten years. But I had to run from there, too, after the publication of another treatise . . . Incidentally, the work dealt with totalitarian power and the criminal character of imperialist wars, but officially I and my work were accused of metaphysical mysticism and clerical schism. It was ruled I had been goaded into action by the expansive and revisionist groups of priests who were actually governing the kingdoms of the Nordlings. Quite amusing in the light of my death sentence for atheism twenty years previously! Indeed, it so happened that the expansive priests in the North had long since been forgotten by their people, but that had not been acknowledged in Nilfgaard. Combining mysticism and superstition with politics was a severely punishable offence.

'Today, looking back down the years, I think that had I humbled myself and shown remorse, perhaps the scandal would have blown over, and the emperor limited himself to disfavour, without using extreme measures. But I was bitter. I considered some of my arguments timeless, superior to this or that dominion or politics. I felt wronged, unjustly wronged. Tyrannously wronged. So I made active contact with the dissidents secretly fighting the tyrant. Before I knew it, I was in a dungeon with those dissidents, and some of them, when they were shown the torture instruments, pointed me out as the movement's chief ideologue.

'The emperor availed himself of his privilege to issue a pardon, though I was sentenced to exile, under the threat of immediate execution should I return to imperial territories.

'Thus I took offence against the entire world, against kingdoms, empires and universities, against dissidents, civil servants and lawyers. Against my colleagues and friends, who stopped being such at the touch of a magic wand. Against my second wife, who, like my first, thought her husband's difficulties a suitable reason for a divorce. Against my children, who disowned me. I became a hermit, here, in Ebbing, in the Pereplut Marshes. I inherited a dwelling from an anchorite I had once known. Unfortunately, Nilfgaard annexed Ebbing, and all of a sudden I

found myself in the Empire again. Now I have neither the strength nor the inclination to continue wandering, so I must hide. Imperial sentences do not lapse, even in a situation when the emperor who issued it died long ago, and the present emperor has no cause to remember the previous one fondly or share his views. The death sentence remains in force. That is the law and custom in Nilfgaard. Sentences for high treason do not expire, and neither are they subject to the amnesties that every emperor proclaims after his coronation. After the accession to the throne of a new emperor, everybody who was sentenced by his predecessor is given an amnesty . . . except those guilty of high treason. It is unimportant who reigns in Nilfgaard: if news gets out that I'm alive and am breaking my sentence of exile, dwelling in imperial territory, my head is for the noose.

'So as you see, Ciri, we find ourselves in wholly similar situation.'

*

'What is ethics? I knew, but I've forgotten.'

'The study of morality. Of the precepts of conduct: of being decorous, noble, decent and honest. Of the heights of goodness, to which probity and morality carry up the human spirit. And of the chasms of evil, into which malice and immorality are flung . . .'

'The heights of goodness!' she snorted. 'Probity! Morality! Don't make me laugh, or the scar on my face will burst. You were lucky that you weren't hunted, that they didn't send bounty hunters after you, people like . . . Bonhart. You'd see what chasms of evil are. Ethics? Your ethics are worth shit, O Vysogota of Corvo. It isn't the evil and indecent who are flung down into the depths, no! Oh, no! The evil and decisive fling down those who are moral, honest and noble but maladroit, hesitant and full of scruples.'

'Thanks for the lesson,' he sneered. 'In truth, though one may have lived a century, it is never too late to learn something new. Indeed, it is always worth listening to mature, worldly and experienced people.'

'Mock. Go ahead and mock.' She tossed her head. 'While you still can. For now it is my turn, now I shall entertain you with a tale. I'll tell you what happened to me. And when I'm done we'll see

if you still feel like mocking me.'

*

Had someone crept up after nightfall to the cottage with the sunken, moss-grown thatched roof, had they peered inside, in the dimly lit interior they would have seen a grey-bearded old man listening raptly to a tale told by an ashen-haired girl sitting on a log by the fireplace. They would have noticed that the girl was speaking slowly, as though having difficulty finding the words; that she was nervously rubbing her cheek, which was disfigured by a hideous scar, and that she was interweaving her story with long silences. A tale about the lessons she had received, of which all, to the last one, turned out to be false and misleading. About the promises made to her which were not kept. A story about how the destiny she'd been ordered to believe in betrayed her disgracefully and deprived her of her inheritance. About how each time she began to believe in her destiny she was made to suffer misery, pain, injustice and humiliation. About how those she trusted and loved betrayed her, did not come to her aid when she was afflicted, when she was menaced by dishonour, agony and death. A tale about the ideals to which she was instructed to remain loyal, and which disappointed, betrayed and abandoned her when she needed them, proving of what little value they were. About how she finally found help, friendship – and love – with those among whom she should have sought neither help nor friendship. Not to mention love.

But no one could have seen that, much less heard it. For the cottage with the sunken, moss-grown thatched roof was well hidden among the fog, in a swamp where no one dared venture.

CHAPTER TWO

A west wind brought a storm that night.

The purple-black sky burst along the line of lightning, exploding in a long drawn-out clatter of thunder. The sudden rain struck the dust of the road with drops as viscous as oil, roared on the roofs, smeared the dirt on the skins covering the windows. But the powerful wind quickly chased off the downpour, drove the storm somewhere far, far away, beyond the horizon, which was blazing with lightning.

And then dogs began to bark. Hooves thudded and weapons clanged. A wild howling and whistling made the hair stand up on the heads of the peasants who had woken and now sprang up in panic, barring their doors and shutters. Hands, wet with sweat, tightened on the hafts of axes and the handles of pitchforks. Clenched them tightly. But helplessly.

Terror sped through the village. Were they the hunted or the hunters? Insane and cruel from ferocity or fear? Will they gallop through, without stopping? Or will the night soon be lit up by the glare of blazing thatch?

Quiet, quiet, children . . .

Mamma, are they demons? Is it the Wild Hunt? Phantoms from hell? Mamma, mamma!

Quiet, quiet, children. They are not demons, not devils . . .

Worse than that.

They are people.

The dogs barked. The gale blew. Horses neighed, horseshoes thudded. The gang raced through the village and the night.

*

Hotspurn rode up onto the hillock, reined in and turned his horse around. He was prudent and cautious, and did not like taking risks, particularly when vigilance cost nothing. He didn't hurry to ride

down to the postal station by the small river. He preferred to have a good look first.

There were no horses or horse-drawn vehicles outside the station, only a single small wagon harnessed with a pair of mules. There was some writing on the tarpaulin which Hotspurn could not make out at a distance. But it did not look dangerous. Hotspurn was capable of sensing danger. He was a professional.

He rode down to the bank, which was covered in bushes and osiers, spurred his horse decisively into the river, crossed at a gallop among gouts of water, many splashing him above his saddle. Some ducks swimming by the bank flew away with a loud quacking.

Hotspurn urged his horse on and rode into the station courtyard through the open fence. Now he could read the writing on the tarpaulin, proclaiming 'Master Almavera, Tattoo Artist'. Each word was painted in a different colour and began with an excessively large, decoratively illuminated letter. And on the wagon's box, above the right front wheel, was a small split arrow rendered in purple paint.

'Dismount!' he heard behind him. 'On the ground, and fast! Hands away from your hilt!'

They approached and surrounded him noiselessly: Asse from the right in a silver-studded black leather jacket, Falka from the left in a short, green suede jerkin and beret with feathers. Hotspurn removed his hood and pulled the scarf from his face.

'Ha!' Asse lowered his sword. 'It's you, Hotspurn. I would have recognised you, but for that black horse!'

'What a gorgeous little mare,' said Falka with delight, sliding her beret over one ear. 'Black and gleaming like coal, not a light hair on her. And so well-shaped! Oh, she's a beauty!'

'Aye, came up for less than five-score florins,' smiled Hotspurn. 'Where's Giselher? Inside?'

Asse nodded. Falka, looking at the mare as though bewitched, patted her on the neck.

'When she ran through the water,' said Falka, raising her huge green eyes up to Hotspurn, 'she looked like a veritable kelpie! Had she emerged from the sea and not a river, I would have believed she was a real one.'

'Have you seen a real kelpie, Miss Falka?'

‘Only in a painting.’ The girl suddenly grew serious. ‘But that would be a long story. Come inside. Giselher’s waiting.’

*

There was a table by the window, which let in a little light. Mistle was half-lying on the table, resting on her elbows, almost naked from the waist down with nothing on but a pair of black stockings. Between her shamelessly spread legs knelt a skinny, long-haired individual in a brownish-grey smock. It could not have been anyone but Master Almavera, tattoo artist, busy tattooing a colourful picture on Mistle’s thigh.

‘Come closer, Hotspurn,’ invited Giselher, drawing a stool away from the next table, where he was sitting with Iskra, Kayleigh and Reef. The latter two, like Asse, were also dressed in black calfskin covered in buckles, studs, chains and other elaborate silver accessories. Some craftsman must have made a fortune on them, thought Hotspurn. The Rats, when the whim to dress up seized them, would pay tailors, shoemakers and leatherworkers handsomely. Naturally, neither did they miss any opportunity to simply wrest any clothing or jewellery that took their fancy from anyone they assailed.

‘I see you found our message in the ruins of the old station?’ Giselher said, stretching. ‘Ha, what am I saying, you wouldn’t be here otherwise, would you? You rode here pretty quickly, I must say.’

‘Because the mare is gorgeous,’ Falka interjected. ‘I’ll bet she’s fleet too!’

‘I found your message.’ Hotspurn did not take his eye off Giselher. ‘What about mine? Did it reach you?’

‘It did . . .’ stammered the leader of the Rats. ‘But . . . Well, to put it briefly . . . There wasn’t time. And then we got drunk and were forced to rest a little. And later another path came up . . .’

Damned pups, thought Hotspurn.

‘To put it briefly, you didn’t do the job?’

‘Well, no. Forgive me, Hotspurn. Couldn’t be done . . . But next time, ho! Without fail!’

‘Without fail!’ repeated Kayleigh with emphasis, though no one had asked him to repeat it.

Damned, irresponsible pups. Got drunk. And then another path came up . . . To a tailor to get some fancy costumes, I’ll be bound.

‘Want a drink?’

‘No, thank you.’

‘Fancy some of this?’ Giselher pointed at a small decorative lacquer casket among some demijohns and beakers. Now Hotspurn knew why a strange light was flashing in the Rats’ eyes, why their movements were so nervous and quick.

‘First-rate powder,’ Giselher assured him. ‘Won’t you take a pinch?’

‘No, thank you.’ Hotspurn glanced knowingly at a red stain and a dwindling bloody streak on the sawdust of the chamber, clearly indicating which way a body had been dragged. Giselher noticed the look.

‘One of the lackeys thought he’d play the hero,’ he snorted. ‘So Iskra had to scold him.’

Iskra laughed throatily. She clearly very aroused by the narcotic.

‘I scolded him so much he choked on his blood,’ she crowed. ‘And the others were cowed at once. That’s what you call terror!’

She was dripping in jewels as usual, and even had a diamond stud in her nose. She was not wearing leather, but a short cherry-red jacket with a fine brocade pattern. Her look was established enough to be all the rage among the gilded youth of Thurn. Like the silk scarf wrapped around Giselher’s head. Hotspurn had even heard of girls asking for ‘Mistle’ haircuts.

‘That’s what you call terror,’ he repeated pensively, still looking at the patch of blood on the floor. ‘What about the station keeper? His wife? And son?’

‘No, no,’ Giselher scowled. ‘Think we did for all of them? Not at all. We locked them in the pantry for a while. Now the station, as you see, is ours.’

Kayleigh swilled wine around his mouth, then spat it out on the floor. He took a small quantity of fisstech from the casket with a tiny spoon, meticulously sprinkled it on the spit-moistened tip of his

index finger and rubbed the narcotic into his gums. He handed the casket to Falka, who repeated the ritual and passed the fisstech to Reef. The Nilfgaardian turned it down, busy looking at a catalogue of colourful tattoos, and handed the box to Iskra. The she-elf passed it to Giselher without taking any.

'Terror!' she growled, narrowing her flashing eyes and sniffing. 'We have the station in the grip of terror! Emperor Emhyr holds the entire world this way, and we only this hovel. But the principle's the same!'

'Owww, dammit!' yelled Mistle from the table. 'Be careful what you prick! Do that one more time and I'll prick you! Right through!'

The Rats – apart from Falka and Giselher – roared with laughter.

'If you want to be beautiful you have to suffer!' Iskra called.

'Prick her, master, prick her,' Kayleigh added. 'She's hardened between the legs!'

Falka swore copiously and threw a beaker at him. Kayleigh ducked and the Rats roared with laughter again.

'So.' Hotspurn decided to put an end to the gaiety. 'You hold the station in the grip of terror. But what for? Other than the satisfaction you derive from terrorising station keepers' families?'

'We,' Giselher answered, rubbing fisstech into his gums, 'are lying in wait. Should someone stop to change horses or rest, they'll be stripped clean. It's more comfortable here than on a crossroads or in the thicket by the highway. But, as Iskra has just said, the principle's the same.'

'But today, since daybreak, only this one's fallen into our grasp,' Reef interjected, pointing at Master Almavera, his head almost hidden between Mistle's parted thighs. 'A pauper, like every artist. Had nothing to rob, so we're robbing him of his art. Take a look at how ingeniously he draws.'

He bared his forearm and displayed a bloody tattoo: a naked woman who wiggled her buttocks when he clenched his fist. Kayleigh also showed off. A green snake with an open maw and a scarlet, forked tongue writhed around his arm, above a spiked bracelet.

'A tasteful piece,' Hotspurn said indifferently. 'And helpful

when corpses are being identified. However, you failed with the robbery, my dear Rats. You'll have to pay the artist for his skill. There was no time to warn you; for seven days, from the first of September, the sign has been a purple split arrow. He has one painted on his wagon.'

Reef swore under his breath and Kayleigh laughed. Giselher waved a hand indifferently.

'Too bad. If needs must we'll pay him for his needles and dye. A purple arrow, say you? We'll remember. If someone rides up with the sign of the arrow between now and tomorrow, he won't be harmed.'

'You plan to stay here till tomorrow?' Hotspurn said with slightly exaggerated astonishment. 'That's imprudent, Rats. It's risky and dangerous!'

'You what?'

'Risky and dangerous!'

Giselher shrugged, Iskra snorted and cleared her nose onto the floor. Reef, Kayleigh and Falka looked at Hotspurn as though he'd just declared that the sun had fallen into the river and must be fished out before the crayfish pinched it. Hotspurn understood that he had merely appealed to the reckless pups' good sense, of which they had little. That he had alerted these braggarts to risk and danger. Braggarts – all reckless bravado – for whom those concepts were utterly alien.

'They're coming for you, Rats.'

'What of it?'

Hotspurn sighed.

Mistle – without having taken the trouble to dress – came over to them and interrupted the discussion. She placed a foot on the bench and – twisting her hips – demonstrated to all and sundry the work of Master Almavera: a crimson rose on a green stem with two leaves, on her inner thigh, right by her groin.

'Well?' she asked, hands on hips. Her bracelets, which almost reached her elbows, flashed brilliantly. 'What do you say?'

'Exquisite!' Kayleigh snorted, brushing his hair aside. Hotspurn had noticed that the Rat had rings in his ears. There was no doubt that similar earrings – like studded leather or silk scarves – would soon be the latest thing among the gilded youth in Thurn and the

whole of Geso.

‘Your turn, Falka,’ said Mistle. ‘What will you have?’

Falka touched her friend’s thigh, leaned over and examined the tattoo. From very close. Mistle ruffled Falka’s ashen-grey hair tenderly. Falka giggled and, without further ado, began to undress.

‘I want the same rose,’ she said. ‘In the same place as you, darling.’

*

‘How many mice you have here, Vysogota!’ Ciri said, breaking off her story and looking down at the floor, where a veritable mouse circus was taking place in the circle of light thrown by the oil lamp. One could only imagine what was happening in the gloom beyond the light.

‘A cat would come in useful. Or, better still, two.’

‘The rodents,’ the hermit coughed, ‘are coming inside because winter is drawing nigh. And I had a cat. But it wandered off somewhere, the good-for-nothing, and never came back.’

‘It was probably taken by a fox or marten.’

‘You never saw that cat, Ciri. If something took it, it would have had to be a dragon. Nothing smaller.’

‘Was he that ferocious? Oh, that’s a pity. He wouldn’t have let these mice scamper all over my bed. Pity.’

‘Yes, it is a pity. But I think he’ll return. Cats always do.’

‘I’ll build up the fire. It’s cold.’

‘It is. The nights are perishingly cold now . . . And it’s not even halfway through October yet . . . Go on, Ciri.’

For a while Ciri sat motionless, staring into the fireplace. The fire sprang to life with the new wood, crackled, roared, and threw golden light and flickering shadows onto the girl’s scarred face.

‘Go on.’

*

Master Almavera pricked, and Ciri felt the tears tingling in the corners of her eyes. Although she had prudently intoxicated herself before the operation with wine and white powder, the pain was almost unbearable. She clenched her teeth. She did not groan, naturally, but pretended not to pay attention to the needle and to scorn the pain. She tried blithely to take part in the conversation the Rats were having with Hotspurn, an individual who wished to be thought of as a merchant, but who – apart from the fact that he lived off merchants – had nothing in common with trade.

'Dark clouds have gathered above your heads,' Hotspurn said, his dark eyes sweeping over the Rats' faces. 'Isn't it bad enough that the Prefect of Amarillo is hunting you, that the Varnhagens are pursuing you, that the Baron of Casadei—?'

'Him?' Giselher grimaced. 'I can understand the prefect and the Varnhagens, but what has that Casadei got against us?'

'The wolf is dressed in sheep's clothing,' Hotspurn said, smiling, 'and pitifully bleats *baa, baa, no one likes me, no one understands me. Wherever I appear they throw stones at me. They shout "Hallo". Why, oh why? Why such unfairness and injustice?* The daughter of the Baron of Casadei, my dear Rats, after her adventure by the River Wagtail, grows ever weaker and feverish . . .'

'Aaah,' Giselher recalled. 'That carriage with those four spotted horses! That maiden?'

'That one. Now, as I said, she ails, wakes up in the night screaming, recalling Mr Kayleigh . . . But especially Miss Falka. And the brooch, a keepsake of her departed mamma, which Miss Falka wrested from her dress. Various words are repeated all the while.'

'It wasn't like that at all!' Ciri yelled from the table, able to react to the pain by shouting. 'We showed the baron's daughter contempt and disrespect by letting her get away with it! The wench should have been ravaged!'

'Indeed.' Ciri sensed Hotspurn's gaze on her naked thighs. 'Verily a great dishonour not to have ravaged her. No wonder then, that the offended Casadei has assembled an armed squad and offered a reward. He has sworn publicly that you will all hang head down from the corbels on the walls of his castle. He also swore that for the brooch wrenched from his daughter he will flay Miss Falka. Alive.'

Ciri swore, and the Rats roared in wild laughter. Iskra sneezed and covered herself in snot; the fisstech was irritating her mucous membranes.

'We disdain our pursuers,' she declared, wiping her nose, mouth, chin and the table. 'The prefect, the baron, the Varnhagens! They can hunt us, but they won't catch us! We are the Rats! We zigzagged back and forth on the far side of the Velda and now those dolts are at sixes and sevens, going the wrong way along a cold trail. They will have gone too far to turn around by the time they catch on.'

'Let them turn around!' Asse said heatedly. He had returned some time before from sentry duty. No one had replaced him and no one seemed about to. 'We'll slaughter them and that's that!'

'Exactly!' Ciri screamed from the table, having already forgotten how they had fled from their pursuers through the villages beside the Velda and how terrified she had been.

'Very well.' Giselher slammed his open palm down on the table, abruptly putting an end to the noisy chatter. 'Speak, Hotspurn. For I can see you wish to tell us something else, something of greater note than the prefect, the Varnhagens, the Baron of Casadei and his sensitive daughter.'

'Bonhart is on your trail.'

A very long silence fell. Even Master Almavera stopped working for a moment.

'Bonhart,' Giselher repeated in a slow, drawling voice. 'That grey-haired old blackguard? We must have really annoyed someone.'

'Someone wealthy,' Mistle added. 'Not everyone can afford Bonhart.'

Ciri was about to ask who this Bonhart was, but Asse and Reef – speaking almost at once, in unison – were quicker.

'He's a bounty hunter,' Giselher explained grimly. 'Years ago he took the king's shilling, they say. Then he was a wandering merchant, and finally began killing people for the bounty. He's a whoreson like no other.'

'They say,' Kayleigh said quite carelessly, 'that if you wanted to bury everyone Bonhart has put to the sword in one graveyard, it would have to measure a good half-acre.'

Mistle poured a pinch of the white powder into the dimple between her thumb and forefinger, and sniffed it up vigorously.

'Bonhart broke up Big Lothar's gang,' she said. 'He carved up him and his brother, the one they called Muchomorek.'

'Stabbed them in the back, they say,' Kayleigh threw in.

'He killed Valdez, too,' Giselher added. 'And when Valdez perished, his gang fell apart. One of the better ones. A solid, hard firm. Good scrappers. I thought about joining them at one time. Before we teamed up.'

'It's all true,' Hotspurn said. 'There's never been a gang like Valdez's and there never will be again. A merry air is sung about how they fought their way out of a trap at Sarda. Aye, bold they were, aye, daredevils they were! Few are their equal.'

The Rats suddenly fell silent and fixed their eyes on him, blazing and furious.

'The six of us,' Kayleigh drawled after a brief silence, 'once broke through a troop of Nilfgaardian horse!'

'We sprang Kayleigh from the Nissirs!' Asse snapped.

'Few are *our* equal!' Reef hissed.

'That is so, Hotspurn.' Giselher threw out his chest. 'The Rats are second to no other gang, not even Valdez's mob. Daredevils, you say? Well I'll tell you something about she-devils. Iskra, Mistle and Falka – the very three sitting here before you – rode in broad daylight down the high street in Druigh, and when they realised that the Varnhagens were in the tavern, they galloped right through it! Right through, I tell you! They rode in through the front and out into the courtyard. And the Varnhagens were left standing open-mouthed over broken beer mugs and spilled beer. Will you say that wasn't dashing?'

'He won't,' Mistle cut in before Hotspurn could reply, smiling nastily. 'He won't, because he knows who the Rats are. And his guild knows too.'

Master Almavera had finished the tattoo. Ciri thanked him with a haughty expression, dressed, and sat down with the company. She snorted, feeling the strange, appraising – and seemingly mocking – gaze of Hotspurn on her. She glowered at him, ostentatiously cuddling up to Mistle. She had already learned that such behaviour discomfited and cooled the zeal of gentlemen with

flirtation in mind. In the case of Hotspurn she acted with a little more exaggeration, for the pretend merchant was not so intrusive in that way.

Hotspurn was an enigma to Ciri. She had only seen him once before and Mistle had told her the rest. Hotspurn and Giselher, she had explained, knew each other and had been comrades for ages, and had agreed signals, passwords and meeting places. During those rendezvous Hotspurn passed on information – and then they travelled to the road indicated and robbed the indicated merchant, convoy or caravan. Sometimes they killed a specific person. There was always also an agreed sign; they were not allowed to attack merchants with that sign on their wagons.

At first Ciri had been astonished and slightly disappointed; she looked up to Giselher, and considered the Rats a model of freedom and independence. She loved their freedom, their contempt for everything and everybody. And now they unexpectedly had to carry out contracts. Like hired thugs, they were being told who to beat up. But that was not all; someone was ordering them to beat someone up and they were sheepishly complying.

It's quid pro quo. Mistle had shrugged when Ciri bombarded her with questions. *Hotspurn gives us orders, but also information, thanks to which we survive. Freedom and contempt have their limits. Anyway, it's always like that. You're always somebody's tool.*

Such is life, Little Falcon.

Ciri was surprised and disappointed, but she got over it quickly. She was learning. She had also learned not to be too surprised or to expect too much – for then the disappointment was less acute.

'I, my dear Rats,' Hotspurn said in the meantime, 'might have a remedy for your difficulties. For the Nissirs, barons, prefects, and even Bonhart. Yes, yes. For even though the noose is tightening around your necks, I might have a way for you to slip out of it.'

Iskra snorted, Reef cackled. But Giselher silenced them with a gesture, allowing Hotspurn to continue. 'The word is out,' the merchant said a moment later, 'that an amnesty will be proclaimed any day now. That even if a sentence is hanging over someone, why, even if the noose is hanging over them, it will be waived if they simply present themselves to the authorities and confess their guilt. That applies to you too.'

‘Bollocks!’ Kayleigh cried, eyes watering a little because he had just inhaled a pinch of fisstech. ‘It’s a Nilfgaardian trick, a ruse! We old warhorses won’t be taken in like that!’

‘Hold hard,’ Giselher halted him. ‘Don’t be hasty, Kayleigh. Hotspurn, as we know, doesn’t usually dissemble nor break his word. He usually knows what he’s saying and why. So he surely knows and will tell us where this sudden Nilfgaardian generosity has come from.’

‘Emperor Emhyr,’ Hotspurn said calmly, ‘is taking a wife. We shall soon have an empress in Nilfgaard. Which is why they’re to proclaim an amnesty. The emperor is reportedly mighty content, so he wishes contentment on others too.’

‘I don’t give a shit about imperial contentment,’ Mistle announced haughtily. ‘And I won’t be availing myself of the amnesty, because that Nilfgaardian kindness smells like fresh shavings. As though someone’s been sharpening a stake. Ha!’

Hotspurn shrugged. ‘I doubt that it’s trickery. It’s a political matter. And a great one. Greater than you, Rats, than all of the local mobs put together. It’s politics.’

‘You what?’ Giselher frowned. ‘I don’t understand a damned thing you’re saying.’

‘Emhyr’s marriage is political, and political issues are to be secured through that wedding. The emperor is forging a union through marriage, he wants to unify the empire more securely, put an end to border unrest, bring peace. For do you know who he’s marrying? Cirilla, the heiress to the throne of Cintra.’

‘Lies!’ Ciri yelled. ‘Hogwash!’

‘By what right do you accuse me of lying, Miss Falka?’ Hotspurn raised his eyes towards her. ‘Perhaps you are better informed?’

‘Certainly am!’

‘Quiet, Falka.’ Giselher grimaced. ‘He pricked your tail on the table and you were quiet, and now you’re bawling? What is this Cintra, Hotspurn? Who is this Cirilla? Why should it be so important?’

‘Cintra,’ Reef interjected, pouring fisstech on his finger, ‘is a little state in the North over which the empire fought with the local rulers. About three or four years ago.’

‘Agreed,’ Hotspurn confirmed. ‘The imperial forces conquered Cintra and even crossed the River Yarra, but had to withdraw later.’

‘Because they took a beating at Sodden Hill,’ snapped Ciri. ‘They almost lost their breeches they retreated so fast!’

‘Miss Falka, I see, is familiar with recent history. It’s creditable, creditable at such a young age. May one ask where Miss Falka attended school?’

‘One may not!’

‘Enough!’ Giselher demanded quiet again. ‘Talk about this Cintra, Hotspurn. And about the amnesty.’

‘Imperator Emhyr,’ the so-called merchant said, ‘has decided to turn Cintra into a parasitic state . . .’

‘A what?’

‘Parasitic. Like ivy, which can’t exist without a powerful tree trunk around which it wraps itself. And the tree trunk is, of course, Nilfgaard. There are other such states, such as Metinna, Maecht, Toussaint . . . Where local dynasties govern, or pretend to govern.’

‘That’s called a parent’s antinomy,’ Reef boasted. ‘I’ve heard of it.’

‘Nonetheless, the problem with Cintra was that the royal line died out . . .’

‘Died out?’ It was as though green sparks would shoot from Ciri’s eyes at any moment. ‘Died out, my hat! The Nilfgaardians murdered Queen Calanthe! Simply murdered her!’

‘I do own–’ with a gesture Hotspurn quieted Giselher, who was once again about to berate Ciri for interrupting ‘–that Miss Falka continues to dazzle us with her knowledge. The queen of Cintra did indeed fall during the war. It is believed that her granddaughter, Cirilla, the last of the royal blood, also fell. Thus Emhyr did not have much from which to create that apparent autonomy – as Mr Reef so wisely said. Until Cirilla suddenly showed up again, as if from nowhere.’

‘Huh. Just fairy tales,’ snorted Iskra, resting on Giselher’s arm.

‘Indeed.’ Hotspurn nodded. ‘A little like a fairy tale, it must be confessed. They say that this Cirilla was imprisoned by an evil witch somewhere in the far North, in a magical tower. But Cirilla managed to flee and beg for asylum in the empire.’

‘That is one damn great load of false hogwash and balderdash!’ yelled Ciri, reaching for the casket of fisstech with shaking hands.

‘While Imperator Emhyr, so the rumour goes–’ Hotspurn continued unperturbed ‘–fell madly in love with her when he saw her and wants to take her for his wife. So he offers an amnesty.’

‘Little Falcon is right,’ Mistle said firmly, emphasising her words by banging her fist on the table. ‘That’s balderdash! I can’t bloody under-bloody-stand what this is all about. One thing I know for certain: basing any hopes of Nilfgaardian benevolence on that balderdash would be even greater balderdash.’

‘That’s right!’ Reef said, supporting her. ‘There’s nothing in the imperial marriage for us. No matter whom the emperor marries, another betrothed will always be waiting for us. One twisted out of hemp!’

‘This isn’t about your necks, my dear Rats,’ Hotspurn reminded them. ‘This is politics. There’s no let-up to the endless rebellions, uprisings and disorder on the northern marches of the empire, particularly in Cintra and its surroundings. And if the imperator takes the heiress of Cintra for a wife, Cintra will calm down. There’ll be a solemn amnesty, and the rebellious parties will come down from the mountains, stop besetting the imperial forces and making trouble. Why, if the Cintran ascends the imperial throne, perhaps the rebels will join the imperial army! And you know, after all, that in the North, on the far side of the River Yarra, there is war. And every soldier counts.’

‘Aha.’ Kayleigh grimaced. ‘Now I get it! That’s their amnesty! They’ll give us a choice: here’s a sharpened stake and there’s the imperial livery. You can have a stake up your arse or the livery on your back. And off to war, to die for the empire!’

‘Indeed,’ Hotspurn said slowly, ‘anything can happen in war. Nonetheless, not everyone must fight, my dear Rats. Of course, after fulfilling the terms of the amnesty, after disclosing and admitting one’s guilt, a certain kind of . . . substitute service might be possible.’

‘What?’

‘I know what this is about.’ Giselher’s teeth flashed briefly in his weather-beaten face, blue from stubble. ‘The merchant’s guild, my little ones, would like to take us in. Caress and nurse us. Like a doting mother.’

‘Whore mother, more like,’ Iskra grunted under her breath. Hotspurn pretended not to hear.

‘You are completely right, Giselher,’ he said coldly. ‘The guild may, if it so wishes, hire you. Officially, for a change. And take you in. Give you protection. Also officially and, also, for a change.’

Kayleigh was going to say something, Mistle too, but a swift glance from Giselher kept them both silent.

‘Tell the guild, Hotspurn,’ the leader of the Rats said icily, ‘that we are grateful for the offer. We shall think it over, reflect on it and discuss it. And decide what to do.’

Hotspurn stood up.

‘I ride.’

‘Now, with darkness falling?’

‘I shall overnight in the village. I feel awkward here. And tomorrow straight to the border with Metinna, then down the main highway to Forgeham, where I’ll stay until the Equinox, and who knows? Maybe longer. For I shall wait there for anyone who has thought it through, and is ready to turn themselves in and wait for the amnesty under my protection. And I advise you not to dilly-dally, either, with your reflecting and your pondering. For Bonhart is liable to outpace the amnesty.’

‘You keep frightening us with Bonhart,’ Giselher said slowly, also standing up. ‘Anyone would think he was just around the corner . . . When he’s probably over the hills and far away . . . ’

‘. . . in Jealousy,’ Hotspurn finished calmly. ‘In the inn called *The Chimera’s Head*. About thirty miles hence. If not for your zigzags by the Velda, you probably would have run into him yesterday. But that doesn’t worry you, I know. Farewell, Giselher. Farewell, Rats. Master Almavera? I’m riding to Metinna, and I’m always happy to have company on the road . . . What did you say? Gladly? As I thought. Pack up your things then. Pay the master, Rats, for his artistic efforts.’

*

The postal station smelled of fried onions and potato soup. They had been cooked by the station keeper’s wife, temporarily released

from her imprisonment in the pantry. A candle on the table spat, pulsated, and swayed with a whisker of flame. The Rats leaned so tightly over the table that the flame warmed their almost-touching heads.

'He's in Jealousy,' Giselher said softly. 'In *The Chimera's Head*. Only a day's ride from here. What do you think of that?'

'The same as you,' Kayleigh snarled. 'Let's ride over and kill the whoreson.'

'Let's avenge Valdez,' Reef said. 'And Muchomorek.'

'Then various Hotspurns,' Iskra hissed, 'won't shove other people's fame and daring down our throats. We'll kill Bonhart, that scavenger, that werewolf. We'll nail his head above the inn door, to match the name! So everyone will see he wasn't a hard man, but a mere mortal like everyone else, one who finally took on someone better than himself. That'll show folk which gang is number one, from Korath to Pereplut!'

'They'll be singing songs about us at markets!' Kayleigh said heatedly. 'Why, and in castles!'

'Let's ride!' Asse slammed his hand down hard on the table, 'Let's ride and destroy the bastard.'

'And afterwards,' Giselher pondered, 'we'll think about that amnesty . . . that guild . . . Why are you twisting up your face, Kayleigh, as though you've bitten a louse? They're on our heels and winter's coming. Here's what I think, little Rats: let's winter, warming our arses by the fireplace, blanketed from the cold by the amnesty, swigging mulled amnesty beer. We'll see out this amnesty nice and politely . . . more or less . . . till the spring. And in the spring . . . when the grass peeps out from under the snow . . .'

The Rats laughed in unison, softly, ominously. Their eyes flared like those of real rats when they approach a wounded man incapable of defending himself at night in a dark alley.

'Let's drink,' Giselher said, 'to Bonhart's confusion! Let's eat that soup, and then go to bed. Rest, for we set off before sunrise.'

'That's right,' Iskra snorted. 'Let's follow Mistle and Falka's example. They've been in bed for an hour.'

The postal station keeper's wife trembled by the cauldron, hearing once again their soft, evil, hideous giggling.

*

Ciri raised her head. For a long time she said nothing, eyes fixed on the barely flickering flame of the lamp, where the last fish oil was burning down.

'I slipped out of the station like a thief,' she continued the story. 'Before dawn, in total darkness . . . But I didn't manage to flee unseen. Mistle must have woken when I was getting out of bed. She caught me in the stable, when I was saddling the horse. But she didn't show any surprise. And she didn't try to stop me. The sun was starting to rise . . .'

'Now it's not too far till *our* dawn,' yawned Vysogota. 'Time to sleep, Ciri. You can take up the story tomorrow.'

'Perhaps you're right.' She also yawned, stood and stretched vigorously. 'Because my eyelids are getting heavy. But at this pace, hermit, I'll never finish. How many evenings have we had together? At least ten. I'm afraid that the whole story might take a thousand and one nights.'

'We have time, Ciri. We have time.'

*

'Who do you want to run from, Little Falcon? From me? Or from yourself?'

'I've finished running. Now I want to catch up with something. Which is why I must return . . . to where everything began. I must. Please understand, Mistle.'

'So that was why . . . why you were so nice to me today. For the first time in so many days . . . The last time? To bid farewell? And then forget me?'

'I'll never forget you, Mistle.'

'You will.'

'Never. I swear. And it wasn't the last time. I'll find you. I'll come to you . . . I'll come in a golden carriage and six. With a retinue of courtiers. You'll see. I'll soon have . . . possibilities. Great possibilities. I'll change your fortunes . . . You'll see. You'll find out

what I'll be capable of doing. Of changing.'

'You need great power to do that,' Mistle sighed. 'And tremendous magic . . . '

'And that's also possible.' Ciri licked her lips. 'Magic too . . . I can recover . . . everything I once lost can be restored. And be mine once more. I promise you, you'll be astonished when we meet again.'

Mistle turned her closely-cropped head away, eyes fixed on the pink and blue streaks the dawn had painted above the eastern edge of the world.

'Indeed,' she said quietly. 'I shall be astonished if we ever meet again. If I ever see you again, little one. Go. Let's not drag this out.'

'Wait for me,' Ciri sniffed. 'And don't get yourself killed. Think about the amnesty Hotspurn was talking about. Even if Giselher and the others don't want to . . . You think about it, Mistle. It may be a way to survive . . . Because I will come back for you. I swear.'

'Kiss me.'

The dawn broke. The light grew and it became colder and colder.

'I love you, Waxwing.'

'I love you, Little Falcon. Now go.'

*

'Of course, she didn't believe me. She was convinced I'd got cold feet, that I'd rush after Hotspurn to look for help, to beg for that tempting amnesty. How could she know what feelings had overcome me, as I listened to what Hotspurn had said about Cintra and my grandmamma Calanthe? And about how some "Cirilla" would become the wife of the Emperor of Nilfgaard? That same emperor who had murdered my grandmamma. And who had sent that black knight with feathers on his helmet after me. I told you, remember? On the Isle of Thanedd, when he held out his hand to me, I made him bleed! I ought to have killed him . . . But somehow I couldn't . . . I was a fool! Oh, never mind. Perhaps he bled to death on Thanedd . . . Why are you looking at me like that?'

'Go on. Tell me how you rode after Hotspurn, to recover your

inheritance. To recover what belonged to you.'

'There's no need to sneer, no need to mock. Yes, I know it was stupid, I see it now, I saw it then too . . . I was cleverer in Kaer Morhen and in the temple of Melitele, there I knew that what had passed could not return, that I wasn't the Princess of Cintra but someone completely different, that I had no inheritance. All of that was lost and I had to reconcile myself to it. It was explained to me wisely and solemnly, and I accepted it. Calmly, too. And then it suddenly began to come back. First, when they tried to impress me with the Baron of Casadei's daughter's title . . . I'd never been bothered about such things, but suddenly I fell into a fury, put on airs and yelled that I was more titled and of better birth than she. And from then on I began to think about it. I felt the fury growing in me. Do you understand that, Vysogota?'

'I do.'

'And Hotspurn's story was the last straw. I was almost boiling with rage . . . I had been told so much about destiny in the past . . . But here was someone else about to benefit from my destiny, thanks to simple fraud. Someone had passed themselves off as me, as Ciri of Cintra, and would have everything, would live in the lap of luxury . . . I couldn't think of anything else . . . I suddenly realised I was hungry, cold, sleeping outdoors, that I had to wash in freezing streams . . . Me! When I ought to have a gold-plated bathtub! Water perfumed with spikenard and roses! Warmed towels! Clean bed linen! Do you understand, Vysogota?'

'I do.'

'I was suddenly ready to ride to the nearest prefecture, to the nearest fort, to those black-cloaked Nilfgaardians whom I so feared and whom I hated so much . . . I was ready to say, "*I* am Ciri, you Nilfgaardian morons. Your stupid emperor ought to take *me* as his wife. Some impudent fraud has been shoved into your emperor's arms, and that idiot hasn't realised he's being swindled". I was so determined I would have done it, given the opportunity. Without a thought. Do you understand, Vysogota?'

'I do.'

'Fortunately, I calmed down.'

'To your great fortune.' He nodded gravely. 'The matter of the imperial marriage bears all the hallmarks of a political scandal, a battle of factions or fractions. Had you revealed yourself, thwarting

other influential forces, you wouldn't have escaped the dagger or poison.'

'I understood that too. And remembered it. I remembered it well. To reveal who I was would mean death. I had the chance to convince myself of it. But let us not get ahead of the story.'

They were silent for some time, working with the skins. A few days before, the catch had been unexpectedly good. Many muskrats and coypus, two otters and a beaver had been caught in the traps and snares. So they had a great deal of work.

'Did you catch up with Hotspurn?' Vysogota finally asked.

'I did.' Ciri wiped her forehead with her sleeve. 'Quite quickly, actually, because he was in no hurry. And he wasn't at all surprised when he saw me!'

*

'Miss Falka!' Hotspurn tugged at the reins, gracefully spinning the black mare around. 'What a pleasant surprise! Although I confess it's not such a great one. I expected it, I can't conceal that I expected it. I knew you would make the right choice, miss. A wise choice. I noticed a flash of intelligence in your lovely and charming eyes.'

Ciri rode closer, so that their stirrups almost touched. Then she hawked at length, leaned over and spat on the sand of the highway. She had learned to spit in that hideous but effective way when it was necessary to dampen somebody's enthusiasm.

'I understand,' Hotspurn smiled slightly, 'you wish to take advantage of the amnesty?'

'No.'

'To what, then, should I ascribe the joy which the sight of your comely face evokes in me, miss?'

'Must there be a reason?' she snapped. 'You said you'd be pleased to have company on the road.'

'Nothing has changed.' He grinned more broadly. 'But if I'm wrong about the issue of the amnesty, I'm not certain we should keep company. We find ourselves, as you see, at a crossroads. A junction, the four points of the compass, the need for a choice . . .

Symbolism, as in that well-known legend. If you ride east you will not return . . . If you ride west you will not return . . . If you ride north . . . Hmm . . . Amnesty lies north of this post—'

'You can shove your amnesty.'

'Whatever you say, miss. So where, if I may ask, does your road lead? Which path from this symbolic crossroads will you choose? Master Almavera, artist of the needle, drove his mules westwards, towards the small town of Fano. The eastern highway leads to the settlement of Jealousy, but I would very much advise against that.'

'The River Yarra,' Ciri said slowly, 'is the Nilfgaardian name for the River Yaruga, right?'

'Such a learned maiden–' he leaned over and looked her in the eye '–and she doesn't know that?'

'Can't you answer in a civilised fashion, when you're asked in a civilised fashion?

'I was only joking! Why bristle so? Yes, it's the same river. In elven and Nilfgaardian it's the Yarra, in the North it's the Yaruga.'

'And at the mouth of that river,' continued Ciri, 'lies Cintra?'

'That's right. Cintra.'

'From where we are now, how far is it to Cintra? How many miles?'

'Plenty. And it depends what kind of miles you count it in. Almost every nation has its own, so it's easy to make a mistake. It's more convenient, using the method of all wandering merchants, to calculate such distances in days. Reaching Cintra would take twenty-five to thirty days.'

'Which way? Due north?'

'Miss Falka seems very curious about Cintra. Why?'

'I want to ascend to the throne there.'

'Very well, very well.' Hotspurn raised his hand in a defensive gesture. 'I understood the gentle deflection, I won't ask any more questions. The most direct road to Cintra, paradoxically, doesn't lead due north, for wildernesses and boggy lakes would hinder your progress. First, you should head towards the town of Forgeham, and then north-west to Metinna, the capital of a country with exactly the same name. Afterwards you ought to ride across the plain of

Mag Deira, on the merchant's road to the town of Neunreuth. Only from there should you head for the north road, which runs along the valley of the River Yelena. From there it's easy – military units and transports ply the road without let-up via Nazair and the Marnadal Stairs, which is a pass leading north to the Marnadal Valley. And the Marnadal Valley is Cintra.'

'Hmm . . . ' Ciri's eyes were fixed on the misty horizon, at the blurred line of black hills. 'To Forgeham and then north-west . . . You mean . . . Which way?'

'You know what, miss?' Hotspurn smiled slightly. 'I'm heading towards Forgeham, and then to Metinna. See, down that track, that line of yellow sand between those young pines? Ride that way with me, and you won't lose your way. Amnesty or no amnesty, but it will be pleasant to travel with such a charming maiden.'

Ciri measured him up with the coldest glance she could manage. Hotspurn bit his lip with a puckish smile.

'So?'

'Let's ride.'

'Bravo, Miss Falka. Wise decision. I said that you were as wise as you were beautiful. I was right.'

'Stop calling me "miss", Hotspurn. In your mouth it sounds insulting, and I won't let myself be insulted with impunity.'

'As you wish, miss.'

*

The day did not fulfil the beautiful dawn's promise. It was grey and wet. The damp fog dimmed the intensity of the autumnal leaves of the trees leaning over the road, displaying a thousand shades of ochre, red and yellow.

The damp air smelled of bark and mushrooms.

They rode at a walk over a carpet of fallen leaves, but Hotspurn often spurred his black mare to a gentle trot or canter. During those moments Ciri looked on in delight.

'Does she have a name?'

'No.' Hotspurn flashed his teeth. 'I treat my mounts

functionally. I change them regularly and don't became attached to them. I think giving horses names is pretentious, if one doesn't run a stable. Do you agree with me? Blacky the horse, Fido the dog and Felix the cat. Pretentious!'

*

Ciri didn't like his gaze or ambiguous smiles, and especially disliked the slightly mocking tone he used when talking and answering questions. So she adopted a simple tactic – she remained silent, spoke in monosyllables and did not provoke him. When possible. It was not always possible. Particularly when he talked about that amnesty of his. Thus when once again – and quite sternly – she expressed her reluctance, Hotspurn surprisingly changed his approach; he abruptly began trying to prove that in her case an amnesty was not necessary, it simply did not apply to her. The amnesty concerned criminals, he said, not victims of crimes. Ciri roared with laughter.

'You're a victim yourself, Hotspurn!'

'I was speaking seriously,' he assured her. 'Not in order to arouse your girlish glee, but to suggest a way of saving your skin in the event of being captured. Something like that won't work on the Baron of Casadei, nor can you expect clemency from the Varnhagens. The most favourable outcome is that they would hang you on the spot, quickly and, all being well, quite painlessly. Were you, however, to fall into the hands of the prefect and stood before the austere, but just, imperial law . . . Ha, then I would suggest the following line of defence: break down in tears and declare that you were the innocent victim of a coincidence.'

'And who would believe that?'

'Everybody would.' Hotspurn leaned over in the saddle and looked her in the eye. 'Because that's the truth. You *are* an innocent victim, Falka. You aren't even sixteen, so according to the empire's law you're a minor. You ended up in the Rats' gang by accident. It's not your fault that one of the bandits, Mistle, whose unnatural tastes are no secret, took a fancy to you. You were dominated by Mistle, sexually abused and forced to—'

'Now it's all clear,' Ciri interrupted, amazed by her own calm. 'It's finally clear what this is all about, Hotspurn. I've seen men like

you before.'

'Indeed?'

'Just like every cockerel,' she said, still composed, 'your comb bristles at the thought of me and Mistle. Like every stupid tomcat it dawns in your stupid noggin to try to cure me of this sickness which is contrary to nature, to turn the deviant back onto the road of truth. But do you know what is truly disgusting and contrary to nature in all that? Your thoughts!'

Hotspurn observed her in silence, with a somewhat mysterious smirk on his thin lips.

'My thoughts, dear Falka,' he said a moment later, 'may not be decent, may not be nice, and they are obviously not innocent . . . But, by the Gods, they are in keeping with nature. With my nature. You do me a disservice, thinking that my attraction to you has its basis in some . . . perverted curiosity. Ha, you also do yourself a disservice, by not being aware – or not wanting to realise – that your captivating appeal and uncommon beauty are capable of bringing any man to his knees. That the charm of your glance—'

'Listen, Hotspurn,' she interrupted. 'Do you want to bed me?'

'What intelligence,' he said, spreading his hands. 'I'm simply lost for words.'

'Then I'll help you.' She spurred her horse a little, in order to look at him over her shoulder. 'Because I have plenty of words. I feel honoured. In other circumstances, who knows . . . If you were someone else, ha! But you, Hotspurn, do not attract me at all. Nothing, simply nothing, about you attracts me. And actually, I'd say, it's the reverse: everything about you puts me off. You can see for yourself that in such circumstances the sexual act would be contrary to nature.'

Hotspurn laughed, also spurring on his horse. The black mare danced on the track, gracefully lifting her shapely head. Ciri fidgeted in the saddle, fighting with a strange feeling which had suddenly woken in her, somewhere deep in the pit of her stomach, but which quickly and doggedly struggled outside, onto her skin, quivering from the touch of her clothing. *I've told him the truth*, she thought. *I don't like him, by the devil, it's his horse I like, that black mare. Not him, but his horse . . . What damned foolishness! No, no, no! Even if I wasn't thinking of Mistle, it would be ridiculous and stupid to yield to him just because the sight of that black mare dancing on the*

track excites me.

Hotspurn let her ride closer and looked her in the eyes with a strange smirk. Then he jerked the reins again, making the mare take short steps, circle and walk gracefully sideways. *He knows*, thought Ciri, *the old rascal knows what I'm feeling.*

Damn it. I'm simply curious!

'Some pine needles,' Hotspurn said gently, riding up very close and extending a hand, 'have got caught in your hair. I'll remove them if you allow. And I'll add that the gesture springs from my gallantry, not from perverted lust.'

The touch – which came as no surprise to her at all – caused her pleasure. She was still very far from a decision, but just to be sure she reckoned the days from her last bleeding. Yennefer had taught her that; to count in advance and with a cool head, because afterwards, when things got hot, a strange aversion to counting developed, linked to a tendency to ignore the potential result.

Hotspurn looked her in the eye and smiled, just as though he knew that the reckoning had come out in his favour. *If only he weren't so old!* Ciri sighed. *He's got to be at least thirty . . .*

'Tourmalines,' said Hotspurn, his fingers gently touching her ear and earring. 'Pretty, but only tourmalines. I would gladly give you emeralds. They are precious and have a more intense green, which would suit your looks and the colour of your eyes much better.'

'Know,' she drawled, looking at him insolently. 'If it came to it, I'd demand emeralds in advance. Because no doubt it's not just horses you treat functionally, Hotspurn. No doubt after a heady night you'd think recalling my first name was pretentious. Fido the dog, Felix the cat and the maiden: Mary-Jane!'

''Pon my honour,' he laughed artificially, 'you can chill the most feverish desire, O Snow Queen.'

'I've been well schooled.'

*

The fog had lifted a little, but it was still gloomy. And soporific. Until the languorous mood was brutally interrupted by yelling and

the thudding of hooves. Some horsemen rushed out from behind a clump of oaks they had just passed.

The two of them reacted as quickly and as smoothly as if they had been practicing it for weeks. They spurred and reined their horses around, breaking into a gallop, a furious dash, pressed to their horses' manes, urging their mounts on with shouts and kicks of their heels. Above their heads crossbow bolts whirred, and up came a shouting, a clanging and a thudding of hoofbeat.

'Into the trees!' Hotspurn yelled. 'Turn into the forest! Into the undergrowth.'

They turned without slowing. Ciri pressed herself harder and lower to her horse's neck, for the branches lashing her as she sped past threatened to knock her from the saddle. She saw a crossbow bolt flake a splinter from the trunk of an alder they were passing. She shouted at her horse to go faster, expecting the thud of a bolt in her back at any moment. Hotspurn, riding just in front of her, suddenly groaned strangely. They cleared a deep hollow and rode recklessly down a precipice into a thorny thicket. Just then Hotspurn slid from his saddle and tumbled into a cranberry bush. The black mare neighed, kicked, thrashed her tail and rushed on. Ciri did not think twice. She dismounted and slapped her horse on the rump. As it ran after the black mare she helped Hotspurn up. The two of them dived into the bushes, into an alder copse, fell over, tumbled down the slope and into some tall ferns at the bottom of the ravine. Moss cushioned their fall.

The thudding of their pursuers' hooves resounded from the precipice above them. Fortunately they were riding higher up through the forest, after the fleeing horses. It seemed that their disappearance among the ferns had gone undetected.

'Who are they?' Ciri hissed, pulling crushed russula mushrooms from under Hotspurn and shaking them from her hair. 'The prefect's men? The Varnhagens?'

'Common bandits . . .' Hotspurn spat out leaves. 'Thugs . . .'

'Offer them an amnesty,' she said, spitting sand. 'Promise them __'

'Be quiet. They'll hear.'

'Heeeyy! Heeeyyy! Over heeere!' they heard from above. 'Over on the leeeft! On the leeeft!'

‘Hotspurn?’

‘What?’

‘You have blood on your back.’

‘I know,’ he answered coldly, pulling a wad of linen from his jacket and turning over on his side. ‘Shove this under my shirt. By my left shoulder blade . . .’

‘Where were you hit? I can’t see the bolt . . .’

‘It was an arbalest . . . Iron shot. The head of a horseshoe nail, most probably. Leave it there, don’t touch it. It’s right by the backbone.’

‘Dammit. What can I do?’

‘Keep quiet. They’re returning.’

Hooves pounded, someone whistled piercingly. Somebody yelled, called, and ordered somebody else to go back. Ciri listened intently.

‘They’re riding off,’ she murmured. ‘They’ve given up the chase. They didn’t even catch the horses.’

‘Good.’

‘We won’t catch them either. Will you be able to walk?’

‘I won’t have to.’ He smiled, showing her a cheap-looking bracelet fastened to his wrist. ‘I bought this trinket with the horse. It’s magical. The mare has carried it since she was a foal. When I rub it, like this, it’s as though I were calling her. As though she were hearing my voice. She’ll run here. It’ll take some time, but she’ll come for certain. With a bit of fortune your roan will follow her.’

‘And with a bit of bad luck you’ll ride off by yourself?’

‘Falka,’ he said, becoming grave. ‘I won’t. I’m counting on your help. I’ll have to be held up in the saddle. My toes are already going numb. I may lose consciousness. Listen: this ravine will lead you to a narrow river valley. You’ll ride uphill, against the current, northwards. You’ll carry me to a place called Tegamo. You’ll find somebody there who’ll know how to get this iron out of my back without me ending up dead or paralysed.’

‘Is that the nearest village?’

‘No. Jealousy is nearer, it’s in a valley about twenty miles in

the opposite direction, downstream. But don't go there under any circumstances.'

'Why?'

'Under no circumstances,' he repeated, frowning. 'It's not about me, it's about you. Jealousy means death for you.'

'I don't understand.'

'You don't have to. Simply trust me.'

'You told Giselher—'

'Forget Giselher. If you want to live, forget about all of them.'

'Why?'

'Stay with me. I'll keep my word, Snow Queen. I'll cover you with emeralds . . . I'll shower you in them. . .'

'Indeed, this is a wonderful time for making jokes.'

'It's always a good time for jokes.'

Hotspurn suddenly seized her, pulled her close and began to undo her blouse. Unceremoniously, but unhurriedly. Ciri pushed him away.

'Indeed!' she snapped. 'A wonderful time for that too!'

'It's always a good time for that. Especially for me, right now. I told you, it's my spine. There may be complications tomorrow . . .'

'What are you doing? Oh, damn it . . .'

This time she pushed him away harder. Too powerfully. Hotspurn blanched, bit his lip and groaned in pain.

'I'm sorry. But if somebody is wounded they ought to lie still.'

'Being close to you makes me forget the pain.'

'Stop that!'

'Falka . . . Be nice to a suffering man.'

'You'll really suffer if you don't take your hand away. This second!'

'Quiet . . . The thugs are liable to hear us . . . Your skin is like silk . . . Don't wriggle.'

Oh, dammit, thought Ciri, *let it be. In any case, what difference does it make? I'm curious. I can be curious. There's no real feeling in it.*

I'll treat him functionally and that's that. And forget him unpretentiously.

She yielded to his touch and the pleasure it brought. She turned her head away, but decided that was exaggeratedly modest and fraudulently prudish; she didn't want to be a goody-goody being seduced. She looked him straight in the eyes, but that seemed too bold and provocative; she didn't want to be like that either. So she simply closed her eyes, hugged him around the neck and helped him with the buttons, because he was having difficulty with them and wasting time. The touch of fingers was joined by the touch of lips. She was close to forgetting about the entire world when Hotspurn suddenly froze stiff. For a while she lay patiently, remembering that he was wounded and the wound must be bothering him. But it went on a little too long. His saliva was cooling on her nipples.

'Hey, Hotspurn? Are you asleep?'

Something oozed onto her chest and side. She touched it with her fingers. Blood.

'Hotspurn!' she shoved him off her. 'Hotspurn, have you died?'

Foolish question, she thought. *I mean, I can see.*

I can see he's died.

*

'He died with his head on my breast.' Ciri turned her head away. The glow from the fireplace played red on her disfigured cheek. Perhaps there was a blush there too. Vysogota could not be certain.

'The only thing I felt then,' she added, still turned away, 'was disappointment. Does that shock you?'

'No. Actually not.'

'I understand. I'm trying not to embellish the story, not correct anything. Not keep anything back. Although occasionally I feel like it, especially that last part.' She sniffed, rubbing a knuckle into the corner of her eye.

'I covered him with branches and stones. Any old thing I could find, I confess. It grew dark, I had to sleep there. The bandits were still hanging around, I could hear their shouts and I was certain

they weren't ordinary bandits. I just didn't know who they were hunting: me or him. But I had to stay quiet. The whole night. Until dawn. Next to a corpse. Brrr.'

'At dawn,' she began again a moment later, 'the sound of our pursuers had long since faded away and I could set off. I had a mount. The magical bracelet I took from Hotspurn's arm really worked. The black mare returned. Now she belonged to me. That was my present. That's the custom on the Isles of Skellige, did you know? A girl has the right to a costly gift from her first lover. So what if mine died before he managed to actually become my lover?'

*

The mare banged her front hooves on the ground, neighed and turned in profile as though ordering Ciri to admire her. Ciri could not suppress a sigh of admiration at the sight of the dolphin-like neck; straight and slender, but powerfully muscled, the small shapely head with its concave forehead, the high withers and her build of delightful proportions.

She approached cautiously, showing the mare the bracelet on her wrist. The mare gave a long drawn-out snort, flattened her twitching ears, but allowed herself to be caught by the bridle and stroked on her velvety nose.

'Kelpie,' Ciri said. 'You're as black and agile as a sea-kelpie. You're as magical as a kelpie. So you'll be "Kelpie". And I don't care if that's pretentious or not.'

The mare snorted, stuck her ears up, and shook her silky tail, which reached her hocks. Ciri – favouring a high saddle position – shortened the stirrup leathers and felt the unusual, flat saddle. It had no saddle tree or pommel. She fitted her boot to the stirrup and seized the horse by the mane.

'Nice and easy, Kelpie.'

The saddle, in spite of appearances, was quite comfortable. And for obvious reasons much lighter than standard cavalry saddles.

'Now,' Ciri said, patting the mare on her hot neck, 'let's see if you're as fleet as you are beautiful. If you're a real racer or just a hack. What do you say to a twenty-mile gallop, Kelpie?'

*

Had someone quietly crept up deep in the night to the remote cottage in the midst of the swamp with its sunken, moss-grown thatched roof, had they peered through the slits in the shutters, they would have seen a grey-bearded old man listening to the story told by a teenage girl with green eyes and ashen hair.

They would have seen the dying glow in the fireplace come alive and grow bright, as though sensing what would be told.

But that was not possible. No one could have seen it. The cottage of old Vysogota was well hidden among the reeds in the swamp. In a wilderness permanently covered in mist, where no one dared to venture.

*

'The stream's valley was level, and good for riding, so Kelpie ran like the wind. Of course, I wasn't riding uphill but downstream. I remembered that curious name: Jealousy. I recalled what Hotspurn had said to Giselher at the station. I understood why he had warned me about that village. There must have been an ambush in Jealousy. When Giselher made light of the offer of the amnesty and working for the guild, Hotspurn deliberately mentioned the bounty hunter quartered in the village. He knew the Rats would swallow the bait, ride there and fall into the trap. I had to get to Jealousy before them, cut off their route and warn them. Turn them back. All of them. Or at least just Mistle.'

'I conclude,' Vysogota mumbled, 'that you didn't manage to.'

'At that time,' she said softly, 'I thought that a large force, armed to the teeth, was waiting in Jealousy. In my wildest dreams it never occurred to me that the trap was a single man . . .'

She was silent, staring into the gloom.

'Nor did I have any idea what kind of man he was.'

*

Birka had once been a wealthy village, charming and picturesquely situated – its yellow thatch and red tiles crowded into a valley with steep, forested sides, which changed colour with the seasons. In autumn, especially, Birka delighted the artistic eye and sensitive heart.

It was like that until the settlement changed its name. Here is what happened:

A young farmer from a nearby elven colony was madly in love with the miller's daughter from Birka. The miller's prankish daughter ridiculed the elf's wooing and continued to sleep around with neighbours, friends and even relatives. They began to mock the elf and his blind love. The elf – somewhat untypically for his race – exploded with anger and vengeance, exploded horribly. One night, with a strong wind blowing the right way, he started a fire and burned Birka down.

The victims of the fire, now ruined, lost heart. Some roamed the world and others fell into idleness and drunkenness. The money gathered for the rebuilding of the village was regularly defrauded and squandered on drink, and the settlement became a vision of misery and despair: it was a jumble of ghastly, carelessly thrown together shacks beneath the bare and black-charred slope of the valley. Before the fire Birka had been oval-shaped, with a central square; now the few solidly built houses, granaries and a distillery formed something like a long main street, which was topped by the façade of *The Chimera's Head*, built by the efforts of the community and kept by the widow Goulue.

And for seven years no one had used the name 'Birka'. People said 'Flaming Jealousy', or for short; simply 'Jealousy'.

The Rats rode down the main street. It was a chill, overcast, gloomy morning.

People fled into their homes, hid in their sheds or their wattle-and-daub shacks. Those who had shutters slammed them closed, those who had doors bolted them. Whoever still had vodka drank it to give them courage. The Rats rode at a walk, ostentatiously slowly, stirrup against stirrup. An indifferent contempt was painted on their faces, but their narrowed eyes closely observed the windows, porches and alleyways.

'One bolt from a crossbow!' Giselher warned, loudly. 'One

clang of a bowstring, and there'll be a bloodbath here!'

'And the red flame will be let slip!' Iskra added in her high, melodious soprano. 'Only earth and water will remain!'

Some of the villagers certainly had crossbows, but no one wanted to find out if the Rats' words were empty.

The Rats dismounted. They covered the final furlong separating them from *The Chimera's Head* on foot, side by side, their spurs, adornments and jewellery rhythmically jangling and clinking.

At the sight of them, three Jealousy residents, soothing the previous day's hangover with beer, bolted from the steps of the inn.

'Hope he's still here,' Kayleigh muttered. 'We've taken our time. There was no need for that rest, we should have come right away, even travelled at night . . .'

'Fool.' Iskra bared her little teeth. 'If we want bards to sing songs about this, it can't be done at night, in the darkness. People must see it! Morning is best, when everybody's still sober, right, Giselher?'

Giselher did not reply. He picked up a stone, swung and hurled it against the door of the inn.

'Come out, Bonhart!'

'Come out, Bonhart!' the Rats called in unison. 'Come out, Bonhart!'

Footsteps could be heard inside. Slow and heavy ones. Mistle felt a shiver crawling over the nape of her neck and her shoulders. Bonhart stood in the doorway.

The Rats involuntarily took a step back. The heels of their high boots dug into the ground and their hands shot to their sword hilts. The bounty hunter held his sword under one arm. That way he had his hands free; in one he held a peeled boiled egg and in the other a hunk of bread.

He slowly walked to the balustrade and looked down on them, from high up. He stood in the porch, and was huge. Immense, though he was as gaunt as a ghoul.

He looked at them, sweeping his watery eyes over each in turn. Then he bit off a morsel of egg and after it a piece of bread.

'Where's Falka?' he asked indistinctly. Bits of yolk fell from his moustache and lips.

*

‘Run, Kelpie! Run, my beauty! Fast as you can!’

The black mare neighed loudly, extending her neck in a headlong gallop. A hail of gravel shot out from under her hooves, though it seemed as if they were barely touching the ground.

*

Bonhart stretched lazily, his leather jerkin creaking. He slowly pulled down and adjusted his elk-hide gloves.

‘What could this be?’ he grimaced. ‘You want to kill me? And why?’

‘For Muchomorek, for starters,’ Kayleigh answered.

‘And for our amusement,’ said Iskra.

‘And to get you off our backs,’ Reef threw in. ‘Aaaah,’ Bonhart said slowly. ‘So that’s what it’s about! And if I swear to leave you alone, will you leave me alone?’

‘No, you grey cur, we will not.’ Mistle smiled charmingly. ‘We know you. We know you won’t drop it, that you’ll trudge along our trail and wait for a chance to stab one of us in the back. Come down!’

‘Easy does it.’ Bonhart smiled too, malevolently stretching his mouth wide beneath his grey whiskers. ‘We can always find time to cavort around, there’s no need to be hasty. First I’ll make you an offer, Rats. I’ll permit you to choose.’

‘What are you mumbling about, you old fool?’ Kayleigh shouted, crouching. ‘Speak clearly!’

Bonhart nodded and scratched a thigh.

‘There’s a bounty on you, Rats. A goodly one. And life must go on.’

Iskra snorted and opened her eyes wide like a wildcat. Bonhart crossed his arms on his chest, holding his sword in the crook of his arm.

‘That goodly reward,’ he repeated, ‘is for you dead, and it’s a little larger for taking you alive. But, to tell the truth, it’s all the same to me. I have nothing against you personally. I was thinking yesterday that I’d dispatch you all, for a bit of amusement and diversion, but you’ve come yourselves, saving me the bother. You’ve won my heart by so doing. Thus I shall let you choose. How do you prefer me to take you: the playful way or the painful way?’

The muscles on Kayleigh’s jaw twitched. Mistle leaned over, ready to leap. Giselher caught her arm.

‘He means to enrage us,’ he hissed. ‘Let the bastard talk.’

Bonhart snorted.

‘Well?’ he repeated. ‘The easy way or the hard way? I advise the first. For you see, the easy way hurts much, much less.’

The Rats drew their weapons at the same instant. Giselher made a few crosscuts and struck a swordfighter’s pose. Mistle spat copiously on the ground.

‘Come down here, skinny old man,’ she said, apparently calmly. ‘Come here, you blackguard. We’ll kill you like a grizzled old dog.’

‘So you wish it the hard way,’ Bonhart said, looking somewhere above the rooftops. He slowly drew his sword, throwing down his scabbard, and unhurriedly descended from the porch, his spurs clanking.

The Rats swiftly spread out across the street. Kayleigh went furthest to the left, almost to the wall of the distillery. Beside him stood Iskra, twisting her thin lips in her usual, dreadful smile. Mistle, Asse and Reef went off to the right. Giselher remained in the centre, staring at the bounty hunter from under narrowed eyelids.

‘Very well, Rats.’ Bonhart looked from side to side, looked up at the sky, and then raised his sword and spat on the blade. ‘If we’re to cavort, let us cavort. Let the music play!’

They leaped at each other like wolves, like lightning, silently, with no warning. Blades wailed in the air, filling the narrow street with the plaintive clang of steel. At first all that could be heard was the clang of sword hilts, gasps, groans and quickened breathing.

And then, suddenly and unexpectedly, the Rats began to scream. And die.

Reef lurched out of the melee first, his back smacking against a

wall, splashing blood on the dirty whitewash. Asse reeled out after him, staggering, curled over and fell on his side, by turns bending and straightening his knees.

Bonhart whirled around and leapt like a mad thing, surrounded by the glint and whistle of his blade. The Rats backed away from him, lunging forward, slashing and jumping aside, furiously, fiercely, pitilessly. And ineffectively. Bonhart parried, struck, parried, struck, and attacked, attacked relentlessly, without respite, dictating the tempo of the bout. And the Rats backed away. And died.

Iskra, slashed in the neck, fell over in the mud, cowering like a kitten, blood gushing from an artery onto Bonhart's calves and knees as he walked past her. The bounty hunter parried the attacks of Mistle and Giselher with a broad swing, then whirled and carved Kayleigh open with a lightning-fast blow, striking him with the very tip of his sword; from collar bone to hip. Kayleigh released his sword, but did not fall, just curled up and seized his chest and belly in both hands, as blood trickled through his fingers. Bonhart once more whirled away from Giselher's thrust, parried Mistle's attack and smote Kayleigh again, this time turning the side of his head into scarlet pulp. The fair-haired Rat fell, splashing into a puddle of blood mixed with mud.

Mistle and Giselher hesitated for a moment. And instead of fleeing, yelled with a single voice, savagely and furiously. And leaped at Bonhart.

And found death.

*

Ciri burst into the settlement and galloped down the main street. Splashes of mud spurted from beneath the mare's hooves.

*

Bonhart shoved Giselher, who was lying by the wall, with his heel. The Rats' leader gave no sign of life. Blood had stopped gushing from his shattered skull.

Mistle, on her knees, searched for her sword, groping in the mud and dung with both hands, not seeing that she was kneeling in a quickly spreading puddle of red. Bonhart walked slowly over towards her.

‘Noooooo!’

The hunter raised his head.

Ciri leaped from her speeding horse, staggered and dropped onto one knee.

Bonhart smiled.

‘A she-rat,’ he said. ‘The seventh Rat. I’m glad you are here. I needed you to complete the set.’

Mistle had found her sword, but was unable to lift it. She wheezed and threw herself at Bonhart’s feet. Her trembling fingers dug into the legs of his boots. She opened her mouth to scream, but instead of a cry, a shining crimson stream burst forth. Bonhart kicked her hard, knocking her over in the muck. Mistle, both hands now holding her mutilated belly, managed to raise herself again.

‘Noooo!’ Ciri screamed. ‘Miiiistle!’

The bounty hunter paid no attention to her yell. He did not even turn his head. He swung his sword and struck vigorously, as though with a scythe. A powerful blow that jerked Mistle up from the ground and flung her over to the wall, as limp as a cloth doll, like a rag smeared with red.

A scream died in Ciri’s throat. Her hands trembled as she reached for her sword.

‘Murderer,’ she said, astonished at the strangeness of her voice, at the strangeness of her lips, which had suddenly become horrendously dry.

‘Murderer! Bastard!’

Bonhart observed her curiously, tilting his head slightly.

‘Are you going to die too?’ he asked.

Ciri walked towards him, skirting around him in a semi-circle. The sword in his raised and extended hands moved around, deceiving, beguiling.

The bounty hunter laughed loudly.

‘Die!’ he repeated. ‘The she-rat wants to die!’

He moved around slowly, standing on the spot, not allowing himself to be lured into the trap of the semi-circle. But it was all the same to Ciri. She was boiling over with ferocity and hatred, trembling with the lust for murder. She wanted to strike that ghastly old man, feel her blade cut into his body. She wanted to see his blood gushing from severed arteries in the final beats of his heart.

'Well, little Rat.' Bonhart raised his bloody sword and spat on the blade. 'Before you die, show me what there is in you! Let the music play!'

*

'Truly, no one knows how that they did not slaughter each other during the first clash,' Nycklar, the son of the coffin maker said, six days later. 'They wanted to slaughter each other, that was clear to see. She to murder him and he her. They flew at each other, came together for a split second and there was a mighty clash of swords. They exchanged mebbes two, mebbes three blows each. There ain't a man what could of counted it, by sight or by hearing. So swiftly did they strike, m'lord, that not a man's eye nor ear could have grasped it. And how they danced and leaped around each other, like two weasels!'

Stefan Skellen, called Tawny Owl, listened attentively, playing with a knout.

'They leaped apart,' the boy went on, 'but neither of them was even grazed. The she-rat was as wrathful as the very Devil, and was hissing like a tomcat when someone wants to take his mouse away. But Mr Bonhart was wholly serene.'

*

'Falka,' Bonhart said, smiling and grinning like a veritable ghoul. 'Truly can you dance and whirl a blade! You have aroused my curiosity, wench. Who are you? Tell me, before you perish.'

Ciri panted. She felt terror beginning to seize her. She understood what she was up against.

‘Tell me who you are, and I’ll spare your life.’

She gripped her hilt more tightly. She had to, had to, get through his parries, slash him, before he closed up. She could not let him deflect her blows, she could not withstand his blows with her sword, she could not risk – even once more – the pain and paralysis which pierced and spread through her elbow and forearm when she parried. She could not waste energy dodging his blows, which were missing her by barely a hair’s breadth. *Get through his defence*, she thought. *Right now. In this clash. Or die.*

‘You will die, she-rat,’ he said, moving towards her with his sword extended far out in front of him. ‘Do you not fear? That is only because you know not what death looks like.’

Kaer Morhen, she thought, as she sprang. *Lambert. The comb. The somersault.*

She took three steps and performed a half-pirouette, and when he attacked she ignored his feint, threw a backward somersault, dropped into a nimble crouch and lunged at him, ducking under his blade and twisting her wrist for the cut, for a fearful blow, aided by a powerful twist of her hip. Suddenly she was seized by euphoria; she would feel the blade cutting into his body.

Instead, there was the hard, moaning impact of metal on metal. And a sudden flash in her eyes, a shock and pain in her head. She felt herself falling, felt herself hitting the ground. *He parried and twisted*, she thought. *I’m dying*, she thought. Bonhart kicked her in the belly. A second kick, accurately and painfully aimed at her elbow, knocked the sword from her hand. Ciri grabbed her head and felt a dull pain, but there was neither a wound nor blood beneath her fingers. *He hit me with his fist*, she thought to her horror. *I was just punched. Or struck with the pommel of his sword. He didn’t kill me. He thrashed me like an unruly brat.*

She opened her eyes.

The hunter stood over her, terrible and gaunt as a skeleton, towering over her like a diseased, leafless tree, stinking of sweat and blood.

He seized her by the hair, lifted her violently, forced her to stand, but at once jerked her, knocking the ground from under her feet, and dragged her, wailing like the damned, towards Mistle, who was lying at the foot of the wall.

‘So you don’t fear death, do you?’ he snarled, bending her head

downwards. ‘Then have a look, she-rat. That is death. That is how you die. Look, those are guts. That is blood. And that is shit. That’s what’s inside us all.’

Ciri tensed up, bent over, still gripped by his hand, and dry-retched hoarsely. Mistle was still alive, but her eyes were already misty, glazed, fishlike. Her hand, like a hawk’s talons, clenched and unclenched, clawing the mud and dung. Ciri smelled the acrid, penetrating odour of urine. Bonhart cackled.

‘That is how you’ll die, little Rat. In your own piss!’

He released her hair. Ciri collapsed onto all fours, racked by dry, choking sobs. Mistle was right beside her. Mistle’s hand, slender, delicate, soft; Mistle’s hand . . .

It was no longer moving.

*

‘He didn’t kill me. He tied my hands to the hitching post.’

Vysogota sat motionless. He had been sitting like that for a long time. He was even holding his breath. Ciri continued her tale, but her voice was becoming more and more hushed, more and more unnatural, more and more unpleasant.

‘He ordered the people who had gathered to bring him a sack of salt and a keg of vinegar. And a saw. I didn’t know . . . I couldn’t understand what he meant to do . . . I still didn’t know what he was capable of. I was tied . . . to the hitching post . . . He called some servants, ordered them to hold me by the hair . . . and by the eyelids. He showed them how; so I couldn’t turn my head away or close my eyes . . . So I had to watch what he was doing. “You have to take pains so the goods won’t go off,” he said. “So they won’t decay . . .”’

Ciri’s voice cracked, stuck dryly in her throat. Vysogota, suddenly realising what he was hearing, felt the saliva well up in his mouth like a flood wave.

‘He cut off their heads,’ Ciri said dully. ‘With a saw. Giselher, Kayleigh, Asse, Reef, Iskra . . . And Mistle. He sawed off their heads . . . One after the other. In front of my eyes.’

*

If someone were to have quietly crept up that night to the remote cottage in the midst of the swamp with its sunken, moss-grown thatched roof, were they to have peered through the slits in the shutters, in the dimly-lit interior they would have seen a grey-bearded old man in a sheepskin coat and an ashen-haired girl with her face disfigured by a scar on her cheek. They would have seen the girl racked with sobs, choking on tears in the arms of the old man, while he tried to calm her, awkwardly and mechanically stroking and patting her trembling shoulders.

But it was not possible. No one could have seen it. The cottage was well concealed amidst the marshes. In a wilderness ever covered in mist, where no one dared to venture.

I have often been asked what made me decide to write my memoirs. Many people seemed interested in the moment my memoirs began, namely what fact, event or incident gave rise to the writing. Formerly, I gave various explanations and often lied, but now, howbeit, I pay homage to the truth. For today, now that my hair has thinned and is going white, I know the truth is a precious seed, while a lie is but contemptible chaff.

And the truth is thus: the event which gave rise to everything, to which I owe the first notes, from which my subsequent life's work was formed, was the accidental discovery of paper and pencil among the things that my company and I stole from the Lyrian military convoys. It happened . . .

Dandelion, *Half a Century of Poetry*

CHAPTER THREE

. . . it happened on the fifth day after the September new moon, on the thirtieth day of our expedition, to be precise, reckoning from when we set out from Brokilon, and six days after the Battle on the Bridge.

Now, my dear future reader, I shall go back in time somewhat and describe the events which took place directly following the glorious Battle on the Bridge, which was so fraught with consequences. First though, I shall enlighten the considerable number of readers who know nothing about the Battle on the Bridge, either owing to their having other interests or as a result of their general ignorance. Let me clarify: that battle was waged on the last day of the month of August in the Year of the Great War in Angren, on the bridge connecting the two banks of the River Yaruga in the vicinity of a border post called the Red Timber Port. The sides of this armed conflict were: the Nilfgaardian Army; a corps from Lyria commanded by Queen Meve; and our glorious company. Which consisted of myself, i.e. the undersigned; and also the Witcher, Geralt; the vampire, Emiel Regis Rohellec Terzieff-Godefroy; the archer, Maria Barring, known as Milva; and Cahir Mawr Dyffryn aep Ceallach, a Nilfgaardian, who liked stubbornly to maintain that he was not such.

It may also be unclear to you, dear reader, why Queen Meve was in Angren, when it was believed she had perished during the Nilfgaardian incursion into Lyria, Rivia and Aedirn in July, which ended in the total conquest of those lands and their occupation by the imperial army. However, Meve had not perished in battle, as was thought, nor was she captured by Nilfgaard. Banding together a loyal mobile force from the surviving Lyrian Army under her colours and enlisting anyone she could, including mercenaries and common felons, the valiant Meve took up a partisan war against Nilfgaard. And the wildness of Angren suited guerrilla warfare perfectly; now striking from an ambuscade, now lurking in some undergrowth – for there was undergrowth in abundance in Angren. If truth be told, there is nothing worth mentioning in that land aside from undergrowth.

The regiment of Meve – now called the White Queen by her army – swiftly grew in might and acquired such daring that it was able to cross to the Yaruga's left bank, in order, to prowl freely and foment unrest far in the enemy's rear.

Now let us return to our sheep; that is, the Battle on the Bridge.

The tactical situation was as follows. Queen Meve's partisans, having rampaged on the Yaruga's left bank, wanted to flee to the Yaruga's right bank, but happened upon the Nilfgaardians, who were rampaging along the Yaruga's right bank and wanted to flee to the Yaruga's left bank. We, from a central position, i.e. the very middle of the River Yaruga, happened upon the above and were surrounded on both sides, from the left and right, by armed men. Having nowhere to flee, we became heroes and covered ourselves in undying glory. The battle, incidentally, was won by the Lyrians, since they achieved what they had intended: i.e. a flight to the right bank. The Nilfgaardians bolted in an unknown direction and in so doing lost the battle. I realise that this all sounds passing confusing and I shall not omit to consult with some military theoretician on the text before publication. For the moment, I am relying on the authority of Cahir aep Ceallach, the only soldier in our company – and Cahir confirmed that winning battles by means of a rapid escape from the battlefield is permissible from the point of view of most military doctrines.

The contribution of our company to the battle was indisputably meritorious, but also had negative consequences. Milva, who was with child, met with a tragic misadventure. The rest of us were fortunate enough not to suffer any serious injuries. But neither did anyone profit, nor even receive any thanks. The exception being Geralt the Witcher. For Geralt the Witcher, in spite of his repeated, but clearly duplicitously professed, indifference and his frequently declared neutrality, displayed in the battle a fervour as great as it was exaggeratedly spectacular. In other words, he fought in a truly effective way, if not to say: for effect. He was noticed, and Meve, the Queen of Lyria, knighted him with her own hand. It quickly turned out that there was more unpleasantness than benefit from that accolade.

For I must tell you, gentle reader, that Geralt the Witcher was always a modest, prudent and composed man, with a soul as simple and uncomplicated as the shaft of a halberd. The unexpected promotion and apparent generosity of Queen Meve changed him, however, and had I not known him better, I would have said that it made him conceited. Instead of vanishing from the scene as quickly and anonymously as possible, Geralt became mixed up in the royal retinue, enjoyed his honour, took delight in the grace and favour, and relished his fame.

But fame and renown were the last things we needed. I shall remind those that do not remember that the very same Geralt the Witcher – now dubbed a knight – was being sought by the intelligence services of all the Four Kingdoms in connection with the matter of the

sorcerers' rebellion on the Isle of Thanedd. Attempts were made to charge me – an innocent person, as honest as the day is long – with the crime of espionage. To that one ought to add Milva, who had collaborated with dryads and Scoia'tael, and who was embroiled – as it transpired – in the infamous massacre on the borders of Brokilon Forest. To that one ought to add Cahir aep Ceallach, a Nilfgaardian, a citizen of an enemy nation, whose presence on the wrong side of the battle would have been arduous to explain or justify. It so happened that the only member of our company whose curriculum vitae was not besmirched by political or criminal issues was the vampire. The exposure or identification of any one of us threatened us all with impalement on sharpened aspen stakes. Each day spent – initially, indeed, pleasantly, safely and with full bellies – in the shade of the Lyrian standards aggrandised that risk.

Geralt, when I emphatically reminded him of that, became somewhat dispirited, but put forward his arguments, of which he had two. Firstly, following her disagreeable accident, Milva still required care and attention, and there were barber-surgeons in the army. Secondly, Queen Meve's army was marching east, towards Caed Dhu. And our company, before it changed direction and became embroiled in the battle described above, had also been heading to Caed Dhu, for we hoped to obtain some information from the druids dwelling there to aid our search for Ciri. Patrols and lawless gangs prowling in Angren had driven us from our straight road to the aforementioned druids. Now, under the protection of the friendly Lyrian Army, in the grace and favour of Queen Meve, the way to Caed Dhu was wide open; why, it seemed straightforward and safe. I warned the Witcher that it only appeared *so, that it was but a semblance and that royal favours are deceptive and inconstant. The Witcher did not want to listen. But it was soon proved who was right. When news got out that a Nilfgaardian punitive expedition was marching towards Angren in great force from the Klamat Pass in the East, the Lyrian Army wasted no time in turning back towards the Mahakam Mountains in the North. As may easily be imagined, that change of direction did not suit Geralt in the slightest; he was hurrying to the druids, not to Mahakam! As naïve as a child, he ran to Queen Meve to obtain an exemption from the army and a royal blessing for his private business. And in that moment queenly love and favour ended, and admiration for the hero of the Battle for the Bridge vanished like so much smoke. The knight, Sir Geralt of Rivia, was reminded in a cool, though resolute, tone of his knightly duties towards the crown. The still ailing Milva, the vampire Regis and the undersigned were instructed to join the column of fugitives and civilians moving*

behind the convoy. Cahir aep Ceallach, a sturdy youth who in no way resembled a civilian, was given a white and blue sash and conscripted into a so-called free company, which meant a cavalry unit drawn from various bits of rabble picked up by the Lyrian corps on the road. In this way our company was sundered and everything suggested that our expedition was definitively and resoundingly over.

As you might imagine, dear reader, it was not the end at all, nay, 'twas not even the beginning! Milva, once she had learned of this development, immediately declared herself fit and well. She was first to give the order to withdraw. Cahir flung his royal livery into the bushes and bolted from the free company, and Geralt fled the opulent tents of the select knighthood.

I shall not go on at length about the details, and modesty does not permit me the excessive display of my own – not insignificant – contribution to the undertaking. I merely state the fact: on the night of the fifth of September our entire company clandestinely took leave of Queen Meve's corps. Before parting from the Lyrian Army we stocked up liberally, without asking the quartermaster's permission for so doing. I consider the word 'theft' – as used by Milva – to be too blunt. For we deserved some sort of payment for our involvement in the memorable Battle of the Bridge. And if not a payment, then at least compensation and reparations for the losses we incurred! Passing over Milva's tragic accident, not counting Geralt and Cahir's cuts and bruises, all our horses were killed or crippled, apart from my faithful Pegasus and the skittish Roach, the Witcher's mare. Thus, in lieu of compensation, we took three full-blooded cavalry steeds and one colt. We also took various bits of tackle, whatever fell into our hands; for the sake of fairness I shall add that we subsequently had to throw half of it away. As Milva said, that can happen when you steal in the dark. The most useful things were taken from the army stores by the vampire Regis, who can see better in the dark than by day. Regis additionally diminished the defensive capabilities of the Lyrian Army by one fat, mousy-grey mule, which he led from the pen so expertly that not a single beast snorted or stamped a hoof. Stories about animals smelling vampires and reacting to their smell in panicked fear cannot thus be believed; unless it refers to certain animals and certain vampires. I shall add that we kept said mousy-grey mule for some time. Following the loss of the colt, which later bolted in the forests of Riverdell, alarmed by wolves, the mule carried what was left of our belongings. The mule was called Draakul. It was so named by Regis immediately after being stolen and so it remained. Regis was clearly entertained by the name, which no doubt had some amusing significance in the culture and speech of vampires, but which he did not

wish to explain to us, claiming it was an untranslatable pun.

In this way our company found itself on the road again, and the previously lengthy list of folk who did not like us grew even longer. Geralt of Rivia, an unblemished knight, had quit the ranks of the knighthood before his promotion had been confirmed by a single deed, and before the court heraldist had created a coat of arms for him. Cahir aep Ceallach had already managed to fight in and desert from both armies in the great conflict between Nilfgaard and the Nordlings, earning a sentence of death in absentia in both. The rest of us were in no better a situation. After all, a noose is a noose and the importance of why one is to hang is extremely slight; whether for discrediting knightly honour, desertion or christening an army mule 'Draakul'.

Let it not then astonish you, reader, that we made truly titanic efforts to considerably increase the distance between us and Queen Meve's corps. We rode south with all possible speed towards the Yaruga, intending to cross to the left bank. Not only in order to put the river between us and the queen and her partisans, but because the wildernesses of Riverdell were less dangerous than war-torn Angren; it would have been far more judicious to travel to the druids in Caed Dhu along the left and not the right bank. Paradoxically so – since the left bank of the Yaruga belonged to the hostile Nilfgaardian Empire. The father of the left-bank conception was Geralt the Witcher, who, after leaving the fraternity of swaggering knighthood, had regained the greater part of his reason, ability to think logically, and customary caution. The future was to show that the Witcher's plan was fraught with consequences and determined the fate of the entire expedition. But more about that later.

When we reached the Yaruga there were already plenty of Nilfgaardians there who had crossed the reconstructed bridge at the Red Timber Port and were continuing the offensive against Angren; and probably further, against Temeria, Mahakam and the Devil only knows where else the Nilfgaardian general staff was planning to attack. Crossing the river right away was out of the question; we had to hide and wait for the army to move on. So for two whole days we hunkered in the riverside osiers, cultivating rheumatism and feeding the mosquitoes. To make matters worse, the weather soon declined: it drizzled, was windy as hell, and our teeth were chattering from the cold. I do not recall such a cold September among the many Septembers engraved in my memory. It was then, my dear reader, having found paper and pencil among the supplies borrowed from the Lyrian convoys, to kill time and forget about our discomforts, that I began to record and

immortalise some of our adventures.

The foul rainy weather and enforced inactivity spoiled our mood and prompted various dark thoughts. Particularly in the Witcher. Geralt had long since begun counting the days separating him from Ciri; and each day we were not on the road pushed him – in his opinion – further and further away from the girl. Now, in the wet osiers, in the cold and rain, the Witcher became gloomier and more evil with each passing hour. I also noticed he was limping heavily, and when he thought no one could see or hear he swore and hissed from the pain. For you ought to know, dear reader, that Geralt had suffered broken bones during the sorcerers' rebellion on the Isle of Thanedd. The fractures had knitted and been healed thanks to the magical efforts of the dryads of Brokilon Forest, but apparently had not stopped troubling him. Thus the Witcher was suffering, so to say, from both bodily and spiritual pain. It made him absolutely livid, so we steered clear of him.

And once again he was persecuted by dreams. On the morning of the ninth of September, while he was sleeping off his guard duty, he terrified us all by springing up with a cry and drawing his sword. It looked as though he were in a frenzy, but fortunately it subsided at once.

He went away, but was soon to return with a gloomy demeanour. He announced, in so many words, that he was breaking up the company with immediate effect and continuing on his way alone, since awful things were occurring somewhere, time was running out, it was becoming dangerous, and he didn't want to put anyone at risk or take responsibility for anyone. He talked and argued so tediously and unconvincingly that no one wanted to discuss it with him. Even the usually eloquent vampire dismissed him with a shrug, Milva by spitting, and Cahir with the terse reminder that he was responsible for himself, and that as far as risks went he did not carry a sword to give his belt ballast. Afterwards, however, everybody fell silent and stared knowingly at the undersigned, no doubt expecting me to avail myself of the opportunity and go back home. I probably do not have to say that they were most disappointed.

The incident persuaded us, nonetheless, to discard our lethargy and drove us to a bold deed; that of crossing the Yaruga. I confess that the undertaking aroused my anxiety, for the plan was to swim across at night; to quote Milva and Cahir, 'hanging on to the horses' tails'. Even if it had been a metaphor – and I suspect it was not – I somehow could not imagine it for myself or my steed, Pegasus, upon whose tail I would have to depend during the crossing. Swimming, to put it mildly, was – and is – not one of my strong points. Had Mother Nature wanted me to swim, in

the act of creation and the process of evolution she would have equipped me with webbed fingers. And the same applied to Pegasus.

My fears turned out to be in vain, at least with regard to swimming behind a horse's tail. For we crossed using a different method. Who knows if it was not even more insane? We crossed in a truly impudent manner; beneath the reconstructed bridge at the Red Timber Port, under the very noses of the Nilfgaardian guard and patrols. The undertaking, it turned out, only appeared to be a demented effrontery and mortal gamble, and in reality passed off without a hitch. After the frontline units had crossed the bridge, transport after transport, vehicle after vehicle, flock after flock wandered this way and that. There were also crowds of various kinds, including civilian flotsam and jetsam, among which our company did not stand out at all, nor were we conspicuous. Thus on the tenth day of September we all crossed to the left bank of the Yaruga, only once being hailed by the guard, at whom Cahir, wrinkling his brow imperiously, shouted back something menacing about imperial service, backing up his words with the classically military and ever effective 'for fuck's sake'. Before anyone had time to grow curious about us, we were already on the left bank of the Yaruga and deep in the Riverdell forest; for there was only a single highway there, heading south, and neither the direction nor the profusion of Nilfgaardians hanging around it suited us.

At our first camp in the forests of Riverdell I was also visited at night by a strange dream. Unlike Geralt's it was not about Ciri, but the sorceress Yennefer. The dream was curious, unsettling; Yennefer, in black and white as usual, was hovering in the air above a huge, grim mountain castle, and from below other sorceresses were shaking their fists and hurling abuse at her. Yennefer swirled the long sleeves of her dress and flew away, like a black albatross, over the boundless sea, straight into the rising sun. From that moment the dream transformed into a nightmare. On awaking the details vanished from my memory, and there remained only vague, not very sensible, images, but they were ghastly: of torture, screaming, pain, fear and death . . . In a word: horror.

I did not share that dream with Geralt. Not a word did I breathe of it. And rightly so, as it later turned out.

*

'She was called Yennefer! Yennefer of Vengerberg. And she was a

most famous sorceress! May I not live to see the dawn if I lie!'

Triss Merigold shuddered and turned, trying to see through the crowd and blue smoke densely filling the tavern's main chamber. She finally rose from the table, somewhat regretfully abandoning a fillet of sole in anchovy butter, a local speciality and a genuine delicacy. She was not roaming the taverns and inns of Bremervoord to eat delicacies, however, but to obtain information. Apart from that, she had to watch her figure.

The crowd of people she had to squeeze among was already dense and tight; in Bremervoord people loved stories and passed up no opportunity to listen to new ones. And the sailors who visited there in great numbers never disappointed; they always had a fresh new repertoire of sea tales. Naturally, the vast majority were invented, but that didn't make the slightest difference. A tale is a tale. And has its own rules.

The woman who was telling the story – and who had mentioned Yennefer – was a fisherwoman from the Isles of Skellige; stout, broad-shouldered, with close-cropped hair, and – like her four companions – dressed in a waistcoat of narwhal skin, worn to a sheen.

'It were the nineteenth day of the month of August, in the morning after the second night of the full moon,' the islander began, raising a mug of ale to her lips. Her hand, Triss noticed, was the colour of old brick, and her exposed, knotty arm must easily have measured twenty inches in girth. Triss's waist measured twenty-two.

'At the crack of dawn,' the fisherwoman continued, her eyes sweeping over her audience's faces, 'our smack put to sea, into the sound 'twixt An Skellig and Spikeroog, to the oyster grounds, where we usually set our salmon gillnets. We made great haste, for a storm were nigh, the heavens darkening cruelly from the West. We 'ad to pluck the salmon from the nets quick, for otherwise, as you knows yoursel', when at last, after a storm, you can venture forth to sea, only rotten, chewed heads remain in the nets, and all the catch is for naught.'

Her audience, residents of Bremervoord and Cidaris in the main, mostly living from the sea and dependent on it for their existence, nodded and murmured their understanding. Triss usually saw salmon in the form of pink slices, but also nodded and murmured, because she didn't want to stand out. She was there

incognito, on a secret mission.

'We sail into port . . .' the fisherwoman went on, draining her mug and indicating that one of the listeners could buy her another. 'We sail in and are a-emptyin' the nets and blow me if Gudrun, Sturla's daughter, doesn't start yelling at the top of her voice! And pointing to starboard! We look, and summat's flying through the air, and it ain't a bird! My heart stopped for a tick, for at once I'm thinking it's a wyvern or young gryphon, they sometimes fly over Spikeroog, true enough, but generally in the winter, usually with a west wind a-blowing. But meanwhile that black thing, if it don't splash into the water! And a wave shoves it! Direckly into our nets. It gets tangled up in the net and splashes around in the water like a seal, then all of us – we were eight fishwives in all – catch the net and heave it on board! And do our gobs fall open! Blow me if it ain't a woman! In a black gown, as black as any crow. She's all caught up in the net, 'twixt two salmon, of which one – as I live and breathe – must of weighed almost three stone!'

The fisherwoman from Skellige blew the froth from her refilled mug and took a deep draught. None of the listeners commented or expressed any disbelief, although not even the oldest among them could remember a salmon of such impressive weight being landed.

'The black-haired woman in the net,' the islander continued, 'is coughing, spitting seawater and thrashing about, and Gudrun, who's expecting, is frantically yelling "It's a kelpie! A kelpie! A havfrue!" But any fool could see it weren't no kelpie, for a kelpie would of ripped up the net long since; and besides, what monster would let itself be a-lugged onto a fishing smack? And it ain't no havfrue neither, for it don't 'ave a fishy tail, and a mermaid always 'as one! And it fell into the sea from the sky, didn't it, and who's seen a kelpie or havfrue flying in the sky? But Skadi, Una's daughter, she's always hasty, so she starts yelling "Kelpie!" too and ups and grabs the gaff! And aims at the net with it! And there's a blue flash from the net and Skadi squeals! The gaff goes left, she goes right, strike me down if I'm lying, she throws three somersets and bangs arse-down on the deck! Ha, turns out a sorceress in a net's worse than a jellyfish, a scorpena or a numbing eel! And on top o' that the witch starts cursing something 'orrible! And the net starts a-hissing, a-stinking and a-steaming, as she works 'er magic inside! We sees it won't be no picnic . . .'

The islander drained her mug and wasted no time in reaching for the next one.

‘Ain’t no picnic–’ she belched loudly, and wiped her nose and mouth ‘–to catch a witch in a net! We can feel – as I live and breathe – that the magic’s making the smack roll harder. No time to ‘ang around! Britta, Karen’s daughter, presses the net with ‘er foot, and I grabs an oar and whack! Whack!! Whack!!!’

The ale splashed high and spilled over the table, and several mugs fell on the floor. The listeners wiped their cheeks and brows, but none of them uttered a word of complaint or admonishment. A tale is a tale. And has its own rules.

‘The witch understood who she were up agin’.’ The fisherwoman stuck out her ample bosom and gazed around defiantly. ‘And that you can’t fool around with the fishwives of Skellige! She said she were surrenderin’ to us willin’ like, and vowed not to cast any charms or incantations. And gave ‘er name as Yennefer of Vengerberg.’

Her listeners murmured. Barely two months had passed since the events on the Isle of Thanedd, and the names of the traitors bribed by Nilfgaard were remembered. The name of the celebrated Yennefer too.

‘We takes ‘er,’ the fisherwoman continued, ‘to jarl Crach an Craite in Kaer Trolde on Ard Skellig. Never seen her after that. The jarl was away on an expedition, but they said when he returned he first received the witch harshly, but later treated her polite and courteous. Hmm . . . And I was just waiting to see what kind of surprise the sorceress would conjure up for me for whacking her with an oar. I thought she’d badmouth me before the jarl. But no. Never said a word, never complained, I know that. Honrable witch. Afterwards, when she killed herself I even felt sorry for ‘er . . .’

‘Yennefer’s dead?’ Triss screamed, so overwhelmed she forgot about the importance of remaining incognito and the secrecy of her mission. ‘Yennefer of Vengerberg’s dead?’

‘Aye, she’s dead,’ the fisherwoman said, finishing her beer. ‘Dead as a doornail. Killed ‘erself with her own charms, making magic spells. Didn’t ‘appen long since, last day of August, just ‘fore the new moon. But that’s quite another story . . .’

*

‘Dandelion! You’re asleep in the saddle!’

‘I’m not asleep. I’m thinking creatively!’

*

So we rode, dear reader, through the forests of Riverdell, heading East, towards Caed Dhu, searching for the druids who were meant to help us to find Ciri. I shall tell you how it went. Before that, though, for the sake of historical truth, I shall write a little about our company and each of its members.

The vampire Regis was more than four hundred years old. If he was not lying, it meant he was the oldest of us all. Of course, it might have been poppycock, but who could check? I preferred to suppose that our vampire was being truthful, for he had also declared that he had given up drinking people’s blood irrevocably and for good. Owing to that declaration we fell asleep more calmly in our camps. I noticed that in the beginning, Milva and Cahir would fearfully and anxiously feel their necks after awaking, but they quickly stopped doing that. The vampire Regis was – or seemed to be – an utterly honourable vampire. If he said he would not drink their blood, then he would not.

He did possess flaws, however, which did not result at all from his vampiric nature. Regis was an intellectual, and liked to demonstrate it. He had the annoying habit of giving statements and truths with the tone and expression of a prophet, to which we swiftly stopped reacting, since the statements he gave were either genuine truths, or sounded like the truth, or could not be proved, which, in essence, amounted to the same thing. But what was truly unbearable was Regis’s habit of answering a question before the person asking had finished formulating it – why, occasionally even before the questioner had begun formulating it. I always took that seeming expression of supposed high intelligence more as an expression of boorishness and arrogance; and those qualities, which suit university or courtly circles, are hard to bear in a companion with whom one travels stirrup by stirrup, day in day out, and who sleeps under the same blanket at night. Serious squabbles did not, however, occur, owing to Milva. Unlike Geralt and Cahir, whose inborn opportunism evidently allowed them to adapt to the vampire’s mannerism, and even led them to compete with him in that regard, the archer Milva preferred simple and unpretentious solutions. When Regis, for the third time, gave her an answer to a question as she was halfway through asking, she cursed him roundly, using words and expressions

capable of making even a hoary mercenary blush in embarrassment. Surprisingly enough it worked; the vampire lost his annoying mannerism in the blink of an eye. The conclusion thus being that the most effective defence against intellectual domination is roundly to affront the domineering intellectual.

Milva, it seems to me, had been greatly affected by her tragic accident – and loss. I write 'it seems to me' for I am aware that being a man I cannot imagine what such a loss means for a woman. Though I am a poet and a man of the quill, even my educated and trained imagination betrays me here and I can do nothing.

The archer swiftly regained her physical fitness, which could not be said for her mental state. It often happened that she would not utter a word throughout the whole day, from dawn to dusk. She would disappear and remain isolated, which worried everyone somewhat. Until finally a crisis occurred. Milva released the tension like a dryad or a she-elf; violently, impulsively and not very comprehensibly. One morning, in front of our eyes, she drew a knife and without a word cut off her plait just above her shoulders. 'It doesn't befit me, for I'm not a maiden,' she said, seeing our jaws hanging open. 'But nor am I a widow,' she added, 'so that's the end of my mourning.' From that moment on she was her old self; brusque, biting, mouthy and inclined to use unparliamentary language. From which we happily concluded that she had come through the crisis.

The third – and no less curious – member of the company was the Nilfgaardian, who kept trying to prove he was not one. He was called, so he claimed, Cahir Mawr Dyffryn aep Ceallach . . .

*

'Cahir Mawr Dyffryn, son of Ceallach,' Dandelion declared, pointing his pencil at the Nilfgaardian, 'I have reconciled myself with many things which I don't like, and actually can't stand, in this honourable company. But not with everything! I can't bear it when people look over my shoulder when I'm writing! And I don't intend to put up with it!'

The Nilfgaardian moved away from the poet, and after a moment's thought seized his saddle, sheepskin and blanket and dragged them over to Milva, who was dozing.

'I apologise,' he said. 'Forgive my obtrusiveness, Dandelion. I

glanced involuntarily, out of pure curiosity. I thought you were creating a map or drawing up some tallies—'

'I'm not a bookkeeper!' the poet said, losing his temper and standing up. 'Nor am I a cartographer! But even if I were, it doesn't justify taking a sly look at my notes!'

'I have apologised,' Cahir repeated dryly, making his bed in the new place. 'I have reconciled myself with and become accustomed to many things in this honourable company. But I'm still accustomed to apologising only once.'

'Indeed,' the Witcher joined in, totally unexpectedly – for everyone, himself included – taking the side of the young Nilfgaardian. 'You've become devilishly touchy, Dandelion. One cannot fail to notice that it is somehow connected to the paper, which you have recently begun to deface with a bit of lead while we camp.'

'It's true,' Regis agreed, putting more birch branches on the campfire. 'Our minstrel has become touchy, not to say secretive, discreet and loving of solitude recently. Oh, no, having witnesses when performing his natural needs doesn't bother him at all which, in our situation, one cannot indeed be astonished by. His shameful secrecy and oversensitivity to being watched extends solely to his scribbled notes. Is, perhaps, a poem being written in our presence? A rhapsody? An epic? A romance? A canzone?'

'No,' Geralt retorted, shifting towards the fire and muffling his back with a blanket. 'I know him. It can't be verse, because he's not cursing, mumbling or counting the syllables on his fingers. He's writing in silence, so it must be prose.'

'Prose!' The vampire flashed his pointed fangs – which he usually tried not to do. 'A novel, perhaps? Or an essay? A morality play? Dammit, Dandelion! Don't torture us so! Reveal what you are writing.'

'My memoirs.'

'Your what?'

'From these notes,' Dandelion displayed a tube stuffed with paper, 'will arise the work of my life. My memoirs, bearing the title *Fifty Years of Poetry*.'

'Nonsensical title,' Cahir declared dryly. 'Poetry has no age.'

'And if one concedes that it does,' added the vampire, 'it is

decidedly older than that.'

'You don't understand. The title means that the author of the work has spent fifty years, no more and no less, in the service of Lady Poetry.'

'In that case, it's even more nonsensical,' said the Witcher. 'You aren't even forty yet. Your writing ability was thrashed into you in the temple elementary school, at the age of eight. Even if we allow that you were writing rhymes in school, you've not been serving Lady Poetry for longer than thirty years. But as I well know, for you've often told me about it, you only began seriously rhyming and composing melodies when you were nineteen, inspired by your love for Countess de Stael. That makes it the nineteenth year of your service, Dandelion. So how did you come up with this titular fifty years? Is it meant to be some kind of metaphor?'

'I,' the bard said, puffing up, 'trace broad horizons with my thought. I describe the present, but I pass into the future. I intend to publish this mighty work in some twenty or thirty years, and then no one will be able to cast doubt on the titular reckoning.'

'Ha. Now I get it. If anything astonishes me, it's the foresight. You aren't usually bothered about tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow still doesn't bother me much,' the poet declared with superiority. 'I'm thinking about posterity. About eternity!'

'From the point of view of posterity,' Regis observed, 'it isn't too ethical a beginning to write now, in advance. On the basis of the title, posterity has the right to expect a work written from a genuine fifty-year perspective, by a person with a genuine fifty-year store of knowledge and experience—'

'A person whose experience amounts to half a century,' Dandelion interrupted unceremoniously, 'must be – from the very nature of the case – a seventy-year-old, decayed old gimmer with his brain eroded by the hag of sclerosis. Someone like that should be sitting on the veranda breaking wind, not dictating their memoirs, for people would only laugh. I won't make that error. I'll write my biography at the height of my creative powers. Later, just before publication, I shall merely make cosmetic corrections.'

'It does have its merits,' Geralt said as he massaged and cautiously flexed his painful knee. 'Particularly for us. For though without doubt we appear in his work, though without doubt he has mauled us, in half a century we won't be especially concerned

about it.'

'What's half a century?' the vampire smiled. 'A moment, a fleeting instant . . . Aha, Dandelion, a minor observation. In my opinion, *Half a Century of Poetry* sounds better than *Fifty Years*.'

'I don't deny it,' said the troubadour, crouching over a page and scribbling on it with a pencil. 'Thanks, Regis. Something constructive at last. Does anyone else have any comments?'

'I do,' Milva began unexpectedly, poking her head out from her blanket. 'Why are you goggling at me? Because I'm unlettered? But I'm not stupid! We're on an expedition, we're going to rescue Ciri, we're travelling through enemy lands with sword in hand. This rubbish of Dandelion's might fall into enemy mitts. And we know the poetaster, it's no secret he's a gasbag, a sensation-seeker as well as a gossip. So let him have a care with what he's scrawling. So we don't accidentally get hung because of his scribblings.'

'You're exaggerating, Milva,' the vampire said gently.

'Greatly, I'd say,' Dandelion continued.

'I'd say the same,' Cahir added carelessly. 'I don't know what it's like with the Nordlings, but in the Empire, possession of a manuscript isn't considered a *crimen*, nor is literary activity punishable.'

Geralt swept his eyes over him and snapped the stick he was playing with.

'But libraries are torched in cities captured by that cultured nation,' he said in an unaggressive tone, but with a distinct sneer. 'Never mind, though. Maria, I agree that you're exaggerating. Dandelion's scribblings, as usual, don't have any importance. Not regarding our safety.'

'Oh, sure!' said the archer, getting hot under the collar and sitting up. 'I know what I know! When the royal bailiff were taking a census round our way, my stepfather took to his heels, bolted into the forest and stayed there for a fortnight without poking his nose out. Wherever there's parchment there's a judgement, he used to say, and whoever's name is captured in ink today is broke on the wheel tomorrow. And he was right, the rotten bastard! I hope that whoreson's sizzling in hell!'

Milva threw off her blanket and – now quite wide awake – moved closer to the fire. It looked, Geralt observed, like another

long fireside conversation was in the offing.

'You weren't fond of your stepfather, I deduce,' Dandelion observed after a moment's silence.

'I weren't,' Milva said, audibly grinding her teeth. 'For he were a rotten bastard. He made advances when mother wasn't looking, interfered with me. He wouldn't listen, so finally I couldn't stand it no more and took a rake to him, and when he fell over I gave him a kick or two, in the ribs and the privates. Two days later he were lying and spitting blood . . . So I decided to flee into the world, without waiting to see if he got better. Later I heard rumours he'd died, and mother soon after him . . . Oi, Dandelion! Are you writing that down? Don't you dare! Don't you dare, hear me?'

*

It was strange that Milva was trekking with us, and the fact that a vampire was accompanying us was astonishing. Nonetheless, strangest – if not simply incomprehensible – were the motives of Cahir, who had suddenly changed from an enemy into – if not a friend – then certainly an ally. The youngster had proved that at the Battle on the Bridge, unhesitatingly standing with sword in hand beside the Witcher against his countrymen. By this deed he gained our appreciation and conclusively dispelled our suspicions. In writing 'our', I have in mind myself, the vampire and the archer. For Geralt, though he had fought shoulder to shoulder with Cahir, though they had looked death in the eye side by side, was still mistrustful of the Nilfgaardian and did not like him. He did, admittedly, try to hide his resentment, but he was – as I believe I have already mentioned – as simple as a spear shaft, incapable of pretending, and his aversion crept out at every turn, like an eel from a rotten trap. The reason was clear: it was Ciri.

It had been my lot to be on the Isle of Thanedd that July new moon when the bloody battle took place between sorcerers loyal to the kings and traitors incited by Nilfgaard. The traitors were helped by the Squirrels – rebellious elves – and Cahir, son of Ceallach. Cahir had been on Thanedd, he had been sent there on a special mission; he was to have seized and abducted Ciri. Ciri wounded him defending herself; Cahir had a scar on his left hand, at the sight of which my mouth always went dry. It must have been hellishly painful and he still could not bend two of his fingers.

And after all that, we rescued him on the Ribbon, when his own countrymen were carrying him away to cruel torture in fetters. Why, I ask? For what misdeeds did they want to execute him? Or was it only for the defeat on Thanedd? Cahir is not garrulous, but I have a sensitive ear even for monosyllables. The lad is not yet thirty, but looks as though he were a high-ranking officer in the Nilfgaardian Army. Since he speaks the Common Speech impeccably, which is seldom found among Nilfgaardians, I think I know what kind of army Cahir served in and why he was promoted so quickly. And why he was sent on such strange missions. Including foreign ones.

For Cahir was the man who had tried once before to abduct Ciri. Almost four years before, during the massacre of Cintra. The destiny guiding the girl's fate had made itself felt for the first time. By coincidence I talked about this with Geralt on the third day after crossing the Yaruga, ten days before the Equinox, as we were negotiating the forests of Riverdell. That conversation, although very short, was fraught with unpleasant and worrying overtones. And at that moment there was writ on the face and in the eyes of the Witcher a harbinger of the horror which was to explode during the Equinox, after we were joined by the fair-haired Angouême.

*

The Witcher wasn't looking at Dandelion. He wasn't looking ahead. He was looking at Roach's mane.

'Just before her death,' he began, 'Calanthe forced an oath on several of her knights. They were not to let Ciri fall into Nilfgaardian hands. During the flight, those knights were killed, and Ciri was left alone amidst corpses and conflagration, in the web of streets of the burning city. She would not have got out alive, that is beyond doubt. But he found her. Cahir. He carried her out of the pit of fire and death. He rescued her. Heroically! Nobly!'

Dandelion reined Pegasus back somewhat. They were riding at the rear, and Regis, Milva and Cahir were about a quarter of a furlong ahead, but the poet didn't want a single word of their conversation to reach the ears of their companions.

'The problem was,' the Witcher continued, 'that our Cahir was only acting nobly by order. He was noble as a cormorant is: he did not swallow the fish because he had a ring on his throat. He was

meant to take the fish to his master. He failed, so the master was angry at the cormorant! The cormorant is now out of favour! Is that why he's searching for friendship in the company of fish? What do you think, Dandelion?'

The troubadour ducked in the saddle to avoid an overhanging linden branch. The branch already bore completely yellow leaves. 'But he saved her life, you said so yourself. Thanks to him Ciri left Cintra in one piece.'

'And she cried out in the night, seeing him in her dreams.'

'But he *did* save her. Stop dwelling on it, Geralt. Too much has changed, why, it changes every day. Brooding achieves nothing, save distress, which clearly does you no good. He rescued Ciri. That fact was, is, and will remain a fact.'

Geralt finally tore his gaze away from the horse's mane and raised his head. Dandelion glanced at his face and swiftly looked away.

'The fact remains a fact,' the Witcher repeated in an angry, metallic voice. 'Oh, yes! He yelled that fact in my face on Thanedd, and his voice stuck in his throat from terror, for he was staring at my sword edge. That fact and that cry were supposed to be the arguments which would stop me murdering him. Well, it did and I don't think it can now be undone. Which is a pity. For a chain ought to have been begun then, on Thanedd. A long chain of death, a chain of revenge, about which tales would still be told after a hundred years have passed. Tales which people will be afraid to listen to after dark. Do you understand that, Dandelion?'

'Not really.'

'Then to hell with you.'

*

That conversation was hideous and the Witcher's expression had been hideous too. Oh, I did not like it when he was in a mood such as that and went off on such a tack.

I must, though, confess that the vivid comparison with the cormorant had played its role. I began to worry. The fish in its beak, taken to be clubbed, gutted and fried! A truly nice analogy, joyful prospects . . .

However, good sense belied such fears. After all, if we were to continue with the fishy metaphors, then who were we? Small fry. Small, bony fry. In exchange for such a meagre haul the cormorant Cahir could not count on imperial grace. In any case, he was far from the pike he wanted to be thought of as. He was small fry, just like us. When the war was raking both the earth and people's fates like an iron harrow, who was paying the slightest attention to small fry?

I am certain that no one in Nilfgaard remembers Cahir now.

*

Vattier de Rideaux, chief of the Nilfgaardian military intelligence, listened to the imperial reprimand.

'So,' Emhyr var Emreis continued scathingly, 'an institution which devours three times as much of the state budget as education, culture and the arts taken together is incapable of finding one man. This man simply disappears, goes into hiding, although I spend astronomical sums on an institution from which nothing has any right to remain concealed! One man, guilty of treason, blatantly mocks an institution to which I have given so many privileges and funds as would give even innocent men sleepless nights. Oh, trust me, Vattier, when the council next speaks of trimming the funds for clandestine services, I shall prick up my ears. You may trust that!'

'Your Imperial Majesty,' Vattier de Rideaux croaked, 'will make, I have no doubt, the right decision, after weighing up all the pros and cons. Both the failures and the successes of the intelligence service. Your Majesty may also be certain that the traitor, Cahir aep Ceallach, will not escape punishment. I have taken steps—'

'I do not pay you for undertakings, but for results. And those are miserable, Vattier, miserable! What about Vilgefortz? Where the hell is Cirilla? What are you mumbling now? Louder!'

'I think Your Highness ought to wed the girl we are holding in Darn Rowan. We need that marriage, we need the legality of Cintra's sovereign fiefdom to subdue the Isles of Skellige and the rebels in Attre, Strept, Mag Turga and the Slopes. We need a general amnesty, peace at the rear and along supply lines . . . We need the neutrality of Esterad Thyssen of Kovir.'

‘I know. But the girl from Darn Rowan is not Ciri. I cannot wed her.’

‘May Your Imperial Majesty forgive me, but does it matter if she is not authentic? The political situation requires your nuptials. Urgently. The bride will be in a veil. And when we finally find the genuine Cirilla, the girls will simply be . . . exchanged.’

‘Have you taken leave of your senses, Vattier?’

‘The fake one was only shown briefly at court. No one has seen the real girl in Cintra for four years, and rumour has it she spent more time in Skellige than in Cintra. I guarantee that no one will see through the deceit.’

‘No!’

‘Your Imperial—’

‘No, Vattier! Find the real Ciri! Pull your finger out. Find Ciri. Find Cahir. And Vilgefortz. Vilgefortz in particular. For he has Ciri, I’m certain of it’

‘Your Imperial Highness . . .’

‘Go on, Vattier! Speak!’

‘At one time I suspected the so-called Vilgefortz case was nothing but a provocation. That the sorcerer had been murdered or is being imprisoned, and the spectacular and clamorous hunt allows Dijkstra to slander us and to justify his brutal repression.’

‘I’ve had similar suspicions.’

‘Ah, you have? This was not made public in Redania, but my agents inform me that Dijkstra found one of Vilgefortz’s hideouts, and within in it evidence of the sorcerer’s bestial experiments on people. To be precise, on human foetuses . . . and women with child. If Vilgefortz had Cirilla, I fear that continued searches for her —’

‘Silence, dammit!’

‘On the other hand,’ Vattier de Rideaux quickly added, looking at the emperor’s furious face, ‘all of that may be disinformation. Intended to denigrate the sorcerer. That would be Dijkstra’s style.’

‘You’re paid to find Vilgefortz and take Ciri from him, for God’s sake! Not to digress and make conjectures! Where is Tawny Owl? Still in Geso? Why? He allegedly “left no stone unturned and looked into every hole in the ground”. Allegedly the girl “is not

there and never was". Apparently "the astrologer was either mistaken or is lying". Those are all quotations from his reports. What is he still doing there?'

'Coroner Skellen, I dare observe, undertakes none too transparent measures . . . He is recruiting for his unit, the one Your Highness ordered him to set up, in Fort Rocayne, Maecht, where he has established his base. That unit, I take the liberty to add, is an extremely doubtful bunch. But it is odd that towards the end of August, Lord Skellen hired a notorious assassin—'

'What?'

'He engaged a hired thug, with instructions to eliminate a criminal gang marauding around Geso. A commendable act, but is it a task for the imperial coroner?'

'Is *invidia* speaking through you, Vattier, by any chance? And does it not give your reports colour and fervour?'

'I merely state the facts, Your Highness.'

'I want–' the emperor stood up abruptly '–to *see* the facts. I'm tired of *hearing* about them.'

*

It was an extremely hard day. Vattier de Rideaux was weary. In his schedule for that day he had planned an hour or two of paperwork, intended to protect him from drowning in pending documents, but the thought of it made him shudder. *No*, he thought, *easy does it. It can wait. I'm going home . . . No, not yet. My wife can wait. I'll go to Cantarella. To my gorgeous Cantarella, with whom I can relax so pleasantly.*

He quickly made up his mind. He simply rose, took his cloak and left, a gesture full of disgust holding off his secretary, who was trying to force a leather portfolio of urgent documents onto him. Tomorrow! Tomorrow is another day!

He left the palace by the rear exit, which opened onto the gardens, and walked along a path lined with cypresses. He passed an ornamental pond, where a carp introduced by Emperor Torres was approaching the venerable age of a hundred and thirty-two years, as testified by a golden commemorative medal attached to the gills of the immense fish.

‘Good evening, viscount.’

Vattier released the dagger concealed in his sleeve with a short movement of his forearm. The hilt slid into his hand by itself.

‘Very risky, Rience,’ he said coldly. ‘Very risky, showing your burned countenance in Nilfgaard. Even as a magical teleprojection.’

‘You noticed? And Vilgefortz assured me that if you didn’t touch me you wouldn’t guess it was an illusion.’

Vattier put the dagger away. He had not guessed it was an illusion at all, but now he knew.

‘You are too great a coward, Rience,’ he said, ‘to show yourself here in person. You know what would befall you if you did.’

‘Is the emperor still so determined to seize me? And my master Vilgefortz?’

‘Your insolence is disarming.’

‘Go to hell, Vattier. We’re still on your side, Vilgefortz and I. Well, I admit we tricked you with the counterfeit Cirilla, but it was done in good faith, in good faith, may I be drowned if I lie. Vilgefortz believed that since the real one had vanished, a fake one was better than none at all. We reckoned it was all the same to you —’

‘Your insolence has stopped being disarming and has begun to be insulting. I have no intention of wasting time talking to an insulting mirage. When I finally get my hands on you we shall have a conversation, a long conversation. So until that time . . . *apage*, Rience.’

‘What’s come over you, Vattier? In the past, if even the Devil himself appeared to you, you wouldn’t forget to investigate – before the exorcism – if you couldn’t, by any chance, profit in some way.’

Vattier did not grace the illusion with a glance. Instead he watched the algae-covered carp idly churning up the sludge in the pond.

‘Profit in some way?’ he repeated slowly, pouting his lips contemptuously. ‘From you? And what could you give me? The real Cirilla, perhaps? Perhaps your patron, Vilgefortz? Perhaps Cahir aep Ceallach?’

‘Hold hard!’ Rience raised an illusory hand. ‘You mentioned him.’

‘Who?’

‘Cahir. We shall bring you Cahir’s head. I, and my master, Vilgefortz . . .’

‘Have mercy, Rience,’ Vattier snorted. ‘Reverse the order.’

‘As you wish. Vilgefortz, with my humble help, will give you the head of Cahir, son of Ceallach. We know where he is and can pluck him out like a lobster from a pot, if you wish.’

‘So you have such capabilities, well, well. Such good stoolpigeons in Queen Meve’s army?’

‘Are you testing me?’ Rience grimaced. ‘You really don’t know? Must be the latter. Cahir, my dear viscount, is . . . We know where he is. We know where he’s headed and in what company. You want his head? You shall have it.’

‘A head,’ Vattier smiled, ‘which won’t be able to tell anyone what really happened on Thanedd.’

‘That’s probably for the best,’ said Rience cynically. ‘Why give Cahir the chance to talk? Our task is to ease – not exacerbate – the animosity between Vilgefortz and the emperor. I shall bring you the mute head of Cahir aep Ceallach. We’ll do it in such a way that it looks like your, and only your, achievement. Delivery in the next three weeks.’

The ancient carp in the fishpond fanned the water with its pectoral fins. That beast, thought Vattier, must be very wise. But why does it need that wisdom? It’s still the same sludge and the same water lilies.

‘Your price, Rience?

‘A trifle. Where is Stefan Skellen and what is he plotting?’

*

‘I told him what he wanted to know.’ Vattier de Rideaux stretched out on the pillows, playing with a ringlet of Carthia van Canten’s golden hair. ‘You see, my sweet, one has to approach some matters wisely. And to approach them wisely means to conform. If one behaves differently, one won’t get anything. Just the putrid water and foul-smelling sludge in a fishpond. And so what if the pond *is* made of marble and is three paces from the palace? Aren’t I right,

my sweet?'

Carthia van Canten, known by the pet-name of Cantarella, did not answer. Vattier in no way expected an answer. The girl was eighteen and – to put it mildly – no genius. Her interests, at least for the moment, were limited to making love with – at least for the moment – Vattier. Cantarella was a natural talent in sexual matters, combining enthusiasm and wholeheartedness with technique and artistry. That was not the most important thing about her, though.

Cantarella spoke little and seldom, while listening willingly and splendidly. With Cantarella one could unload oneself, relax, spiritually unwind and psychologically regenerate oneself.

'A man in this service can expect nothing but reprimands,' Vattier said bitterly. 'Just because he hasn't found some Cirilla or other! And is the fact that, thanks to the work of my men, the army is achieving successes unimportant? Does the fact that the general staff knows the enemy's every move mean nothing? And how many strongholds have my agents opened for the imperial forces, which would have taken weeks to storm? But no, there is no praise for that. Only some Cirilla or other is important!'

Puffing up angrily, Vattier de Rideaux took a glass of excellent Est Est of Toussaint from Cantarella's hands, a wine with a vintage that remembered the days when Emperor Emhyr var Emreis was a cruelly damaged little boy, devoid of any rights to the throne and Vattier de Rideaux was a young officer of the intelligence service, insignificant in the hierarchy.

It had been a good year. For wine.

Vattier sipped it, played with Cantarella's shapely breasts and went on. Cantarella listened splendidly.

'Stefan Skellen, my sweet,' muttered the chief of the imperial intelligence service, 'is a wheeler-dealer and a conspirator. But I shall know what he's up to before Rience gets there . . . I already have an agent there . . . Very close to Skellen . . . Very close . . .'

Cantarella untied the sash fastening Vattier's dressing gown, and leaned forward. Vattier felt her breath and moaned in anticipation of the pleasure. That's talent, he thought. And then the soft, hot touch of velvety lips drove all thoughts from his head.

Carthia van Canten slowly, deftly and skilfully supplied Vattier de Rideaux, the chief of the imperial intelligence service, with sexual bliss. That wasn't Carthia's only talent. But Vattier de

Rideaux had no idea about her others.

He didn't know that despite appearances Carthia van Canten possessed a splendid memory and intelligence as lively as quicksilver.

Everything Vattier told her, every piece of information, every word he uttered, Carthia passed on to the sorcereress Assire var Anahid the next day.

*

Yes, I would stake my head that everyone in Nilfgaard forgot about Cahir long ago, including his betrothed, if he had one.

But more about that later, for now we return to the day and place the Yaruga was crossed. We rode quite briskly eastwards, meaning to reach the region of the Black Forest known in the Elder Speech as Caed Dhu. For there dwelt the druids, who were capable of divining where Ciri was residing, or foretelling her location from the weird dreams that were vexing Geralt. We rode through Upper Riverdell, also known as Left Bank, a wild and deserted land situated between the Yaruga and the Slopes, set at the foot of the Amell Mountains, delineated to the east by the Dol Angra valley, and to the west by a boggy lakeland whose name has slipped my mind.

No one laid any specific claim to that land, and so it was never rightly known to whom it actually belonged or who governed it. In that respect, it seems, the successive monarchs of Temeria, Sodden, Cintra and Rivia – who, with varying results, treated Left Bank as a fiefdom of their kingdoms and occasionally tried to drive home their arguments using fire and sword – had some say. And subsequently the Nilfgaardian Army arrived from beyond the Amell Mountains and no one had anything more to say. Or any doubts about issues of fiefdom or territorial rights. Everything south of the Yaruga belonged to the Empire. As I write these words, plenty of lands to the north also belong to the Empire. Owing to a lack of precise information, I do not know how many or how far to the north.

Going back to Riverdell, permit me, dear reader, a digression concerning historical processes. The history of a given territory is often created and formed by accident, as a side effect of the conflicts between external forces. A given land's history is very often created by foreigners. Foreigners are the cause – but the effects are always invariably borne by

the local people.

That rule fully applied to Riverdell.

Riverdell had its own folk, indigenous Riverdellers. The unceasing years of scrambles and struggles had transformed them into beggars and forced them to migrate. Their villages and settlements had gone up in smoke, and the ruins of homesteads and fields were transformed into fallow land and swallowed up by the wilderness. Trade fell into decline and caravans avoided the neglected roads and tracks. The few Riverdellers who remained turned into coarse boors. They mainly differed from wolverines and bears by the fact that they wore britches. At least some of them did. I mean some of them wore britches and some of them differed from the beasts. They were – generally speaking – an unobliging, crude and boorish nation.

And utterly devoid of a sense of humour.

*

The dark-haired daughter of the forest beekeeper tossed her plait over her shoulder, and resumed turning the quern with furious vigour. Dandelion's efforts were in vain; the poet's words seemed not to register with their audience. Dandelion winked at the rest of the company, pretending to sigh and raise his eyes to the ceiling. But he did not quit.

'Let me,' he repeated, grinning. 'Let me grind, while you fetch some ale from the cellar. There must be a hidden cellar somewhere around here and a keg in the vault. Am I right, fair one?'

'You might leave the wench alone, m'lord,' the forest beekeeper's wife – a tall, willowy woman of astonishing beauty – said crossly as she busied herself around the kitchen. 'I already told 'ee there ain't no ale 'ere.'

'You bin told near a dozen times, m'lord,' the forest beekeeper said, backing up his wife, breaking off from his conversation with the Witcher and the vampire. 'I shall make you pancakes with honey, and then you'll eat. But leave the wench in peace to grind the corn for meal, for without meal even a sorcerer cannot make a pancake! Let 'er be, let 'er grind in peace.'

'Did you hear that, Dandelion?' called the Witcher. 'Leave the girl alone and go and do something useful. Or write your memoirs!'

‘I fancy a drink. I fancy a drink before eating. I have some herbs, I’ll brew myself an infusion. Granny, would there be any hot water in this cottage? Hot water, I’m asking. Would there be any?’

An old woman, the forest beekeeper’s mother, sitting on the stove bench, raised her head from the sock she was darning.

‘There would, petal, there would,’ she muttered. ‘Only it be cold b’ now.’

Dandelion groaned and sat down, resigned, at the table, where the company was chatting with the beekeeper, whom they had happened upon in the forest early that morning. The beekeeper was short, thickset, swarthy and terribly hairy. No wonder, then, that he had given the company a scare when he loomed out of the undergrowth unexpectedly; they had taken him for a lycanthrope. To make it funnier still, the first to yell ‘Werewolf! Werewolf!’ had been the vampire, Regis. There was something of a commotion, but the matter was quickly cleared up, and the beekeeper, though at first sight surly, turned out to be hospitable and courteous. The company accepted the invitation to his homestead. His homestead – called, in forest-beekeeping jargon, a ‘shanty’ – stood in a cleared glade, where the beekeeper, his mother, his wife and their daughter lived. The latter two were women of exceptional, though somewhat curious, looks, clearly indicating that there was a dryad or hamadryad among their forebears.

During the conversations that ensued, the forest beekeeper at first gave the impression one could talk to him solely about bees, beehives carved into trees, hollows, rope harnesses, bear fences, beeswax, honey and honey-gathering, but that was just a semblance.

‘With politics? And what should be happening with it? The same as usual. We ‘ave to pay more and more duty. Three urns of honey, and an entire length of wax. I can barely supply it. I sit on my ropes from dawn to dusk, gouging out hollows . . . Who do I pay the duty to? To whoever calls, how am I to know who’s in power now? Some time since, you know, they bin speakin’ Nilfgaardian. I ‘ear we’re now an imporial provenance, or summat like ‘at. They pay for the honey – if I sell any – in imporial coin, with the emprer’s head struck on it. ‘Is mush is more comely, though cruel, you’ll know ‘im right away. If you get my drift . . .’

Two dogs – one black and the other ruddy – sat facing the vampire, raised their heads and started to howl. The beekeeper’s

hamadryad wife turned back from the hearth and hit them with her broom.

‘It be an evil sign,’ the beekeeper said, ‘when hounds howl in broad daylight. Kind of thing . . . What was I sposed to be talkin’ ‘bout?’

‘About the druids of Caed Dhu.’

‘Eh! So you wasn’t jestin’, m’lord? You rightly mean to go to the druids? Sick of life, are you? That way is death! He who dares to venture into the Mistletoers’ clearings is seized, shoved into a wicker doll and roasted over a slow flame.’

Geralt looked at Regis and Regis winked at him. They both knew the popular rumours about the druids, and every last one was fabricated. Milva and Dandelion, though, began listening with greater curiosity than before. And evident alarm.

‘There’s some as say,’ the forest beekeeper continued, ‘that the Mistletoers are getting their own back, for the Nilfgaardians vexed ‘em first, by entering their holy oak groves down in Dol Angra and by walloping the druids for no reason. Others say the druids started it, capturing and tormenting a couple of imporial men to death, and now Nilfgaard are getting their revenge. ‘Ow it rightly is, no one knows. But one thing brooks no doubt; the druids catch people, puts ‘em in the Wicker Woman and burns ‘em. To venture among ‘em is certain death.’

‘We are not afraid,’ Geralt said calmly.

‘Certainly,’ the forest beekeeper eyed the Witcher, Milva and Cahir up and down. Cahir was just entering the cottage, having groomed the horses. ‘It is evident you are fearless folk, valorous and armed. Eh, wouldn’t be no fear journeying with the likes of you . . . you know . . . But the Mistletoers ain’t in the Black Grove presently, your toils and travels would be in vain. Nilfgaard pressed ‘em, drove ‘em from Caed Dhu. They ain’t there presently.’

‘How so?’

‘Thus it is. The Mistletoers ‘ave fled.’

‘Fled where?

The forest beekeeper glanced at his hamadryad wife and said nothing for a moment.

‘Fled where?’ the Witcher repeated.

The beekeeper's tabby cat sat down before the vampire and miaowed frightfully. The hamadryad hit it with her broom.

'It be an evil sign when a tomcat mews in broad daylight,' the beekeeper mumbled, strangely embarrassed. 'But the druids . . . you know . . . They fled for the Slopes. Right enough. I speak the truth. To the Slopes.'

'A good sixty miles south,' Dandelion estimated in quite a casual – even cheerful – voice. But he fell silent when he saw the Witcher's expression.

Only the ominous miaowing of the cat, promptly driven outside, could be heard in the silence that fell.

'Well,' the vampire began, 'what difference does it make to us?'

*

The next morning brought more surprises. And riddles, which were quickly solved. 'A pox on it,' said Milva, who was the first to scramble out of the hay barrack, awoken by the commotion. 'Well, I'll be blowed. Look at that, Geralt.'

The clearing was full of people. At first glance it could be seen that five or six forest beekeeping families were gathered there. The Witcher's trained eye also picked out several fur trappers and at least one tar maker. Taken together, there were twelve men, ten women, ten adolescents of both sexes and the same number of little children. The gathering was equipped with six wagons, twelve oxen, ten cows and four goats, a fair number of sheep, and also plenty of dogs and cats, whose barking and miaowing could definitely be considered a bad omen in such circumstances.

'I wonder,' Cahir said, rubbing his eyes, 'what this means?'

'Trouble,' Dandelion replied, shaking the hay from his hair. Regis said nothing, but wore a curious expression.

'Please break your fast, noble lords,' said their friend the forest beekeeper, approaching the rick accompanied by a broad-shouldered man. 'Breakfast is ready. Milky porridge. And honey . . . And if I may introduce Jan Cronin, headman of us forest beekeepers . . .'

'Pleased to meet you,' the Witcher lied, without returning the

bow, partly because his knee was paining him intensely. ‘And this crowd, how did they get here?’

‘Type of thing . . .’ the beekeeper scratched the back of his head. ‘As you see, winter’s coming . . . The trees have bear fences, the hollows have been gouged out . . . Time we returned to the Slopes and Riedbrune . . . Store away the honey, for winter, you know . . . But it is perilous to be in the forests . . . alone . . .’

The headman cleared his throat. The beekeeper glanced at Geralt’s face and seemed to shrink a little.

‘You are mounted and armed,’ he grunted. ‘Valorous and bold, anyone can see it. Wouldn’t be no fear travelling with the likes of you . . . And it’d be commodious for you . . . We know every path, every track, every copse and holt . . . And we can feed you . . .’

‘And the druids,’ Cahir said coldly, ‘have left Caed Dhu. And headed for the Slopes. Where you want to go. What a remarkable coincidence.’

Geralt walked slowly over to the forest beekeeper and grabbed him by the front of his coat. But a moment later thought better of it, released him and smoothed down his garments. He said nothing. And asked nothing. But in any case the beekeeper hurried to explain.

‘I spoke the truth! I swear! May the earth swallow me up if I lie! The Mistletoers have gone from Caed Dhu! They ain’t there!’

‘And they’re in the Slopes, are they?’ Geralt growled. ‘Where you are headed, you and this rabble of yours? And you want to travel with an armed escort? Speak, fellow. But take heed, the earth is indeed liable to cleave open!’

The beekeeper lowered his eyes and looked down apprehensively at the ground beneath his feet. Geralt kept meaningfully silent. Milva, finally understanding what it was all about, cursed foully. Cahir snorted contemptuously.

‘Well?’ the Witcher urged. ‘Where were the druids making for?’

‘Who knows, m’lord?’ the beekeeper finally mumbled. ‘But they may be in the Slopes . . . Just as well as they might be anywhere else. There’s a plenitude of mighty oak groves in the Slopes, and druids are fond of oaks . . .’

Aside from headman Cronin, both hamadryads – mother and daughter – were now standing behind the beekeeper. It’s fortunate

the daughter takes after her mother and not her father, the Witcher thought, for the beekeeper suits his wife as well as a wild boar suits a mare. He noticed that several more women were standing behind the hamadryads. They were much less comely, but were looking at him just as pleadingly.

He glanced at Regis, not knowing whether to laugh or curse. The vampire shrugged.

'Let me start by saying,' he said, 'that the forest beekeeper is right, Geralt. It is quite probable that the druids have gone to the Slopes. It is perfectly fitting terrain for them.'

'Is that probability–' the Witcher's gaze was very, very cold, '– sufficiently great, in your view, to prompt us to abruptly change our course and head off blindly with these folk here?'

Regis shrugged again.

'What difference does it make? Think it over. The druids are not in Caed Dhu, so we ought to eliminate that direction of travel. Neither can a return to the Yaruga, I venture, be an option. And so all remaining directions are equally good.'

'Really?' The temperature of the Witcher's voice now equalled his gaze. 'And which of those that remain, in your view, would be most advisable? The one with the forest beekeepers? Or a quite different one? Will you – in your infinite wisdom – undertake to stipulate that?'

The vampire turned slowly towards the forest beekeeper, the forest beekeeper headman, the hamadryads and the other women.

'What is it,' he asked gravely, 'you fear so much, good folk, that you seek an escort? What arouses this fear in you? Speak plainly.'

'Oh, m'lord,' Jan Cronin whined, and the most genuine horror appeared in his eyes. 'I'm glad you asked . . . Our way goes through the Dank Wilderness! And it's ghastly there, m'lord! There are, m'lord, brukolaks, vampyrodes, endryags, gryphoons and all kind of monstrosities! Why, barely two Sundays since, a leshy snatched my son-in-law, he only managed a rasp and that was him, dead. Do you not wonder that we're afeared to go that way with our women and bairns? Eh?'

The vampire glanced at the Witcher and his face was very grave.

‘My boundless wisdom,’ he said, ‘suggests I stipulate that the most advisable direction is whichever is most advisable for the Witcher.’

*

We set off northwards, towards the Slopes, a land lying at the foot of the Amell Mountains. We set off in a great procession which contained everything: young women, forest beekeepers, fur trappers, women, children, young women, domestic livestock, household paraphernalia, and young women. And a hell of a lot of honey. Everything was sticky from the honey, even the girls.

The train moved at walking and wagon speed, but the pace of the march did not falter, for we did not stray, but marched with ease – the beekeepers knew the tracks, paths and causeways between the lakes. But that knowledge came in useful, oh, how it did, for it began to drizzle and suddenly the whole of bloody Riverdell was plunged into a fog as thick as cream. Without the beekeepers we would surely have lost our way or sunk somewhere in the mire. Neither did we have to waste time or energy organising and preparing vittles – we were fed thrice a day, amply, if simply. And were permitted to laze around for some time after each repast.

In short, it was wonderful. Even the Witcher, that old sourpuss and bore, began to smile and enjoy life more, for he reckoned we were covering fifteen miles a day, which we had never once managed since leaving Brokilon. The Witcher had no work, for though the Dank Wilderness was so dank it would have been difficult to imagine anything danker, we did not encounter any monsters. Sure, at night spectres howled a little, forest weepers moaned and will o’ the wisps capered on the bogs. But nothing remarkable.

It was a tiny bit worrying, in truth, that once again we were travelling in quite an accidentally chosen direction and once again without a precisely defined destination. But, as the vampire Regis articulated, it is better to go forward without an aim than loiter without an aim, and with surety much better than to retreat without an aim.

*

‘Dandelion! Strap that tube of yours on securely! It would be a shame for half a century of poetry to break free and get lost in the ferns.’

‘No fear! I shan’t lose it, be certain of it. Nor let anyone take it from me! Anyone wanting this tube will have to wrest it from my cooling corpse. Might one know, Geralt, what provokes your peals of laughter? Let me hazard a guess . . . Congenital imbecility?’

*

It so happened that a team of archaeologists from the University of Castell Graupian, conducting excavations in Beauclair, dug through a layer of charcoal – indicating a great fire – to an even older layer, estimated to date from the 13th century. In that layer, a cavern formed by the remains of walls and sealed by clay and lime was excavated, and in it – to the great excitement of the scholars – were two perfectly preserved human skeletons: those of a woman and a man. Beside the skeletons – apart from weapons and countless small artefacts – was a tube made of hardened leather and measuring two and a half feet long. A coat of arms with faded colours depicting lions and lozenges was embossed on the leather. Professor Schliemann, a distinguished specialist in the sigillography of the Dark Ages, who was leading the team, identified the coat of arms as the emblem of Rivia, an ancient kingdom of unconfirmed location. The archaeologists’ excitement reached its peak, since manuscripts were kept in similar tubes in the Dark Ages, when the container’s weight permitted the supposition that there was plenty of paper or parchment preserved inside. The tube’s excellent condition offered hope that the documents would be legible and throw light on the shadowy past. The centuries were about to speak! It was an exceptional surprise, a victory of science which could not be squandered. Linguists and scholars of extinct languages were prudently summoned from Castell Graupian, along with specialists capable of opening the tube without the risk of even the slightest damage to the valuable contents.

Meanwhile, rumours of ‘treasure’ had spread through Professor Schliemann’s team. It so happens that those words reached the ears of three characters, known as Zdyb, Billy Goat and Kamil Ronstetter, who’d been hired to dig out the clay. Convinced that the tube was literally stuffed full of gold and valuables, the three

aforementioned diggers, under cover of darkness, swiped the priceless artefact and fled with it to the forest. Once there, they lit a small fire and sat down around it.

'What you waitin' for?' Billy Goat said to Zdyb. 'Open up that pipe!'

'Won't give,' Zdyb complained to Billy Goat. 'It's tight as a whoreson!'

'Stamp on the sodding bitch!' Kamil Ronstetter advised.

The hasp of the priceless find gave way under Zdyb's heel and the contents fell out onto the ground.

'Bugger the sodding bitch!' Billy Goat yelled in astonishment. 'What is it?'

The question was foolish, for at first sight it could be seen they were sheets of paper. For which reason Zdyb, rather than answer, took one of the sheets and brought it up to his nose. He examined the curious-looking signs for a long while.

'It's writing,' he finally stated authoritatively. 'They're letters!'

'Letters?' Kamil Ronstetter roared, paling in horror. 'Written letters? What a bitch!'

'Writing, meaning spells!' Billy Goat jabbered, his teeth chattering in terror. 'Letters, meaning witchery! Don't touch it, son-of-a-sodding-bitch! You might catch something from it!'

Zdyb didn't need telling twice, throwing the page onto the fire and nervously wiping his trembling hands on his britches. Kamil Ronstetter kicked the rest of the papers into the campfire – after all, children might chance upon that foul stuff. Then the three hurried away from that dangerous place. The priceless writing from the Dark Ages burned with a tall, bright flame. For a few short moments the centuries spoke with the soft whisper of paper blackening in the fire. And then the flame went out and darkness covered the earth.

***Houvenaghel, Dominik Bombastus**, b. 1239, became rich in Ebbing conducting trade on a great scale and settled in Nilfgaard; respected by previous emperors, he was appointed burgrave and director of mines in Venendal by Emperor Jan Calveit, and as reward for services rendered was given the office of mayor of Neveugen. A faithful imperial advisor, **H**. had the emperor's favour and also participated in many public affairs. d. 1301. While still in Ebbing, **H**. was engaged in numerous charitable works, supported the needy and impoverished, and founded orphanages, hospitals and nurseries, putting up plentiful sums for them. A great enthusiast of the fine arts and sport, he founded a comedic theatre and stadium in the capital, both of which bore his name. He was regarded as a model of probity, honesty and mercantile decency.*

Effenberg and Talbot,

Encyclopaedia Maxima Mundi, Volume VII

CHAPTER FOUR

‘Witness’s surname and given name?’

‘Selborne, Kenna. Beg pardon, I meant Joanna.’

‘Profession?’

‘Provider of diverse services.’

‘Is the witness jesting? May the witness be reminded that she stands before the imperial tribunal in a trial of high treason! The lives of many people depend on the witness’s testimony, since the penalty for treason is death! May the witness be reminded that she stands before the tribunal by no means as a free agent, but having been brought from a place of isolation in the citadel, and whether the witness returns there or is discharged depends inter alia on her testimony. The tribunal has taken the liberty of this lengthy lecture in order to show the witness how highly improper buffoonery and facetiae are in this chamber! They are not merely unpalatable, but also threaten very grave consequences. The witness has a half-minute to ponder this matter after which the tribunal shall pose the question once again.’

‘Very well, Illustrious Judge.’

‘Address us as “Your Honour”. Witness’s profession?’

‘I’m a psionic, Your Honour. But mainly in the service of the imperial intelligence, I mean . . .’

‘Please keep your answers brief and to the point. Should the court be desirous of further explanations we shall ask for them. The court is aware of the collaboration between the witness and the empire’s secret service. For the record, what is the meaning of the term “psionic”, which the witness used when giving her profession?’

‘I’ve got pure aitch-es-pee, which means first category psi, without the gift of pee-kay. To be precise: I can hear other people’s thoughts and speak remotely with a sorcerer, elf or other psionic. And I can give orders using thought. I mean: make someone do what I want them to. I can also do pre-cog, but only when I’m under.’

‘Please enter in the proceedings that the witness, Joanna Selborne, is a psionic, with the gift of hypersensory perception. She

is a telepath and tele-empath, able to carry out precognition under hypnosis, but without the ability of psychokinesis. The witness is admonished that the use of magic and extrasensory powers in this chamber is strictly prohibited. We shall continue the hearing. When, where and in what circumstances did the witness encounter the matter of the person passing herself off as Cirilla, Princess of Cintra?'

'I only found out about some Cirilla or other when I was in the clink . . . I mean in a place of isolation, Illustrious Tribunal. While being investigated. I was made aware it was the same person as had been called Falka or the Cintran in my hearing. And the circumstances were such that I must state the order of events. For clarity, I mean. It was like this: I was accosted in a tavern in Etolia by Dacre Silifant, him, who's sitting over there . . . '

'Make note that the witness, Joanna Selborne, has indicated the accused Silifant without being prompted. Please continue.'

'Dacre, Illustrious Tribunal, recruited a hanza . . . I mean, an armed troop. Valiant to a man, and woman . . . Dufficey Kriel, Neratin Ceka, Chloe Stitz, Andres Vierny, Til Echrade . . . They're all dead, Your Honour . . . And of the ones what survived, most of them are sitting here, under guard . . .'

'Please state precisely when the meeting of the witness and the accused, Silifant, took place.'

'It was last year, in the month of August, somewhere near the end, I don't recall exactly. Well not in September, in any case, for that September, ha, is well embedded in my memory! Dacre, who'd learned about me from somewhere, said the hanza needed a psionic, one that wasn't afraid of magic, because we'd be dealing with sorcerers. The work, he said, was for the emperor and the empire, well-paid, furthermore, and the hanza would be commanded by none other than Tawny Owl himself.'

'When they say Tawny Owl, does the witness have in mind Stefan Skellen, the imperial coroner?'

'Yes, I do, indeed I do.'

'Please enter that in the proceedings. When and where did the witness encounter Coroner Skellen?'

'It was in September, on the fourteenth, in Fort Rocayne. Rocayne, Illustrious Tribunal, is a border watchtower, which guards the trade route from Maecht to Ebbing, Geso and Metinna. Our

hanza – numbering some fifteen horse – was brought there by Dacre Silifant. So, taken together, there were twenty-two of us, as the others were already standing by in Rocayne, under the command of Ola Harsheim and Bert Brigden.'

*

The wooden floor boomed beneath heavy boots, spurs jingled and metal buckles clinked.

'Greetings, Sir Stefan!'

Tawny Owl not only did not stand up, he didn't even take his feet from the table. He just waved a hand in a very lordly gesture.

'At last,' he said curtly. 'You've kept me waiting a long time, Silifant.'

'A long time?' Dacre Silifant laughed. 'That's rich, Sir Stefan! You gave me, four Sundays to gather and bring here a good dozen of the best blades the empire and its dominions have produced. A year would be too little for the assembling of such a hanza! But I tossed it off in twenty-two days. That deserves praise, eh?'

'Let's refrain from praise,' Skellen said coolly, 'until I've seen this hanza of yours.'

'Why not now? Here are my – and now your, Sir Stefan – lieutenants: Neratin Ceka and Dufficey Kriel.'

'Hail, hail.' Tawny Owl finally decided to stand up, and his adjutants also rose. 'Let me introduce you, gentlemen . . . Bert Brigden, Ola Harsheim . . .'

'We know each other well.' Dacre Silifant grasped Ola Harsheim's right hand firmly. 'We put down the rebellion in Nazair under old Braibant. That was comical, eh, Ola? Eh, comical! The horses were hock-deep in blood! And Mr Brigden, if I'm not mistaken, from Gemmera? From the Pacifiers? Ah, there'll be comrades in the squad! I've got a few Pacifiers there.'

'I'm getting impatient to see them,' Tawny Owl interjected. 'May we go?'

'A moment,' Dacre said. 'Neratin, go and array the company, so they'll look their best before the honourable coroner.'

‘Is it a he or she, that Neratin Ceka?’ Tawny Owl squinted, watching the officer leave. ‘A woman or a man?’

‘Mr Skellen.’ Dacre Silifant cleared his throat, but when he spoke his voice was steady and his eyes cold. ‘I do not know exactly. He would appear to be a man, but I’m not certain. As to what kind of officer Neratin Ceka is, I’m certain. What you have deigned to ask me about would be significant were I to ask him – or her – for his – or her – hand. But that I do not intend. Neither do you, I expect.’

‘You’re right,’ Skellen conceded after a moment’s thought. ‘So there’s nothing to say. Let’s go and scrutinise your gang, Silifant.’

Neratin Ceka, the individual of uncertain gender, had not wasted time. When Skellen and the officers went out into the fort’s courtyard, the squad was standing in tidy array, aligned so that not a horse’s muzzle extended further than a span. Tawny Owl gave a slight cough, content. A decent band, he thought. Ah well, were it not for official policy . . . Oh, to assemble a hanza like that and head for the marches, to plunder, rape, murder and burn . . . A man would feel young again . . . Pshaw, if it weren’t for politics!

‘Well, Sir Stefan?’ Dacre Silifant asked, flushing with barely concealed excitement. ‘How do you find them, these splendid sparrowhawks of mine?’

Tawny Owl’s eyes travelled from face to face, from figure to figure. He knew some of them personally, for better or worse. Others, whose acquaintance he was now making, he had heard of. By reputation.

Til Echrade, a fair-haired elf, a scout of the Gemmerian Pacifiers. Rispat La Pointe, a sergeant from the same unit. Next, a Gemmerian: Cyprian Fripp the younger. Skellen had been present at the execution of Fripp the older. Both brothers had been famous for their sadistic proclivities.

Further away, leaning back easily in the saddle of a piebald mare, was Chloe Stitz, thief; occasionally hired and utilised by the secret service. Tawny Owl’s eyes swiftly darted away from her insolent gaze and nasty smile.

Andres Vierny, a Nordling from Redania, a vicious killer. Stigward, a pirate, a renegade from Skellige. Dede Vargas an assassin by profession, the Devil only knew where he was from, Kabernik Turent, a murderer by vocation.

And others. Much the same. They're all akin, Skellen thought. A guild, a fraternity, where after killing the first five people they all become the same. The same movements, the same gestures, the same manner of speech, of movement and dress.

The same eyes. Impassive and cool, flat and immobile like the eyes of a snake, whose expression nothing – not even the most monstrous atrocity – was capable of changing.

'Well? Sir Stefan?'

'Not bad. A decent hanza, Silifant.'

Dacre blushed even more and saluted in the Gemmerian fashion, fist pressed against his calpac.

'I especially requested,' Skellen reminded him, 'several people who were no strangers to magic. Who fear neither spells nor sorcerers.'

'I remembered. Why, there's Til Echrade! And apart from him, see that tall maiden on that splendid chestnut, the one beside Chloe Stitz?'

'Bring her to me later.'

Tawny Owl leaned on the balustrade and rapped on it with the metal-tipped handle of his knout.

'Hail, company!'

'Hail, lord coroner!'

'Many of you,' Skellen began, when the echo of the gang's combined roar had died away, 'have worked with me before, know me and my requirements. Let them explain to those who don't know me what I expect from my subordinates, and what I do not tolerate from them. Then I shan't waste my breath needlessly.

'This very day some of you will receive your assignments and will ride out at dawn to execute them. In Ebbing. I remind you that Ebbing is an autonomous kingdom and we have no formal jurisdiction there, so I order you to act prudently and discreetly. You remain in the imperial service, but I forbid you from flaunting it, boasting about it or treating the local rulers arrogantly. You shall behave so as not to attract attention. Is that clear?'

'Yes sir, lord coroner!'

'Here, in Rocayne, you are guests and are to behave like guests. I forbid you from leaving your assigned quarters without an

essential need. I forbid you from making contact with the fort's garrison. The officers will think up something so that boredom doesn't drive you to fury. Mr Harsheim, Mr Brigden, please show the troop their quarters!'

*

'I'd barely managed to get off me mare, Your Honour, than Dacre grabs me by the sleeve. Lord Skellen, he says, wants a word with you, Kenna. What to do? Off I go. Tawny Owl's sitting behind a table, feet up, whacking his knout against his bootleg. And without beating about the bush asks me if I'm the Joanna Selborne who was mixed up in the disappearance of the ship *The Southern Star*. I tells him nothing was ever proved. He bursts out laughing. "I like people, you can't pin anything on," he says. Then he asks if my aitch-es-pee, hypersensory perception, I mean, is innate. When I says aye, his mood darkened and he says: "I thought that talent of yours would come in useful with sorcerers, but first you'll have to deal with another mysterious personage".'

'Is the witness certain Coroner Skellen used those exact words?'

'I am. I'm a psionic, ain't I?'

'Please continue.'

'Our conversation was interrupted by a messenger, dusty from the road. He clearly hadn't spared his horse. He had urgent tidings for Tawny Owl, and Dacre Silifant says, as we was heading to our quarters, that he felt in his water that the messenger's tidings would shove us in the saddle before evening came. And 'e was right, Your Honour. Even before anyone had thought of dinner, half the hanza were saddled up. I got off that time; they took Til Echrade, the elf. I was content, for after those few days on the road my arse ached like buggery . . . And to make matters worse my monthly had just started—'

'Will the witness please refrain from picturesque descriptions of her intimate complaints and keep to the subject. When did the witness learn the identity of the "mysterious personage" Coroner Skellen mentioned?'

'I'll tell you dreckly, but there has to be some order, don't

there, for everything's getting so mixed up we won't ever untangle it! The ones who'd saddled their mounts in such haste before dinner raced from Rocayne to Malhoun. And brought back some teenage lad . . .'

*

Nycklar was angry with himself. So angry he felt like weeping.

If only he'd heeded the warnings given him by prudent folk! If only he'd remembered his proverbs, or at least the fable about the rook that couldn't keep its trap shut! If only he'd done what was to be done and returned home to Jealousy! But, oh no! Excited by the adventure, proud to be in possession of a fine steed, feeling the pleasant weight of coins in his purse, Nycklar couldn't resist showing off. Rather than going straight home to Jealousy, he rode to Malhoun, where he had loads of pals, including several maids, to whom he made advances. In Malhoun he strutted around like a gander in spring, kicked up a rumpus, cavorted, showed his horse off around the courtyard, and stood rounds in the inn, tossing money on the counter with the look and bearing of, if not a prince by blood, then at least a count.

And talked.

Talked about what had happened four days ago in Jealousy. He talked, constantly offering new versions, adding new information, confabulating, and ultimately lying through his teeth, which didn't bother his audience in the least. The inn's regulars – both locals and travellers – listened eagerly. And Nycklar went on, pretending to be well-informed. And placing himself ever oftener at the centre of the confabulated events.

On the third evening his own tongue landed him in trouble.

A deathly hush fell at the sight of the people entering the inn. And in that hush, the clank of spurs, the rattle of metal buckles and the scraping of scabbards sounded like a foreboding bell tolling misfortune from the top of a belfry.

Nycklar was not even given the chance to try playing the hero. He was seized and escorted from the inn so fast he only managed to touch the floor with his heels about three times. His pals, who only the previous day – when he was paying for their drinks – had

declared their undying friendship, were now practically sticking their heads under the tables, as though incredible marvels were occurring or naked women were dancing there. Even the deputy shire-reave – who was present in the inn – turned to face the wall and didn't breathe a word.

Nycklar didn't breathe a word either, not asking who, what or why. Terror turned his tongue into a stiff, dry board.

They put him on his horse and ordered him to ride. For several hours. Then there was a fort with a palisade and a tower. The courtyard was full of noisy, swaggering, well-armed mercenaries. And a chamber. And in the chamber were three men. A commander and two subordinates, it was immediately obvious. The commander, short, with blackish hair, and richly attired, was sober in his speech and admirably courteous. Nycklar listened with mouth agape as the commander apologised to him for the trouble and inconvenience and assured him he would suffer no harm. But he was not to be deceived. The men reminded him too much of Bonhart.

That observation turned out to be astonishingly accurate. For they were interested in Bonhart. Nycklar should have expected that. For, after all, it was his wagging tongue that had landed him in this quandary.

When prompted he began to talk. He was warned to speak the truth and not embellish it. He was warned courteously, but sternly and emphatically, and the one doing the warning, the richly attired one, played all the while with a metal-tipped knout, and his eyes were dark and evil.

Nycklar, the son of the coffin-maker from Jealousy, told the truth. The whole truth and nothing but the truth. About how, on the morning of the ninth day of September in the village of Jealousy, Bonhart, a bounty hunter, had wiped out the gang of Rats, sparing the life of only one bandit, the youngest, the one they called Falka. He told them how the whole of Jealousy had gathered to watch Bonhart torment and thrash his captive, but the folk were sorely disappointed, for Bonhart, astonishingly, did not kill or even torture Falka! He did no more than what a normal fellow does to his wife on returning home from the tavern on Saturday evening – just gave her a kicking, slapped her a few times, and nothing more.

The richly attired gentleman with the knout said nothing, and Nycklar told them how Bonhart had sawn the heads off the slaughtered Rats before Falka's eyes, and plucked the golden

earrings set with gemstones from those heads like raisins from a bun. How Falka, tied to the hitching post, screamed and puked on seeing it. He told how afterwards Bonhart had buckled a collar around Falka's neck, like you would a bitch dog, and dragged her by it to *The Chimera's Head* inn. And then . . .

*

'And then,' said the lad, constantly licking his lips, 'the gentleman Bonhart called for ale, for he was sweating something awful and his throat was dry. And after that he cried that he had a fancy to give someone a good horse and a whole five florins. That's what he said, those were his very words. So I came forward at once, not waiting for anyone else to be quicker, for I wanted awful to have a horse and a little coin of my own. The old man gives me nothing, for he drinks whatever he makes on the coffins. So I comes forward and asks which horse – no doubt one of the Rats' – can I take? And his lordship Bonhart looks at me, till shivers ran through me and says, don't he, that the only thing I can take is a kick up the backside, for other things have to be earned. What to do? Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, says the proverb; well, the Rats' horses were standing at the hitching post, in particular that black mare of Falka's, a horse of rare beauty. So I bows and asks what must I do to earn the gift? And Mr Bonhart says that I must ride to Claremont, stopping off in Fano on the way. On the horse of my choosing. He must have known I had me eye on the black mare, for he forbad me from taking her. So I takes a chestnut with a white patch . . . '

'Less about horses' coats,' Stefan Skellen reprimanded dryly. 'And more hard facts. Tell us what Bonhart charged you to do.'

'His lordship Bonhart wrote some missives, and ordered me to hide them secure. He charged me to ride to Fano and Claremont, and there to hand over the letters to the indicated persons.'

'Letters? What was in them?'

'How should I know, gentle lord? Reading don't come easy to me, and the letters were sealed with Mr Bonhart's signet.'

'But for whom were the letters, do you recall?'

'Oh, indeed I do. Mr Bonhart ordered me to repeat it ten times, so I wouldn't forget. I got where I was to go without erring, and

handed over the missives as instructed. They praised me for an able lad, and that honourable merchant even gave me a denar—'

'To whom did you deliver the letters? Speak plainly!'

'The first missive was for Master Esterhazy, a swordsmith and armourer from Fano. And the second was for the honourable Houvenaghel, a merchant from Claremont.'

'Did they open the letters in your presence? Perhaps one of them said something as he read? Rack your brains, lad.'

'I cannot recall. I didn't mark it then, and now I can't seem to remember . . .'

'Mun, Ola,' Skellen nodded at the adjutants, without raising his voice at all. 'Take the lout into the courtyard, drop his britches, and give him thirty solid lashes with a knout.'

'I remember!' the boy yelled. 'It's come back to me!'

'Nothing works on the memory,' Tawny Owl grinned, 'like nuts and honey, or a knout hovering over the arse. Talk.'

'When Houvenaghel read the missive in Claremont, there was another gentlemen there, a little chap, a veritable halfling. Mr Houvenaghel said to him . . . Erm . . . He said they'd written that soon there might be sport in the fleapit the like of which the world had never seen. That's what he said!'

'You aren't making this up?'

'I swear on my mother's grave! Don't have them flog me, gentle lord! Have mercy!'

'Well, well, get up, don't dribble on my boots! Here's a denar.'

'A thousand thanks . . . M'lord . . .'

'I said don't dribble on my boots. Ola, Mun, do you understand anything of this? What does a fleapit have in common with—'

'Bear pit,' Boreas Mun suddenly said. 'Not fleapit. Bear pit.'

'Aye!' the boy yelled. 'That's what 'e said! Just as though you'd been there, gentle lord!'

'A bear pit and sport!' Ola Harsheim hit one fist against the other. 'It's an agreed code, nothing too elaborate. It's easy. Sport – bear-baiting – is a warning about a pursuit or a manhunt. Bonhart was warning them to flee! But from whom? From us?'

‘Who knows?’ said Tawny Owl pensively. ‘Who knows? We shall have to send men to Claremont . . . And to Fano also. You take care of that, Ola, give the squads their orders . . . Now listen, my lad . . .’

‘Yes sir, gentle lord!’

‘When you left Jealousy with Bonhart’s letters, he was still there, I understand? And making ready to leave? Was he in haste? Did he say, perhaps, whither he was headed?’

‘He did not. And neither could he make ready. He’d had his raiment – which was awful blood-spattered – cleaned and laundered, so he was only in a blouse and hose, but girt with a sword. Though I think he was hastening to leave. Why, he had thrashed the Rats and sawed them’s heads off for the bounty, so he needs must ride and claim it. And, why, he’d captured that Falka too, to deliver her alive to someone. Why, that’s his profession, ain’t it?’

‘This Falka . . . Did you have a good look at her? Why are you cackling, you ass?’

‘Oh, gentle lord! Have a good look at her? I’ll say I did! Every detail!’

*

‘Disrobe,’ Bonhart repeated, and there was something in his voice that made Ciri cringe involuntarily. But defiance immediately got the better of her.

‘No!’

She didn’t see the fist, she didn’t even catch sight of its movement. She saw stars, the ground swayed, then shot from under her feet and suddenly thumped painfully against her hip. Her cheek and ear burned like fire; she realised she had not been punched, but struck with an open palm.

He stood over her and brought his clenched fist towards her face. She saw the heavy, skull-shaped signet, which a moment earlier had stung her face like a hornet.

‘You owe me one front tooth,’ he said icily. ‘So the next time I hear the word “no” from you I’ll knock two out right away. Get

undressed.'

She stood up unsteadily and began to unfasten buckles and buttons with shaking hands. The villagers present in *The Chimera's Head* murmured, coughed and goggled. The widow Goulue, the alewife, bent down behind the counter, pretending to be looking for something.

'Strip off everything. To the last rag.'

They aren't here, she thought, undressing and staring blankly at the floor. *There's no one here. And I'm not here either.*

'Legs apart.'

I'm not here at all. What is about to happen won't touch me at all. Not at all. Not a bit.

Bonhart laughed.

'You flatter yourself, I think. I must dispel those illusions. I'm undressing you, little idiot, to check you haven't concealed any magical talismans, charms or amulets about your person. Not to enjoy your wretched nakedness. Don't start imagining the Devil knows what. You're a skinny kid, as flat as a pancake, and as ugly as the seven sins. Even if the urge was strong, I'd sooner tup a turkey.'

He walked over, spread her clothing around with the tip of his boot and sized it up.

'I said everything! Earrings, rings, necklace, bracelet!'

He gathered up her jewellery meticulously. He kicked her tunic with the blue fox-fur collar, gloves, coloured scarves and belt with silver chains into the corner.

'You won't parade around like a parrot or a half-elf from a whorehouse now! You can put on the rest of those rags. And what are you lot staring at? Goulue, bring some provender, I'm hungry! And you, fatso, see how my vestments are coming on!'

'I am the ealdorman here!'

'How convenient,' Bonhart drawled, and the ealdorman of Jealousy seemed to grow slimmer under his gaze. 'If anything has been damaged in the laundry I shall take measures against you, as a public servant. Off to the wash house! The rest of you, get out! And you, pipsqueak, why are you still standing here? You have the letters, the horse is saddled, so smartly to the highway and be gone!

And remember: should you fail, lose the letters or mix up the addresses, I shall find you and cut you up so fine your own mother wouldn't recognise you!'

'I'm flying, m'lord! I'm flying!'

*

'That day,' Ciri pursed her lips, 'he beat me twice more. Once with his fist and once with a knout. Then he lost the urge. He just sat and stared at me without a word. His eyes were somehow . . . like those of a fish. Without eyebrows, without eyelashes . . . Somehow like watery orbs, with a black core sunk into each one. He stared hard at me and said nothing. That terrified me more than being beaten. I didn't know what he was plotting.'

Vysogota remained silent. Mice scampered around the chamber.

'He kept asking me who I was, but I said nothing. Just like when the Trappers caught me in Korath desert, this time too I fled deep into myself, inside, if you know what I mean. The Trappers said I was a doll then, and I was: a wooden doll, insensitive and lifeless. I was somehow looking down from above at everything that was being done to that doll. So what if they were hitting me, so what if they were kicking me, putting a collar on me like a dog? For it wasn't me, it wasn't me at all . . . Do you understand?'

'I do,' Vysogota nodded. 'I do understand, Ciri.'

*

'Then, Your Honour, it was our turn. The turn of our group. Neratin Ceka took command over us, and they also assigned Boreas Mun, a tracker, to us. Boreas Mun, Illustrious Tribunal, could track a fish in water, they say. That's how good he was! One time, they say, Boreas Mun—'

'The witness will refrain from digressions.'

'Beg pardon? Oh, yes . . . I get it. I mean they ordered us to ride to Fano at all speed. It was the morning of the sixteenth of September . . .'

*

Neratin Ceka and Boreas Mun rode at the head, and behind them, side by side, Kabernik Turent and Cyprian Fripp the younger, then Kenna Selborne and Chloe Stitz, and finally Andres Vierny and Dede Vargas. The latter two were singing a new and popular soldier's song, sponsored and endorsed by the Ministry of War. Even among soldier's songs it stood out by the horrifying paucity of its rhymes and alarming lack of respect for grammatical rules. It was entitled *At War*, since all the verses – and there were over forty of them – began with those words.

At war things can get quite rough,

Someone gets their head chopped off,

You come back from a drinking bout,

To see a cove with his guts hanging out.

Kenna softly whistled along. She was pleased to be among companions she had come to know well on the long journey from Etolia to Rocayne. After her conversation with Tawny Owl she had expected a random assignment, to be tagged onto a squad made up of Brigden and Harsheim's men. Til Echrade had been assigned to a squad like that, but the elf knew most of his new comrades, and they knew him. They rode at a walk, though Dacre Silifant had ordered them to race at full speed. But they were professionals. They had galloped, kicking up dust, while they could still be seen from the fort, then they'd slowed down. Tiring horses out and reckless gallops were good for tyros and amateurs, and haste, of course, only comes in useful for catching fleas!

Chloe Stitz, the professional thief from Ymlac, told Kenna about her erstwhile work with Coroner Stefan Skellen. Kabernik Turent and Fripp the younger reined in their horses and listened, often looking back.

'I know him well. I've served under him several times . . .'

Chloe stammered a little, aware of the suggestive nature of her words, but immediately laughed freely and carelessly.

‘I’ve also served under his command,’ she snorted. ‘No, Kenna, don’t worry. None of those demands from Tawny Owl. He didn’t force himself on me, I looked for the opportunity and found it. But to be clear I’ll say this: you won’t gain his protection by doing that.’

‘I’m not planning anything of the kind.’ Kenna pouted, looking provocatively at the lewd smiles of Turent and Fripp. ‘I won’t be looking for an opportunity, but I’m not worried either. I’m not alarmed by any old thing. And certainly not by a cock!’

‘That’s all you talk about,’ Boreas Mun said, reining back his dun stallion and waiting for Kenna and Chloe to catch up with him.

‘We aren’t riding off to fight with our cocks, ladies!’ he added, continuing to ride beside the young women. ‘Bonhart, let me tell you, has few equals with the sword. I’ll be glad if it turns out there’s no squabble or vendetta between him and Mr Skellen. And that everything blows over.’

‘But I don’t get it,’ Andres Vierny admitted from the rear. ‘Apparently we were to track down some sorcerer. That’s why they gave us a psionic, this here Kenna. Wasn’t it? Now, though, there’s talk about some Bonhart and a girl!’

‘Bonhart, the bounty hunter,’ Boreas Mun said, ‘had a compact with Mr Skellen. And let him down. Though he promised Mr Skellen he’d kill that girl, he let her live.’

‘No doubt someone’s paying more for her alive than Tawny Owl would for her dead.’ Chloe Stitz shrugged. ‘That’s what bounty hunters are like. Don’t go looking for honour among them!’

‘Bonhart is different,’ Fripp the younger, looking back, retorted. ‘Bonhart never breaks his word.’

‘Making it all the stranger that he’s suddenly started.’

‘And why,’ Kenna asked, ‘is that lass so prized? The one who was to be killed, but wasn’t?’

‘What business is it of ours?’ Boreas Mun grimaced. ‘We have our orders! And Mr Skellen has the right to demand his due. Bonhart was meant to have stuck Falka, and didn’t. Mr Skellen has the right to demand that he accounts for it . . .’

‘This Bonhart,’ Chloe Stitz repeated with conviction, ‘means to get more money for her alive than dead. There’s your whole mystery.’

‘The lord coroner,’ Boreas Mun said, ‘thought the same at first,

that Bonhart had promised to supply Falka alive – for the sake of amusement and slow torture – to a baron from Geso, who was determined to punish the Rats' gang. But it turned out not to be true. No one knows who Bonhart is keeping Falka alive for, but it certainly ain't that baron.'

*

'Mr Bonhart!' The fat ealdorman of Jealousy lumbered into the tavern, puffing and panting. 'Mr Bonhart, there are armed men in the village! Riding horses!'

'What a sensation.' Bonhart wiped his plate with some bread. 'Now if they were riding monkeys, *that* would be remarkable. How many?'

'Four!'

'And where are my vestments?'

'Barely laundered . . . They haven't dried . . .'

'A pox on you. I'll have to greet our guests in my hose. But in truth, the quality of such a greeting suits that of the guests.'

He adjusted the belt and sword fastened over his hose, tucked the straps of his hose into his boot tops, and tugged the chain attached to Ciri's collar.

'On your feet, little Rat.'

When he led her out onto the porch, the four horsemen were already nearing the tavern. It was clear that they had ridden long over trackless terrain and through bad weather; their clothing, harnesses and horses were flecked with crusted-on dust and mud.

There were four of them, but they were leading a riderless horse. At the sight of it Ciri felt herself suddenly growing hot, though the day was very cool. It was her roan, still bearing her trappings and saddle. And a brow band, a gift from Mistle. The horsemen were among those who had killed Hotspurn.

They stopped outside the tavern. One, probably the leader, rode up, and raised his marten-fur calpac to Bonhart. He was swarthy and had a thin, black moustache on his upper lip like a line drawn in charcoal. His upper lip, Ciri noticed, curled every now and then; the tic meant he looked enraged the whole time. Perhaps he

really was furious?

‘Greetings, Mr Bonhart!’

‘Greetings, Mr Imbra. Greetings, gentlemen.’ Bonhart unhurriedly fastened Ciri’s chain onto a hook on a post. ‘Excuse my unmentionables, but I wasn’t expecting you. A long road behind you, my, my . . . You’ve come all the way to Ebbing from Geso? And how is the honourable baron? In good health?’

‘Fit as a fiddle,’ the swarthy man replied indifferently, wrinkling his upper lip again. ‘But there’s no time to spend on idle chatter. We’re in a hurry.’

‘I–’ Bonhart hauled up his belt and hose ‘–am not holding you back.’

‘News has reached us that you slaughtered the Rats.’

‘That is true.’

‘And in accordance with your promise to the baron,’ the swarthy man continued to pretend he could not see Ciri on the porch, ‘you took Falka alive.’

‘I’d say that that is also true.’

‘You were lucky, where we were not.’ The swarthy man glanced at the roan. ‘Very well. We’ll take the wench and head homeward. Rupert, Stavro, take her.’

‘Not so fast, Imbra,’ Bonhart raised a hand. ‘You aren’t taking anyone. And for the simple reason that I won’t give her to you. I’ve changed my mind. I’m keeping the girl.’

The swarthy man called Imbra leaned over in the saddle, hawked and spat, impressively far, almost to the steps of the porch.

‘But you promised His Lordship the baron!’

‘I did. But I’ve changed my mind.’

‘What? Do my ears deceive me?’

‘The state of your ears, Imbra, is not my concern.’

‘You stayed three days at the castle. You guzzled and gorged for three days on the promises given to His Lordship. The best wine from his cellar, roast peacock, venison, forcemeat, carp in cream. You slept like a king in a feather bed for three nights. And now you’ve changed your mind?’

Bonhart said nothing, maintaining an expression of indifference and boredom. Imbra clenched his teeth in order to suppress the twitching of his lips.

‘You know, Bonhart, that we can take her from you by force?’

Bonhart’s face, until that moment bored and amused, hardened instantly.

‘Just try. There are four of you and one of me. And me in my hose at that. But I don’t have to don britches to deal with scoundrels like you.’

Imbra spat again, jerked his reins, and turned his horse around.

‘The Devil take it, Bonhart, what’s happened to you? You’ve always been renowned as a reliable, honest professional. Once given, you keep your word unfailingly. And now it turns out your word isn’t worth shit! And since a man is judged by his words, then it turns out that you’re a—’

‘If the talk is of words,’ Bonhart interrupted coldly, resting his hands on his belt buckle, ‘then take heed, Imbra, that you don’t let too coarse a word slip out by accident. For it might hurt when I shove it back down your throat.’

‘You are bold against four! But will your boldness suffice against fourteen? For the Baron of Casadei will not let this insult slide!’

‘I’d tell you what I’ll do with your baron, but a crowd forms, and in it are women and children. So I shall merely tell you that in some ten days I shall stop in Claremont. Whomsoever wishes to pursue a right, avenge an insult or take Falka from me, let them come to Claremont.’

‘I shall be there!’

‘I shall be waiting. Now be off with you.’

*

‘They feared him. They feared him terribly. I could feel the fear seeping from them.’

Kelpie whinnied loudly, jerking her head.

‘There were four of them, armed to the teeth. And one of him, in darned long johns and a ragged old blouse with too-short sleeves. He would have been ridiculous, were he . . . Were he not so terrible.’

Vysogota remained silent, narrowing his eyes, which were watering from the wind. They were standing on a knoll rising above the Pereplut Marshes, not far from the spot where, two weeks earlier, the old man had found Ciri. The wind flattened the reeds and ruffled the water on the marshes.

‘One of the four,’ Ciri continued, letting her mare enter the water and drink, ‘had a small crossbow by his saddle and his hand stretched out towards that crossbow. I could almost hear his thoughts and feel his terror. “Will I manage to cock it? And loose it? And what will happen if I miss?” Bonhart also saw that crossbow and that hand, he heard the same thoughts, I’m sure. And I’m sure the horseman wouldn’t have been quick enough.’

Kelpie raised her head, snorted and jingled the rings of her curb bit.

‘I was understanding better and better into whose hands I’d fallen. But I still couldn’t understand his motives. I’d heard their conversation and remembered what Hotspurn had said before. That the Baron of Casadei wanted me alive and Bonhart had promised him that. And then he changed his mind. Why? Did he want to hand me over to somebody else who would pay more? Had he worked out who I really was? And meant to turn me over to the Nilfgaardians?

‘We set off from the village before nightfall. He let me ride Kelpie. But he tied my hands and held me by the chain fixed to the collar the whole time. The whole time! And we rode, almost without stopping, a whole night and day. I thought I’d die of exhaustion. But *he* showed no tiredness at all. He isn’t a man. He’s the Devil incarnate.’

‘Where did he take you?’

‘To a little town called Fano.’

*

‘When we entered Fano, Illustrious Tribunal, it was already gloomy,

murky as you please, only the sixteenth of September, in truth, but the day was overcast and cold as hell, you'd of said it was November. We didn't have to search long for the armourer's workshop, for it was the largest farmstead in the entire town, and what's more, the ringing of hammers forging iron relentlessly sounded from it. Neratin Ceka . . . Master scribe, you write his name in vain, for I don't recall if I said, but Neratin is dead now, killed in a village called Unicorn—'

'Please do not instruct the clerk. Continue with your testimony.'

'Neratin knocked at the gate. He politely said who we were and what was our business, and asked politely to be heard. We were admitted. The swordsmith's workshop was a fine building, virtually a stronghold, with a palisade of pine timbers, towers of oaken planks, and inside planed larch on the walls—'

'The court is not interested in architectural details. Let the witness get to the point. Prior to that, however, please repeat the swordsmith's name for the records.'

'Esterhazy, Illustrious Tribunal. Esterhazy of Fano.'

*

The swordsmith, Esterhazy, looked long at Boreas Mun, unhurriedly answering the question posed to him. 'P'rhaps Bonhart was here,' he finally said, fiddling with a bone whistle hanging around his neck. 'And p'rhaps he wasn't? Who knows? This, gentlefolk, is a workshop where we forge swords. We shall answer any questions concerning swords eagerly, swiftly, elegantly and at length. But I see no reason to answer questions concerning our guests or customers.'

Kenna pulled a kerchief from her sleeve and pretended to wipe her nose.

'A reason can be found,' said Neratin Ceka. 'You may find one, Mr Esterhazy. Or I may. Would you choose?'

In spite of the semblance of effeminacy, Neratin's face could become hard and his voice menacing. But the swordsmith only snorted, continuing to toy with the whistle.

'Choose between a bribe and a threat? I would not. I consider the former and the latter worth only of being spat on.'

‘Just one tiny piece of information,’ Boreas Mun said, clearing his throat. ‘Is that so much? We’ve known each other long, Mr Esterhazy, and Coroner Skellen’s name is known to you—’

‘It is,’ the swordsmith cut in, ‘it is indeed. The misdemeanours and exploits with which that name is associated are also known to us. But we are in Ebbing, an autonomous and self-governing kingdom. Only seemingly, perhaps, but nonetheless. Thus we shall tell you nothing. Continue on your way. As a consolation, we’ll pledge to you that if in a week or a month someone asks about you, they will hear just as little.’

‘But, Mr Esterhazy—’

‘Must I make it clearer? Prithee, get out of here!’

Chloe Stitz hissed furiously, Fripp and Vargas’ hands crept towards their hilts, and Andres Vierny laid his fist on the war hammer hanging at his thigh. Neratin Ceka did not move and his face did not even quiver. Kenna saw that his eye never left the bone whistle. Before they entered, Boreas Mun had warned them that the sound of the whistle was the signal for bodyguards – consummate men-at-arms – called ‘quality controllers’, who were waiting, concealed, in the swordsmith’s workshop.

But, having foreseen everything, Neratin and Boreas had planned their next move. They had a trump up their sleeves.

Kenna Selborne. Psionic.

Kenna had already probed the swordsmith’s mind, had gently pricked him with impulses and cautiously pervaded the tangle of his thoughts. Now she was ready. Pressing a kerchief to her nose – there always existed the danger of a nosebleed – she forced her way into his brain with a throbbing and a command. Esterhazy began to choke, flushed, and grasped the table he was sitting behind with both hands, as though he feared it would float away to distant lands along with the sheaf of invoices, the inkwell and the paperweight depicting a nereid cavorting with two tritons at once.

Keep calm, Kenna commanded, *it’s nothing, nothing’s the matter. You would simply like to tell us what we wish to know. For you know what interests us, and the words are positively bursting forth from you. So go on. Begin. You will see that you only need speak and the humming in your head, the roaring in your temples and the stabbing in your ears will cease. And the spasm in your jaw will also subside*.

‘Bonhart,’ Esterhazy said hoarsely, opening his mouth more

often than would be expected from the syllabic articulation, ‘was here four days ago, on the twelfth of September. He had a wench with him he called Falka. I was expecting his visit, for two days earlier a letter from him had been delivered . . .’

A trickle of blood seeped from his left nostril.

Speak, Kenna ordered. *Speak. Tell us everything. You can see what a relief it will be.*

*

The swordsmith Esterhazy scrutinised Ciri with curiosity, without getting up from the oaken table.

‘It’s for her,’ he guessed, tapping a pen holder against the paperweight depicting the weird group. ‘The sword you requested in the letter. Right, Bonhart? Well, let’s examine it then . . . Let’s see if it agrees with what you wrote. Five feet, nine inches in height . . . And such she is. One hundred and twelve pounds in weight . . . Well, we’d have given her less than a hundred and twelve, but that’s a minor detail. A hand, you wrote, which a number five glove would fit . . . Show me your hand, honourable maiden. Well, and that agrees, too.’

‘With me everything always agrees,’ Bonhart said dryly. ‘Do you have any decent iron for her?’

‘In my firm,’ Esterhazy answered proudly, ‘no other iron than decent is manufactured or offered. I understood it was to be a sword for combat, not for gala decoration. Ah, yes, you wrote that. Naturally, a weapon will be found for this maid without any difficulty. Swords of thirty-eight inches suit such a height and weight, standard manufacture. With that light build and small hand, she needs a mini-bastard with a hilt lengthened to nine inches, and a pommel. We could also suggest an elven taldaga or Zerrikanian sabre, or alternatively a light Viroledanian—’

‘Show me the wares, Esterhazy.’

‘Hot-tempered, are we, eh? Well, come this way. Come this way . . . Hey, Bonhart? What the Devil is this? Why are you pulling her on a leash?’

‘Keep your snotty nose out of this, Esterhazy. Don’t stick it where it doesn’t belong, for you’re liable to get it caught

somewhere!'

Esterhazy, toying with the whistle hanging around his neck, looked at the hunter without fear or respect, though he had to crane his neck a good deal. Bonhart twisted his moustache and cleared his throat.

'I,' he said, a little more quietly, though still malevolently, 'don't meddle in your business or affairs. Does it surprise you that I demand reciprocity?'

'Bonhart.' The swordsmith did not even flicker an eyelid. 'When you leave my home and courtyard, when you close my gate behind you, then shall I respect your privacy, the secrecy of your affairs, the specifics of your profession. And I shall not meddle in them, be certain. But in my home I shall not allow you to abuse human dignity. Do you understand me? Outside my gate you may drag the wench behind a horse, if you wish. In my home you will remove that collar. Forthwith.'

Bonhart reached for the collar and unfastened it, unable to resist a tug which almost brought Ciri to her knees. Esterhazy, pretending he hadn't seen it, let the whistle slip from his fingers.

'That's better,' he said dryly. 'Let's go.'

They crossed a small passage into another, slightly smaller, courtyard adjoining the rear of the smithy, with one side opening out onto an orchard. There was a long table there, beneath a canopy resting on carved posts, where servants were just finishing laying out some swords. Esterhazy gestured for Bonhart and Ciri to walk up to the array.

'This is what I offer.'

They approached.

'Here,' Esterhazy pointed to a long row of swords on the table, 'we have my wares. All the blades were forged here. You can see the horseshoe, my punch-mark. Prices fall in the range of five to nine florins, since they're standard. These, though, lying here, are only assembled and finished by us. The blades are generally imported. Their origin can be told from the punches. The ones from Mahakam have crossed hammers stamped on them, those from Poviss a crown or a horse's head, and those from Viroleda a sun and the famous workshop's inscription. Prices start at ten florins.'

'And where do they end?'

‘That varies. Oh, this one, for example, is an exquisite Viroledanian.’ Esterhazy took up a sword from the table, gave a salute with it, and then moved to a fencing position, dextrously twisting his hand and forearm in a complicated sequence called an ‘Angelica’. ‘This one is fifteen. Antique workmanship, a collector’s blade. Clearly made to order. The motif chiselled on the ricasso shows the weapon was intended for a woman.’

He turned the sword over, hand held in tierce, pointing the blade flat at them.

‘As on all Viroleda blades, the traditional inscription: “Draw me not without reason; sheath me not without honour”. Ha! They still chisel such inscriptions in Viroleda. Throughout the wide world, these blades have been drawn by blackguards and oafs. Throughout the wide world, honour has gone way down in price, for it’s an unprofitable commodity—’

‘Don’t talk so much, Esterhazy. Give her that sword, let her try it for size. Take the blade, girl.’

Ciri grasped the sword lightly, feeling the lizard-skin hilt cling firmly to her palm, and the weight of the blade urging her arm to wield and thrust.

‘It’s a mini-bastard,’ Esterhazy reminded her. Needlessly. She knew how to use the long hilt, with three fingers on the pommel.

Bonhart took two steps backward, into the courtyard. He drew his sword from the scabbard and whirled it around until it hissed.

‘Have at me!’ he said to Ciri. ‘Kill me. You have a sword and you have the opportunity. You have the chance. Make use of it. For I shan’t soon give you a second.’

‘Have you lost your mind?’

‘Quiet, Esterhazy.’

She beguiled him with a glance to one side and a deceptive twitch of her shoulder, and struck like lightning, with a flat sinistre. The blade clanged so powerfully against the parry that Ciri staggered and had to leap to one side, banging her hip against the table with the swords. She involuntarily loosened her grip on the weapon, trying to regain her balance – knowing that at that moment he could have killed her without the slightest difficulty, had he so wished.

‘You have lost your minds!’ Esterhazy said, his voice raised.

The whistle was in his hand again. The servants and craftsmen looked on in stupefaction.

'Put the iron aside.' Bonhart did not take his eyes off Ciri, utterly ignoring the swordsmith. 'Aside, I said. Or I'll hack off your hand!'

She obeyed after a moment's hesitation. Bonhart smiled ghoulishly.

'I know who you are, you viper. But I'll make you reveal it yourself. By word or deed! I'll make you reveal who you are. And then I'll kill you.'

Esterhazy hissed as though wounded.

'That sword–' Bonhart didn't even glance at him '–was too hefty for you. And because of it you were too slow. You were as slow as a pregnant snail. Esterhazy! What you gave her was too heavy by at least four ounces.'

The swordsmith was pale. His eyes ran from her to him, from him to her, and his face was strangely altered. At last he beckoned a servant and issued an order in hushed tones.

'I've something,' he said slowly, 'which ought to satisfy you, Bonhart.'

'Why, then, didn't you show it to me at once?' snarled the hunter. 'I wrote that I wanted something extraordinary. Perhaps you thought I can't afford a better sword?'

'I know what you can afford,' Esterhazy said with emphasis. 'I've known that for no little time. But why didn't I show you this one right away? I had no way of knowing who you would bring here . . . on a leash, with a collar around her neck. I couldn't guess who the sword was meant for and what it was to serve. Now I do.'

The servant had returned, bearing an oblong box.

'Come closer, girl,' Esterhazy said softly. 'Look.'

Ciri approached. And looked. And sighed audibly.

*

She unsheathed the sword with a deft movement. The fire from the hearth flared blindingly on the blade's wavily outlined edge, glowed

red in the openwork of the ricasso.

‘This is it,’ said Ciri. ‘As you’ve probably guessed. Hold it, if you wish. But beware, it’s sharper than a razor. You feel how the hilt sticks to your hand? It’s made from the skin of a flatfish which has a venomous spine on its tail.’

‘A ray.’

‘I guess. That fish has tiny teeth in its skin, so the hilt doesn’t slide in the hand, even when it sweats. Look what’s etched on the blade.’

Vysogota leaned over and examined it, squinting.

‘An elven mandala,’ he said soon after, raising his head. ‘The so-called blathan caerme, or garland of destiny: stylised oak blossom, bridewort and broom flowers. A tower being struck by lightning – a symbol of chaos and destruction, for the Old Races . . . And above the tower–’

‘A swallow,’ Ciri completed. ‘Zireael. My name.’

*

‘Indeed, a fine thing,’ said Bonhart finally. ‘Gnomish handiwork, that’s clear at once. Only the gnomes forged such dark iron. Only the gnomes used undulating blades and only they open-worked their blades to reduce the weight . . . Come clean, Esterhazy. Is it a replica?’

‘No,’ the swordsmith snapped. ‘It’s original. A genuine gnomish gwyhyr. The blade is more than two hundred years old. The finishing, naturally, is much more recent, but I wouldn’t call it a replica. The gnomes of Tir Tochair made it to my order. Following ancient techniques, methods and patterns.’

‘Dammit. It may be too dear for me after all. How much do you wish for this blade?’

Esterhazy was silent for some time. His face was inscrutable.

‘I shall give it to her for nothing, Bonhart,’ he finally said in hushed voice. ‘As a gift. So that what is to come about, will come about.’

‘Thank you,’ said Bonhart, visibly astonished. ‘Thank you,

Esterhazy. A kingly gift, kingly indeed . . . I accept, I accept. I am indebted to you . . .'

'You are not. The sword is for her, not for you. Come here, girl with a collar on her neck. Examine the marks etched into the blade. You don't understand them, naturally. But I shall explain them to you. Look. The line delineated by destiny is winding, but leads to this tower. Towards annihilation, towards the destruction of established values, of the established order. But there, above the tower, do you see? A swallow. The symbol of hope. Take this sword. And may what is to come about, come about.'

Ciri cautiously extended a hand, and gently stroked the dark blade, its edge gleaming like a mirror.

'Take it,' Esterhazy said slowly, looking at Ciri with eyes wide open. 'Take it. Hold it, girl. Take it . . .'

'No!' Bonhart suddenly barked, leaping up, seizing Ciri by the arm and shoving her suddenly and forcefully. 'Away!'

Ciri fell onto her knees, the gravel of the courtyard painfully pricking her hands, which she had to spread to keep her balance.

Bonhart slammed the box shut.

'Not yet!' he snarled. 'Not today! The time is not yet come!'

'Most evidently,' Esterhazy nodded calmly, looking him in the eyes. 'Aye, it most evidently hasn't come yet. Pity.'

*

'It was of little avail, Illustrious Tribunal, reading that swordsmith's thoughts. We were there on the sixteenth of September, three days before the full moon. And while we were returning from Fano to Rocayne, a patrol caught us up. Ola Harsheim and seven horse. Mr Harsheim ordered us to race as fast as we could to reach the rest of the unit. For the day before – the fifteenth of September – there had been a massacre in Claremont . . . I suppose I don't need to tell you; the illustrious tribunal doubtlessly knows about the massacre in Claremont . . .'

'Please testify, without worrying what the tribunal knows.'

'Bonhart was a day ahead of us. He brought Falka to Claremont on the fifteenth of September . . .'

*

‘Claremont,’ Vysogota nodded. ‘I know that town. Where did he take you?’

‘To a large house in the town square. With arcades and columns at the entrance. It was obvious at once that a wealthy man lived there . . .’

*

The chambers’ walls were draped with sumptuous tapestries and splendid wall hangings depicting religious and hunting scenes, and idylls featuring disrobed women. The furniture gleamed with inlays and brass fittings, and one sunk ankle-deep into the carpets. Ciri had no time to note the details, though, for Bonhart walked swiftly, dragging her by the chain.

‘Greetings, Houvenaghel!’

Lit by the spectrum of colours cast by a stained-glass window, his back to a hunting tapestry, stood a man of impressive corpulence, attired in a kaftan dripping with gold and a fur-lined coat trimmed with karakul pelts. Although in the prime of his manhood, he had a bald pate and pendulous jowls like those of a great bulldog.

‘Greetings, Leo,’ he said. ‘And you, lady—’

‘That’s no lady.’ Bonhart showed him the chain and collar. ‘No need to welcome her.’

‘Politeness costs nothing.’

‘Nothing but time.’ Bonhart tugged the chain, walked up and unceremoniously patted the fat man’s belly.

‘You’ve put on a good deal,’ he remarked. ‘By my troth, Houvenaghel, were you to stand in the way it would be easier to jump over you than walk around.’

‘Prosperity,’ Houvenaghel explained jovially, shaking his cheeks. ‘Greetings to you, greetings, Leo. ‘Tis wonderful to host you, for I am most inordinate joyful today. My business affairs are going

so admirably well that I feel like touching wood. The till's a-ringing! Only today, may this serve as an example, a captain in the Nilfgaardian reserve horse, the quartermaster responsible for supplying gear to the front, flogged me six thousand military bows, which I shall retail with a ten-fold profit to hunters, poachers, brigands, elves and diverse other freedom fighters. I also bought a castle from a local marquess . . .'

'Why the hell do you need a castle?'

'I must live regally. Getting back to my business affairs: one deal is quite simply thanks to you, Leo. A seemingly hopeless debtor paid me back. Quite literally a moment ago. His hands were shaking as he paid me. The fellow saw you and thought—'

'I know what he thought. Did you receive my letter?'

'I did.' Houvenaghel flopped down heavily, knocking the table with his belly and making the carafes and goblets on it ring. 'And I've prepared everything. Haven't you seen the handbills? The rabble must have torn them down . . . Folk are already heading for the theatre. The till's a-ringing . . . Sit you down, Leo. There's time. Let's talk, enjoy some wine . . .'

'I don't want your wine. It's army issue, no doubt, stolen from Nilfgaardian transports.'

'You must be jesting. It's Est Est from Toussaint, the grapes picked when our gracious emperor, Emhyr, was a mere nipper, shitting in his cradle. It was a good year. For wine. Cheers, Leo.'

Bonhart silently raised a toasting goblet. Houvenaghel smacked his lips, examining Ciri extremely critically.

'So this is the doe-eyed nymph,' he said at last, 'who is to guarantee the sport promised in your epistle? I know that Windsor Imbra is already nearing the town. And has with him several decent cut-throats. And a few local swordsmen have seen the bills . . .'

'Have you ever been disappointed by my wares, Houvenaghel?'

'Never, 'tis true. But neither have I had anything from you for a good while.'

'I work more seldom than in the past. I'm thinking about retiring entirely.'

'Capital is needed for that, from which to support oneself. I might have a way . . . Will you listen?'

‘Only for want of other amusement.’ Bonhart pulled a chair closer with his foot and made Ciri sit down.

‘Have you ever thought of heading north? To Cintra, to the Slopes or across the Yaruga? Do you know that anyone who moves there and chooses to settle on captured territory is guaranteed a plot of eight oxgangs by the empire? And freedom from tax for a decade?’

‘I,’ replied the hunter calmly, ‘am not cut out to be a farmer. I couldn’t till the soil or breed cattle. I’m too sensitive. The sight of dung or worms makes me want to puke.’

‘Me too.’ Houvenaghel shook his jowls. ‘The only thing I can tolerate in the whole of agriculture is distilling spirits. The rest is repugnant. They say agriculture is the basis of economics and guarantees prosperity. I consider it, however, contemptible and humiliating that something stinking of manure should determine my prosperity. I’ve taken some steps in that regard. One need not till the soil, Bonhart, one need not raise cattle on it. It’s sufficient to own it. If one has enough of it one can extract decent profits from it. One can, believe me, live a life of ease. Yes, I’ve taken certain steps in that regard, hence, indeed, my question about a trip northwards. For you see, Bonhart, I would have work for you there. Permanent, well-paid, undemanding. And just right for a sensitive fellow like you: no dung, no worms.’

‘I’m prepared to listen. Without committing to anything, naturally.’

‘From the plots which the emperor guarantees the settlers, one can, with a bit of enterprise and a little seed capital, put together quite a decent latifundium.’

‘I understand.’ The hunter chewed his moustache. ‘I understand what you’re getting at. I already see what steps you’re taking regarding your own prosperity. Do you see no difficulties?’

‘Oh, I do. Of two kinds. Firstly, one has to find hired hands, who, pretending to be settlers, will travel north to receive the land from the distributing officers and take over the plots. Formally for themselves, but in practice for me. But I shall set about finding them. The second of the difficulties concerns you.’

‘I’m all ears.’

‘Some of the hired hands will take over the land and then be disinclined to give it up. They will forget about the agreement and

the money they have taken. You wouldn't believe, Bonhart, how deeply fraud, wickedness and low motives are ingrained in human nature.'

'I would.'

'I will need someone to convince the dishonest that dishonesty doesn't pay. That it's punishable. And you could take care of that.'

'It sounds excellent.'

'It is. I have experience, I've already conducted rackets of this kind. Following the formal inclusion of Ebbing into the empire, when plots were distributed. And later, when the Enclosure Act came into force. Owing to that, Claremont – this charming little town – is on my land and thus belongs to me. The entire area belongs to me. Far, far away, to the mist-shrouded horizon. It's all mine. Three hundred oxgangs all told. That's over six thousand acres. Imperial acres, not peasant ones. Twenty-four thousand roods.'

'"O lawless empire, close to downfall",' Bonhart recited scornfully. 'An empire where everybody who steals has to fall. Its weakness lies in self-interest and self-seeking.'

'Its power and strength lie in it.' Houvenaghel shook his cheeks. 'You, Bonhart, confuse thievery with private enterprise.'

'Only too often,' admitted the bounty hunter detachedly.

'What do you say to this partnership, then?'

'Isn't it too early to be dividing up that land in the North? Perhaps, to be certain, we should wait until Nilfgaard wins the war?'

'To be certain? Don't jest. The result of the war is a foregone conclusion. Wars are won with money. The empire has it and the Nordlings don't.'

Bonhart cleared his throat meaningfully.

'While we're on the subject of money . . .'

'Ah yes.' Houvenaghel rummaged in the documents lying on the table. 'Here's a bank cheque for a hundred florins. Here is the deed of contract for the transfer of obligations, on the strength of which I shall receive the reward for the bandits' heads from the Varnhagens of Geso. Sign here. Thank you. You are also owed a percentage of the takings from the extravaganza, but the accounts

have not yet been closed, the till's still a-ringing. There is great interest, Leo. Great, indeed. People in my town are awfully troubled by boredom and despondency.'

He broke off and looked at Ciri.

'I sincerely hope you aren't mistaken with regard to this person. That she will furnish us with wholesome amusement . . . And be willing to cooperate for the sake of our joint profit.'

'There won't be any profit for her–' Bonhart eyed up Ciri indifferently, '–she knows that.'

Houvenaghel grimaced and snorted.

'It's no good, no bloody good that she knows! She ought not to know! What's the matter with you, Leo? And if she's not willing to be sporting, if she turns out to be spitefully uncompliant? What then?'

The expression on Bonhart's face didn't change.

'Then,' he said, 'we'll unleash your mastiffs into the arena. They've always been compliant where sport's concerned, as I recall.'

*

Ciri was silent for a long time, rubbing her disfigured cheek.

'I was beginning to understand,' she finally said. 'I was beginning to realise what they wanted to do with me. I gathered myself, I was determined to escape at the first opportunity . . . I was prepared for any risk. But they didn't give me the chance. They were guarding me too well.'

Vysogota said nothing.

'They dragged me downstairs. The guests of that fat Houvenaghel were waiting there. More eccentrics! Where do all these grotesque odd fish come from, Vysogota?'

'They breed. Natural selection.'

*

The first of the men was short and chubby, more resembling a

halfling than a human, and was even dressed like a halfling – modestly, pleasantly, neatly and in pastel colours. The second man – though no longer young – had the outfit and bearing of a soldier and a sword at his side. Silver embroidery depicting a dragon with batlike wings sparkled on the shoulder of his black jerkin. The woman was fair-haired and skinny, with a slightly hooked nose and thin lips. Her pistachio-coloured gown had a plunging neckline. Which wasn't very well advised. There wasn't much cleavage to show, apart from wrinkled and parchment-dry skin covered in a thick layer of rouge and white lead powder.

'Her Noble Ladyship the Marchioness de Nementh-Uyvar,' Houvenaghel said. 'Lord Declan Ros aep Maelchlad, captain in the Nilfgaardian reserve horse of His Mighty Emperorship of Nilfgaard. Lord Pennycuick, Mayor of Claremont. And this is Mr Leo Bonhart, my relative and former comrade.'

Bonhart bowed stiffly.

'So this is the little brigand who is to amuse us today,' said the skinny marchioness, staring intently at Ciri with her pale blue eyes. Years of drinking could be heard in her husky, seductive voice.

'Not too bad, I'd say. But nicely built . . . Quite a pleasant little bodikin.'

Ciri jerked, pushing off an obtrusive hand, paled with fury and hissed like a serpent.

'Please don't touch,' Bonhart said coldly. 'Don't feed it. Don't tease it. I take no responsibility.'

'A little bodikin–' the marchioness licked her lips, paying no attention to him '–can always be tied to a bed, to make it more amenable. Perhaps you'd sell her to me, Mr Bonhart, sir? My marquess and I like little bodikins like that, and Mr Houvenaghel is so reproachful when we seize local goose girls and peasant children. In any case, the marquess can't hunt children any longer. He can't run, because of those chancres and warts which have opened up in his crotch—'

'Enough, enough, Matilda,' Houvenaghel said softly but quickly, seeing the expression of growing disgust on Bonhart's face. 'We must leave for the theatre. Mr Mayor has just been informed that Windsor Imbra has reached the town with a squad of the Baron of Casadei's infantry. Which means it's time.'

Bonhart removed a flacon from a belt pouch, wiped the onyx

table top with his sleeve and tipped out a small mound of white powder. He pulled on the chain, drawing Ciri closer.

'Do you know how to use it?'

Ciri clenched her teeth.

'Sniff it up. Or lick a finger and rub it into your gums.'

'No!'

Bonhart didn't even turn his head.

'You'll do it yourself,' he said softly, 'or I'll do it, only in a way that will supply everybody here with a bit of entertainment. You don't just have mucous membranes in your mouth and nose, little Rat, but in a few other amusing places. I'll call for servants, have you stripped naked and restrained, and I'll take advantage of those amusing places.'

The Marchioness de Nementh-Uyvar laughed gutturally, watching Ciri reaching for the narcotic with a trembling hand.

'Amusing places,' she repeated and licked her lips. 'What a fascinating idea. Worth trying one day! Hey, hey, girl, have a care, don't waste good fisstech! Leave some for me!'

*

The narcotic was much more powerful than the one she'd tried with the Rats. A little while after taking it, Ciri was overcome by a dazzling euphoria; contours were sharpened, light and colours pricked her eyes, smells irritated her nose, sounds became unbearably loud, and everything around her became unreal, as ephemeral as a dream. There were the steps, there were the tapestries stinking of thick dust, there was the husky laughter of the Marchioness de Nementh-Uyvar. There was the courtyard, rain drops falling quickly on her face, and the jerking of the collar she still had around her neck. There was an immense building with a wooden tower and a large, repulsively tawdry painting on the frontage. The painting depicted dogs baiting a monster – neither a dragon, a gryphon, nor a wyvern. There were people outside the entrance to the building. One was shouting and gesticulating.

'It's revolting! Revolting and sinful, Mr Houvenaghel, to be utilising a building which was once a place of worship for such an

immoral, inhuman and disgusting practice! Animals also feel, Mr Houvenaghel! They also have their dignity! It's a crime to set animal against animal for the amusement of the common folk in the name of profit!'

'Calm yourself, you pious fellow! And don't meddle in my private enterprise! In any case, no animal shall be baited today. Not a single one! Exclusively people!'

'Oh. Then I do beg your pardon.'

Inside, the building was full of people sitting on rows of benches forming an amphitheatre. A pit had been dug in the centre, a circular depression measuring about ten yards across, shored up by hefty posts and topped with a balustrade. The stench and uproar were overwhelming. Again, Ciri felt a tug on the collar, somebody seized her under the arms, somebody shoved her. She suddenly found herself at the bottom of the pit, on firmly packed down sand.

In the arena.

The first rush had subsided, and now the narcotic was just stimulating her, sharpening her senses. Ciri pressed her hands over her ears – the crowd occupying the amphitheatre's benches roared, booed and whistled; the noise was unbearable. She noticed that her right wrist and forearm were tightly bound by a leather bracer. She couldn't recall it being fastened to her.

She heard the familiar hoarse voice, saw the skinny, pistachio-coloured marchioness, the Nilfgaardian cavalry captain, the pastel-toned mayor, Houvenaghel and Bonhart occupying a box perched above the arena. Her hands went to her ears again, as someone suddenly struck a copper gong.

'Look, good people! In the pit today there's no wolf, no goblin, no endrega! In the arena today is the murderous Falka from the Rats' gang! The ticket desk by the entrance is taking bets! Don't stint a penny, good people! You can't eat this amusement, you can't drink it, but if you skimp on it you'll not profit, you'll lose out!'

The crowd roared and applauded. The narcotic was working. Ciri trembled with euphoria. Her vision and hearing were registering everything, every detail. She could hear Houvenaghel's cackle, the marchioness' husky laugh, the mayor's grave voice, Bonhart's cold bass, the yelling of the animal-loving priest, the squealing of women and the crying of a child. She could see dark patches of blood on the posts encircling the arena and a stinking

grill-covered hole gaping in it. And brutishly contorted faces, glistening with sweat, above the balustrade.

A sudden commotion, raised voices, curses. Armed men jostled the crowd, but ground to a halt, stopped by a wall of guards clutching partisans. She'd seen one of the men before – she remembered the swarthy face and the black moustache like a line drawn in charcoal on his upper lip, which quivered in a tic.

'Mr Windsor Imbra?' It was Houvenaghel's voice. 'Of Geso? Seneschal of His Noble Lordship, the Baron of Casadei? Greetings, greetings to our foreign guests. Take your places, the spectacle is about to begin. But don't forget, please, to pay at the entrance!'

'I'm not here for the sport, Mr Houvenaghel! I'm here on matters of service! Bonhart knows of what I speak!'

'Indeed? Leo? Do you know of what the seneschal speaks?'

'Do not jest! There are fifteen of us here! We've come for Falka! Hand her over, or things will turn ill!'

'I don't understand your excitation, Imbra.' Houvenaghel frowned. 'But I observe that this is not Geso, nor is it within the lands of that mandarin, your baron. Should you make a fuss and incommode us I shall have you driven away with knouts!'

'I wish to cause no offence, Mr Houvenaghel,' Windsor Imbra appealed. 'But the law is on our side! Bonhart, here present, promised Falka to His Grace, Baron of Casadei. He gave his bond. And now he must keep it!'

'Leo?' Houvenaghel said, jowls shaking. 'Do you know what he's talking about?'

'I do and I admit he's right.' Bonhart stood up, carelessly waving a hand. 'I shan't protest or cause any difficulties. The girl is here, as everybody sees. Whoever wishes to may take her.'

Windsor Imbra was dumbfounded. His lip trembled intensely.

'How is that?'

'The girl,' Bonhart repeated, winking at Houvenaghel, 'belongs to the man who wishes to take her from the arena. Alive or dead, as your taste dictates.'

'How is that?'

'Dammit, I'm gradually losing my patience!' Bonhart skilfully feigned anger. 'Nothing but "how is that"! Bloody parrot! How?

However you wish! It's up to you; poison some meat and throw it to her as you would a she-wolf. But I can't guarantee she will devour it. She doesn't look stupid, does she? No, Imbra. Whoever wants her must take the trouble of going down to her. Down there, into the pit. You want Falka? Then claim her!'

'You wave Falka under my nose like a frog on a rod before a catfish,' Windsor Imbra growled. 'I don't trust you, Bonhart. I can smell the iron hook hidden in that bait!'

'I congratulate you on your sensitive nose.' Bonhart stood up, took the sword acquired in Fano from under the bench, drew it from the scabbard and threw it into the arena, so dexterously that the blade stuck vertically in the sand, two paces in front of Ciri. 'There's your iron. Out in the open, not concealed at all. I don't care for the wench, and whomsoever wants to may take her. If they're able.'

The Marchioness de Nementh-Uyvar laughed nervously.

'If they're able!' she repeated in her husky contralto. 'For now the bodikin has a sword. Bravo, Mr Bonhart. It seemed despicable to leave the bodikin defenceless and at the mercy of these good-for-nothings.'

'Mr Houvenaghel,' Windsor Imbra said with arms akimbo, not gracing the skinny aristocrat with even a glance. 'This spectacle is being held under your patronage, for it's your theatre, after all. Just tell me one thing. By whose rules and principles are we to play – yours or Bonhart's?'

'By theatrical ones,' Houvenaghel cackled, shaking his belly and bulldog-like jowls. 'For though it's true that it's my theatre, the customer is always right, as he who pays the piper calls the tune! The customer sets the rules. While we merchants must act according to those rules: whatever the customer demands, we must give him.'

'Customer? You mean these folk?' Windsor Imbra gestured sweepingly across the packed auditorium. 'All these folk who have paid to marvel at these marvels?'

'Business is business,' Houvenaghel replied. 'If there a demand for something, why not sell it? Do folk pay for a wolf fight? For endrega and aardvark fights? For baiting a badger in a barrel, or a wyvern? Why are you so astonished, Imbra? Folk need circuses and spectacles as they do bread, why, more than bread. Many of those here had it taken from their mouths. Now look at them, how their

eyes shine. They can't wait for the games to begin.'

'But at games,' Bonhart added, smiling spitefully, 'the appearances of sport must at least be observed. The brock, before the curs drag him from the barrel, may nip with its teeth; that's only sporting. And the girl has a blade. Let it also be sporting here. Well, good people? Am I right?'

The good people confirmed in an incoherent – though thunderous and joyful – chorus that Bonhart was absolutely right.

'The Baron of Casadei,' Windsor Imbra said slowly, 'will not be pleased, Mr Houvenaghel. I tell you he'll not be pleased. I don't know if it's worth your while picking a fight with him.'

'Business is business,' Houvenaghel repeated and jiggled his cheeks. 'The Baron of Casadei knows that very well. He has borrowed a deal of money from me at low interest, and when the time comes to borrow more, then we shall somehow smooth over our squabbles. But some foreign lord isn't going to interfere in my private enterprise. Wagers have been laid, people have paid to enter. Blood must soak into that sand, in that arena.'

'Must?' Windsor Imbra yelled. 'Bollocks! I'm itching to show you that it doesn't need to at all! For I shall leave here and ride away, without looking back. Then you can spill your own blood! The very thought of supplying this rabble with amusement sickens me!'

'Let him go.' A character with a very low hairline in a horsehide jerkin emerged from the crowd. 'If it sickens him, let him go. It doesn't sicken me. They said whoever does for the she-rat takes the reward. I volunteer to enter the arena.'

'Not likely!' one of Imbra's soldiers, a short but wiry and well-built man, suddenly yelled. He had thick, unkempt and matted hair. 'We was first! Wasn't we, boys?'

'Yeah!' chimed in a second, a scrawny one with a pointed beard. 'We have priority! And don't let your sense of honour get the better of you, Windsor! What of it if the rabble is watching? Falka's in the pit, suffice to hold out a hand and take her. And let the peasantry goggle, we don't give a damn!'

'And we're ready to get something out of it too!' snickered a third, dressed in a doublet of vivid amaranth. 'Let's make sport of it, am I right, Mr Houvenaghel? Let's make a contest of it! As long as a reward's on offer!'

Houvenaghel grinned and nodded, proudly and majestically jiggling his pendulous cheeks.

'Well then,' asked the one with the goatee curiously, 'are there any wagers?'

'As of now,' the merchant laughed, 'no one has wagered on the result! As of now it's three to one, since none of you dares enter the enclosure.'

'Huuuh!' Horsehide yelled. 'I dare! I'm minded!'

'Out of the way, I said!' Matted Hair roared back. 'We was first and we have first crack. Come on, what are we waiting for?'

'How many can go in at one time?' Amaranth tightened his belt. 'Or is only one at a time allowed?'

'You whoresons!' Quite unexpectedly, the pastel mayor suddenly roared in a powerful voice utterly incongruent with his build. 'Perhaps ten of you want to take on the one of her? On horseback, perhaps? Riding chariots, perhaps? Perhaps you want to borrow a catapult from the armoury in order to hurl boulders at the wench from afar? Eh?'

'Very well, very well,' Bonhart interrupted, after swiftly consulting with Houvenaghel. 'Let it be sport, but let there be entertainment too. We'll say two at a time. You may enter in pairs.'

'But the reward,' Houvenaghel warned, 'will not be doubled! If it's two, you'll have to share.'

'In pairs? Two at a time?' Matted Hair flung his cape from his shoulders. 'Are you ashamed, boys? She's just a wench!' He spat on the ground. 'Stand back. I'll go myself and take her down. Big deal!'

'I want Falka alive!' protested Windsor Imbra. 'A pox on your fights and duels! I won't go along with Bonhart's circus, I want the wench! Alive! You two go in, you and Stavro. And haul her out of there.'

'As for me,' Stavro, the one with the goatee, said, 'it's an insult for two of us to take on that scrawny thing.'

'The baron's florins will make that insult more palatable. But only if she's alive!'

'The baron's a miser,' Houvenaghel cackled, wobbling his belly and bulldog's jowls. 'He doesn't have an ounce of sporting spirit in him. Nor the desire to reward that spirit in others! I, though,

champion sport. And hereby increase the reward. Whomsoever enters the arena alone and leaves it on his own two feet, will be paid, by this very hand, from this very coffer, not twenty but thirty florins!'

'So what are we waiting for?' yelled Stavro. 'I'm going first!'

'Not so fast!' the short mayor roared once again. 'The wench has but thin linen on her back! So cast off that brigandine, soldier. This is sport!'

'A pox on you!' Stavro stripped off the studded kaftan, then pulled his shirt off over his head, revealing a scrawny chest and arms as hairy as a baboon. 'A pox on you, m'lords, and your sodding sport! I'll go in the buff! Shall I take off me britches too?'

'And your braies!' the Marchioness de Nementh-Uyvar croaked seductively. 'Then we'll see if you're only manly in word!'

Rewarded by thunderous applause and naked to the waist, Stavro drew his weapon and threw one leg over the barrier, watching Ciri intently. Ciri folded her arms over her chest. She didn't even take a step towards the sword plunged into the sand. Stavro hesitated.

'Don't do it,' said Ciri, very softly. 'Don't make me . . . I won't let you touch me.'

'Don't begrudge me, wench.' Stavro clambered over the barrier. 'I've nothing against you. But business is—'

He didn't complete the sentence, for Ciri was already on him, was already holding Swallow, as she had named the gnomish gwyhyr. She used a very simple, downright childish attack and feint called 'three little steps' – but Stavro was taken in by it. He took a step backwards and raised his sword involuntarily, and was then at her mercy – after stepping back he was leaning against a post and Swallow's blade was an inch from the tip of his nose.

'That move,' Bonhart explained to the marchioness, shouting over the roaring and applause, is called "three little steps, a feint and a lunge in tierce". A cheap trick, I'd expected something more refined from the wench. Though one must admit, if she'd wanted it, the fellow would already be dead.'

'Kill 'im! Kill 'im!' the spectators bellowed, and Houvenaghel and Mayor Pennycuick pointed their thumbs downwards. The blood had drained from Stavro's face, and the pimples and pockmarks on

his cheeks were repugnantly visible.

'I told you not to make me,' Ciri hissed. 'I don't want to kill you! But I won't let anyone touch me. Go back where you came from.'

She moved back, turned around, put down her sword and looked up towards the box.

'Are you toying with me?' she cried, voice breaking. 'Do you mean to force me to fight? To kill? You can't do it! I won't fight!'

'Hear that, Imbra?' Bonhart's sneering voice resounded in the silence. 'Clear profit! And no risk! She won't fight. Thus you can take her from the arena and deliver her alive to the Baron of Casadei, so he can freely amuse himself with her. You can take her without any danger! With your bare hands!'

Windsor Imbra spat. Stavro, still standing with his back pressed against the post, panted, gripping his sword. Bonhart laughed.

'But I, Imbra, bet a diamond to a walnut that you can't.'

Stavro took a deep breath. The girl standing with her back to him appeared distracted, preoccupied. He was seething with rage, shame and hatred. He couldn't control himself. He attacked. Swiftly and treacherously.

The audience didn't notice the swerve or reverse thrust. All they saw was the rushing Stavro making a truly balletic leap, after which – less balletically – he fell belly and face down in the sand; sand which was immediately stained red with blood.

'Instinct takes the upper hand!' Bonhart shouted over the crowd. 'Reflexes come into play! Eh, Houvenaghel? What did I say? You'll see, the mastiffs won't be needed!'

'What a splendid and profitable spectacle,' Houvenaghel said, closing his eyes in bliss.

Stavro raised himself on trembling arms, jerked his head, cried out, croaked, puked blood and slumped down on the sand.

'What's that blow called, Mr Bonhart, sir?' the Marchioness de Nementh-Uyvar asked huskily and sensuously, rubbing her knees together.

'That was improvised.' The teeth of the bounty hunter – who didn't even look at the marchioness – flashed from beneath his lips.

‘An exquisite, inspired and, I’d say, visceral improvisation. I’ve heard of a place where they teach that kind of improvised butchery. I’ll wager our maiden knows it well. Now I know who she is.’

‘Don’t make me!’ Ciri screamed, a truly ghastly note trembling in her voice. ‘I don’t want to! Understand? I don’t want to!’

‘You hellish slut!’ Amaranth nimbly vaulted the barrier, circling the arena to distract Ciri from Matted Hair, who was entering from the opposite side. Horsehide cleared the barrier behind Matted Hair.

‘That’s fighting dirty!’ roared the halfling-sized Mayor Pennycuick, who was sensitive to fair play, and the crowd yelled with him.

‘Three against one! That’s unfair!’

Bonhart laughed. The marchioness licked her lips and began to wriggle her legs more urgently.

The threesome’s plan was simple – pin the retreating girl against the posts. Then two would block and the third one kill. Nothing came of it, for a simple reason. The girl didn’t retreat but attacked.

She slipped between them with a balletic pirouette, so lightly she almost didn’t touch the sand. She struck Matted Hair in passing, precisely where he ought to be struck: in the carotid artery. The blow was so subtle it didn’t jar her rhythm. She ducked away in a reverse feint, so swiftly that not a single drop of the blood gushing from Matted Hair’s neck in a two-yard stream fell on her. Amaranth, behind her, aimed to slash across the back of her neck, but his treacherous blow clanged against a lightning-fast parry of her blade, held up behind her. Ciri unwound like a spring, slashing with both hands, amplifying the blow’s power with a jerk of her hips. The dark gnomish blade was like a razor, and cut his abdomen open with a hiss and a squelch. Amaranth howled and flopped forward onto the sand, curling up in a ball. Horsehide leaped at Ciri and thrust towards her throat, but she dodged, spun fluidly and struck from close quarters with the middle of the blade, mutilating his eye, nose, mouth and chin.

The spectators yelled, whistled, stamped their feet and bayed for more. The Marchioness de Nementh-Uyvar thrust both hands between her clenched thighs, licked her shining lips and laughed in her nervous drinker’s contralto. The captain of the Nilfgaardian

reserve horse was as wan as vellum. A woman tried to cover the eyes of her child as he wriggled free. A grizzled old man in the front row vomited loudly and spasmodically, and hung his head between his knees.

Horsehide sobbed, holding his face, as blood mixed with snot and spit poured through his fingers. Amaranth rolled around, squealing like a stuck hog. Matted Hair stopped scrabbling against a post slippery with blood, spurting from him in the rhythm of his heartbeat.

'Heeelp meeee,' Amaranth howled, tightly clutching his innards spilling out of his belly. 'Comraaaades! Heeeelp meeee!'

'Bheeeh . . . bhooo . . . bheeeeh . . .' Horsehide spat and snorted blood.

'Fin-ish-'im-off! Fin-ish-'im-off!' chanted the audience, stamping their feet to the rhythm. The puking old man was shoved from the bench and kicked towards the gallery.

'A diamond to a walnut,' Bonhart's sneering bass resounded amongst the racket, 'that none will now dare enter the arena. A diamond to a walnut, Imbra! What am I saying – even to an empty walnut shell!'

'Kill 'em!' A roaring, thumping of feet and clapping. 'Kill 'em!'

'Noble maiden!' Windsor Imbra shouted, gesturing his subordinates to go forward. 'Let them remove the wounded! Let them enter the arena and take them, before they bleed to death! Have a heart, noble maiden!'

'A heart,' Ciri repeated with effort, only then feeling the adrenaline strike her. She got herself quickly under control, with a series of well-drilled breaths.

'Come in and take them,' she said. 'But come in unarmed. Have a heart as well. Just this once.'

'Noooo!' the crowd roared and chanted. 'We-want-blood! We-want-blood!'

'You rotten bastards!' Ciri turned around gracefully, sweeping her gaze over the stands and benches. 'You despicable swine! You scoundrels! You lousy whoresons! You want blood? Come here, come down, taste it and smell it! Lick it up before it clots! Bastards! Vampires!'

The marchioness groaned, trembled, fluttered her eyelashes

and softly nestled up to Bonhart, without taking her hands from between her thighs. Bonhart grimaced and shoved her away from him, not bothering to be gentle. The crowd howled. Someone threw a half-chewed sausage into the arena, someone else a boot, and yet another chucked a gherkin, aimed at Ciri. She sliced the gherkin in two with a flourish of her sword, provoking an even louder roar.

Windsor Imbra and his men picked up Amaranth and Horsehide. When Amaranth was touched, he howled, while Horsehide fainted. Matted Hair and Stavro no longer showed any signs of life. Ciri moved back, to stand as far away as the arena permitted. Imbra's men also did their best to stay away from her.

Windsor Imbra stood motionless. He waited until they had heaved out the dead and wounded. He looked at Ciri through narrowed eyes, his hand on the hilt of his sword, which – despite his promise – he had not removed on entering the arena.

'No,' she warned, barely moving her lips. 'Don't make me. Please.'

Imbra was pale. The crowd stamped their feet, roared and howled.

'Don't listen to her!' Bonhart shouted over the racket again. 'Draw your sword! Otherwise it'll get out that you're a coward and a turd! From the Alba to the Yaruga everyone will be talking about how Windsor Imbra ran from a slip of a girl with his tail between his legs!'

Imbra's blade slid an inch from the scabbard.

'Don't,' said Ciri.

The blade went back in.

'Coward!' roared someone from the crowd. 'Shithead! Chicken heart!'

His face impassive, Imbra walked to the edge of the arena. Before seizing the hands of his comrades reaching down from above, he turned back one last time.

'You probably know what you're in for, wench,' he said softly. 'You probably already know what Leo Bonhart is. You probably already know what Leo Bonhart's capable of. What excites him. You'll be shoved out into the arena to kill for the amusement of the swine and scum in here. And even worse than them. And when the fact that you can kill stops amusing them, when Bonhart tires of

doing violence to you, then they'll kill you too. They'll send so many to face you, you won't be able to watch your back. Or they'll set dogs on you. And the dogs will tear you apart, and the rabble in the stands will sniff blood and applaud. You'll expire on this blood-stained sand. Like the men you slaughtered today. You'll remember my words.'

Oddly, it was only then that she noticed the small escutcheon on his enamel gorget.

A silver unicorn rampant on a black field.

A unicorn.

Ciri lowered her head. She looked at her sword's openwork recasso.

Everything suddenly went quiet.

'By the Great Sun,' Declan Ros aep Maelchlad, the captain of the Nilfgaardian reserve horse, abruptly began. 'No. Don't do that, girl. *Ne tuv'en que'ss, luned*!'

Ciri slowly turned Swallow around in her hand and rested the pommel on the sand. She went down on one knee. Holding the blade with her right hand, she aimed the point with her left towards her breastbone. The blade cut through her clothing and pricked her at once.

Just don't cry, thought Ciri, pushing harder and harder down on the sword. Just don't cry, there's nothing to cry over. One quick thrust and it will all be over . . . It will all be over . . .

'You won't do it.' Bonhart's voice resounded in the complete silence. 'You won't do it, witcher girl. In Kaer Morhen you were taught how to kill, so you kill like a machine. Instinctively. To kill yourself you need character, strength, determination and courage. And they couldn't teach you that.'

*

'He was right,' Ciri said with effort. 'I couldn't.'

Vysogota remained silent. He was holding a coypu pelt. Motionless. Had been for a long time. He had almost forgotten about the pelt as he listened.

‘I chickened out. I was a coward. And I paid for it. As every coward pays for it. In pain, dishonour and hideous humiliation. And an absolute revulsion towards myself.’

Vysogota said nothing.

*

Had someone crept up to the cottage with the sunken thatched roof that night, had they peered through the slits in the shutters, they would have seen in the dimly lit interior a grey-bearded old man and an ashen-haired girl sitting by the fireplace. They would have noticed that the two of them were staring silently into the glowing, ruby coals.

But no one could have seen it. For the cottage with the sunken, moss-grown thatched roof was well hidden among the fog and the mist, in a boundless swamp in the Pereplut Marshes where no one dared to venture.

Whosoever sheds man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed.

Genesis, 9:6

Verily, great self-righteousness and great blindness are needed to call the gore pouring from the scaffold justice.

Vysogota of Corvo

CHAPTER FIVE

‘What seeks the Witcher on my territory?’ Fulko Artevelde, the Prefect of Riedbrune, repeated the question, now clearly impatient with the lengthening silence. ‘Whence is the Witcher coming? And whither is he headed? With what purpose?’

That’s what comes of playing at good deeds, thought Geralt, looking at the prefect’s face, which was marked with thickened scars. That’s what comes of playing the noble witcher out of compassion for a bunch of shabby forest folk. That’s what comes of the desire for luxury and sleeping in taverns, where there’s always a nark. That’s what comes of travelling with a loudmouthed poetaster. Here I sit, in a room like a windowless cell, on a hard interrogation chair bolted to the floor, and on the chair’s back – it’s impossible not to notice – are cuffs and leather straps. For binding the arms and restraining the neck. They haven’t been used yet, but they’re there.

How the bloody hell do I get myself out of this pickle now?

*

After five days of trekking with the Riverdellian forest beekeepers they finally emerged from the wilderness onto a boggy reed bed. It stopped raining, the wind dispersed the mists and clammy fog, the sun broke through the clouds. And mountain peaks sparkled snow-white in the glare.

If a short while ago the River Yaruga had signified to them a clear dividing line, a border, the crossing of which represented an evident passage to the next, more serious, stage of the expedition, it was even more so now; the sense that they were approaching a limit, a barrier, a place which could only be turned back from. They all felt it, Geralt above all – it could only be thus, since from dawn to dusk they had been faced with a mighty, jagged range of mountains barring their way, rising up in front of them to the south, and gleaming with snow and glaciers. The Amell Mountains. And rising even above the saw-toothed Amell was the forbiddingly majestic obelisk of Mount Gorgon, Devil Mountain, as angular as

the blade of a misericorde. They did not talk about it, didn't discuss it, but Geralt felt what everybody was thinking. For when he looked at the Amell range and Gorgon, the thought of continuing the journey southwards seemed sheer insanity.

Fortunately, it suddenly turned out there would be no need to head south.

This news was brought to them by the shaggy forest beekeeper, owing to whom they had acted as the train's armed escort for the previous five days. The husband and father of the comely hamadryads, next to whom he looked like a wild boar beside two mares. He who had tried to deceive them by saying the druids of Caed Dhu had gone to the Slopes.

It was the day after their arrival in Riedbrune, a town teeming like an anthill and the destination of the forest beekeepers and trappers from Riverdell. It was the day after parting with the forest beekeepers, for whom the Witcher was no longer needed. He hadn't expected to see any of them again. His astonishment was thus all the greater.

For the forest beekeeper began with effusive expressions of gratitude and the handing to Geralt of a full pouch of mainly small change; his witcher's fee. He accepted it, feeling on him the somewhat mocking gaze of Regis and Cahir, to whom he had occasionally moaned during the trek about human ingratitude and stressed the pointlessness and stupidity of selfless altruism.

And then the excited beekeeper literally shouted out the news. 'The, you know, Mistletoers, I mean the druids, are camped, dear Master Witcher, in the oak groves by Loch Monduirn, a lake, get my drift, thirty-five miles from here in a westerly direction.'

The beekeeper had heard these tidings at a honey and beeswax trade market from a relative living in Riedbrune, while the relative had been given the information from a diamond prospector acquaintance of his. When the beekeeper learned about the druids he ran as quickly as he could to tell the Witcher. And now he was glowing with happiness, pride and a sense of importance, like every liar when his lies accidentally turn out to be true.

At first, Geralt had intended to make for Loch Monduirn without a moment's delay, but the company protested vehemently. Being in possession of the money from the beekeepers – declared Regis and Cahir – and being in a town where anything could be bought, they ought to stock up on vittles and supplies. And buy

extra arrows, added Milva, because they was always demanding game from her and she weren't going to shoot whittled sticks. And spend at least one night in a bed in an inn, added Dandelion, and retired to that bed bathed and pleasantly tipsy on ale.

The druids, they chorused, won't run away.

'Utter coincidence though it may be,' added the vampire Regis with a curious smile, 'our company is on exactly the right road, and heading in exactly the right direction. For since we are clearly and absolutely destined to encounter the druids, a day or two's delay makes no difference.'

'And as regards haste,' he added philosophically, 'the impression that time is quickly running out is customarily a warning signal enjoining one to reduce the pace, and proceed slowly and with due prudence.'

Geralt didn't protest or argue with the vampire's philosophy, although the weird nightmares he was being haunted by still inclined him towards haste. Despite his being unable to recollect them after waking.

It was the seventeenth of September and a full moon. Six days remained until the autumn Equinox.

*

Milva, Regis and Cahir took upon themselves the task of making purchases and acquiring the necessary equipment. Geralt and Dandelion, however, were to reconnoitre and gather information in the town of Riedbrune.

Situated in a bend in the River Nevi, Riedbrune was a small town, if one only took into consideration the densely-grouped brick and wooden buildings inside the ring of earthen embankments bristling with a palisade. But the serried buildings inside the embankments were currently merely the centre of the town, and no more than a tenth of the population could live there. Nine tenths resided in the noisy ocean of ramshackle huts, shacks, cabins, sheds, tents and wagons serving as dwellings which surrounded the embankments.

The Witcher and the poet were served by a cicerone in the form of the beekeeper's relative; young, artful and arrogant, a

typical specimen of an urban layabout, who'd been born in the gutter and was no stranger to bathing nor slaking his thirst there. This stripling was like a trout in a crystal-clear mountain stream in the urban hubbub, throng, grime and stench, and the chance to show someone around his repugnant town clearly delighted him. Unconcerned that nobody was asking him any questions, the guttersnipe gave enthusiastic explanations. He explained that Riedbrune was an important stage for Nilfgaardian settlers travelling northwards after the endowment pledged by the emperor: six oxgangs or roughly one hundred and twenty acres. And on top of that a ten-year tax moratorium. For Riedbrune lay at the mouth of the Dol Nevi valley which cuts through the Amell Mountains, via the Theodula pass linking the Slopes and Riverdell with Mag Turga, Geso, Metinna and Maecht; all countries for many years subordinate to the Nilfgaardian Empire. The town of Riedbrune, explained the guttersnipe, was the last place where the settlers could depend on something else and not just themselves, their womenfolk and what they had on their wagons. Which was why most of the settlers remained camped outside the town for quite some time, gathering their strength before the last push to the banks of the Yaruga and beyond. And many of them, he added, with the pride of a slum patriot, settled in the town permanently, because the town was, why, culture, not some yokelish dump stinking of dung.

In truth, the town of Riedbrune's stench drew on many smells; dung included.

Geralt had been there, years before, but couldn't recognise it. Too much had changed. Previously, there hadn't been so many cavalrymen in black armour and cloaks with silver emblems on their spaulders. Previously, the Nilfgaardian tongue had not been heard on all sides. Previously, there hadn't been a quarry outside the town, where now ragged, dirty, haggard and bloodied people split boulders into ashlars and rubble, whipped by black-uniformed overseers.

A large force of Nilfgaardian soldiers are stationed here, explained the guttersnipe, but not permanently, only during breaks in marches and searches for partisans of the Free Slopes organisation. They'll be setting up a powerful Nilfgaardian garrison here when a great, stone stronghold is constructed on the site of the old castle. A stronghold built of stone hard-won from the quarry. The people splitting the stone are prisoners of war. From Lyria, from Aedirn, and lately from Sodden, Brugge and Angren. And

Temeria. Four hundred prisoners are employed here in Riedbrune. A good five hundred work in the ore quarries, underground and open-cast mines in the vicinity of Belhaven and over a thousand are building bridges and levelling roads in the Theodula pass.

There had also been a scaffold in the town square when Geralt had visited, but a much more modest one. There hadn't been so many devices arousing hideous associations on it, and there hadn't been so many revolting and putrid decorations hanging from the gallows, stakes, forks and poles.

That's thanks to Mr Fulko Artevelde, the prefect recently installed by the military authorities, explained the guttersnipe, looking at the scaffold and the fragments of human anatomy gracing it. Mr Fulko has given the hangman business again. There's no fooling around with Mr Fulko, he added. He's a stern master.

The diamond prospector – the guttersnipe's mate, who they found in the tavern – didn't make a good impression on Geralt. For he happened to be in that tremblingly pale, half-sober, half-drunk, half-real, almost nightmarish state which drinking for several nights and days without stopping puts a fellow into. The Witcher's heart sank. It looked as though the sensational news about the druids might have originated in simple delirium tremens.

The drink-sodden prospector answered their questions astutely, however, and with good sense. He wittily retorted to Dandelion's accusation that he didn't look like a diamond prospector by saying that he would if he ever found a diamond. He described the dwelling place of the druids by Loch Monduirn explicitly and precisely, without exaggerated embellishment or an overinflated fantasising manner. He took the liberty of asking what his interlocutors wanted from the druids and, when treated to a contemptuous silence, warned them that entering the druidic oak groves meant certain death, since the druids were wont to grab intruders, shove them in a basket called the Wicker Woman and burn them alive to the accompaniment of prayers, chants and incantations. The groundless rumour and foolish superstition, it turned out, had dogged the druids, resolutely keeping up, never lagging more than two furlongs behind.

Further conversation was interrupted by nine soldiers in black uniforms with the sign of the sun on their spaulders, armed with guisarmes.

'Would you be,' asked the sergeant commanding the soldiers,

tapping his calf with an oaken truncheon, ‘the witcher Geralt?’

‘Yes,’ Geralt answered after a moment’s reflection. ‘I would.’

‘You’ll be coming along with me, then.’

‘How can you be sure I will? Am I under arrest?’

The soldier looked at him in a seemingly endless silence, but somehow strangely without respect. No doubt his eight-man escort gave him the nerve to look in that manner.

‘No,’ he said at last. ‘You aren’t under arrest. I received no order to arrest you. If I’d received an order my question would have been different, sir. Very different.’

Geralt adjusted his sword belt rather ostentatiously.

‘And my answer,’ he said icily, ‘would have been different, too.’

‘Now, now, gentlemen,’ Dandelion decided to step in, putting on an expression, which, in his opinion, was the smile of a seasoned diplomat. ‘Why that tone? We’re honest men, we needn’t fear the powers that be, why, we’re willing to help them. Whenever the opportunity arises. But by virtue of that we deserve something from authority, don’t we, officer? If only something as tiny as an explanation of why our civic freedoms are being curtailed.’

‘There’s a war on, sir,’ the soldier replied, not in the least bit disconcerted by the torrent of words. ‘Freedom, as the name suggests, is a matter for peacetime. Any reasons will be elucidated by His Lordship the Prefect. I carry out orders, so don’t get into discussions with me.’

‘Fair enough,’ the Witcher conceded and gave the troubadour a slight wink. ‘Then lead us to the prefecture, good soldier. Dandelion, go back to the others and tell them what’s happened. Do the necessary. Regis will know what to do.’

*

‘What’s a witcher doing in the Slopes? What do you seek?’

The person asking the questions was a broad-shouldered, dark-haired man with a face rutted with scars and a leather patch over his left eye. In a dark alleyway, the sight of that cyclopean face was

capable of wresting a moan of terror from many a breast. But how unjust, when it was the face of Mr Fulko Artevelde, Prefect of Riedbrune, the highest ranking custodian of law and order in the entire region.

'What does a witcher seek in the Slopes?' repeated the highest ranking custodian of law and order in the entire region.

Geralt sighed and shrugged, feigning indifference.

'You know, of course, the answer to your question, prefect. You could only have gleaned the fact that I'm a witcher from the Riverdell forest beekeepers who hired me to protect them on their march. And being a witcher, in the Slopes, or anywhere else, I'm generally in search of the chance to work. So I'm journeying in the direction suggested by the patrons who hired me.'

'Logical,' Fulko Artevelde nodded. 'On the face of it at least. You parted company with the beekeepers two days ago. But you intend to continue your travels southwards, in somewhat peculiar company. With what aim?'

Geralt didn't lower his eyes, but steadily returned the burning gaze of the prefect's only eye.

'Am I under arrest?'

'No. Not for the time being.'

'Then the purpose and direction of my travel is my private business.'

'I suggest frankness and openness, nonetheless. If only in order to prove you don't feel in any way guilty and don't fear either the law, or any authority guarding it. I'll repeat the question: what is behind your expedition, witcher?'

Geralt pondered this briefly.

'I'm trying to reach the druids who were abiding in Angren, but have probably moved into these parts. It would have been easy to learn that from the beekeepers I was escorting.'

'Who hired you to deal with the druids? The guardians of nature haven't burned one too many people in the Wicker Woman, have they?'

'Fairy tales, rumours, superstitions. Strange for an enlightened person like yourself. I want information from the druids, not their blood. But really, prefect, it seems to me I've been too frank, in

order to prove I don't feel guilty.'

'It's not about your guilt. At least not just about it. I'd like, nevertheless, a tone of mutual congeniality to prevail in our talk. For in spite of appearances, the aim of this talk is, among others, to save you and your companions' lives.'

'You have provoked my sincere curiosity, m'lord prefect,' answered Geralt after some time, 'Among other things. I shall hear out your explanations with truly rapt attention.'

'I don't doubt it. We'll get to those explanations, but gradually. In stages. Have you ever heard, master witcher, of the tradition of turning imperial evidence? Do you know what that is?'

'I do. Weaselling out of one's responsibilities by fingering one's comrades.'

'A gross simplification,' Fulko Artevelde said without smiling, 'typical, actually, for a Nordling. You often disguise gaps in your education with sarcastic or exaggerated simplifications which you consider witty. Imperial law operates here in the Slopes, master witcher. More precisely, imperial law is going to operate here when rank lawlessness has been utterly extirpated. The best way to fight lawlessness and criminality is the scaffold, which you surely saw in the town square. But occasionally the offer to turn imperial evidence also works.'

He made a dramatic pause. Geralt didn't interrupt.

'Quite recently,' the prefect continued, 'we managed to lure a gang of juvenile criminals into an ambush. The brigands offered resistance and were killed . . . '

'But not all of them, right?' Geralt conjectured, bluntly, becoming a little bored by all this oratory. 'One was taken alive. They were promised a reprieve if they turned imperial evidence. I mean if they started grassing. And they grassed me up.'

'Why such a deduction? Have you had any contact with the local criminal underworld? Now or in the past?'

'No. I haven't. Not now, or in the past. So forgive me, lord prefect, but the whole matter is either a complete misunderstanding or humbug. Or a trap directed against me. In the latter case I would suggest we don't waste any more time and proceed to the nub of the matter.'

'It appears that the thought of a trap troubles you,' the prefect

observed, furrowing his scarred brow. ‘Could you, perhaps, in spite of your assurances, have some reason to fear the law?’

‘No. I’m beginning, though, to fear that the fight against crime is being conducted hurriedly, wholesale and not meticulously enough, without painstaking inquiries to determine guilt or innocence. But well, perhaps that’s just an exaggerated simplification, typical of a dull Nordling. And this Nordling continues not to understand in what way the Prefect of Riedbrune is saving his life.’

Fulko Artevelde observed him in silence for a moment, then clapped his hands.

‘Bring her in,’ he ordered the soldiers who’d appeared at his signal.

Geralt calmed himself with several breaths, for suddenly a certain thought made his heart race and his adrenaline flow. A moment later he had to take several more breaths, and even – astonishingly – had to make a Sign with his hand out of sight beneath the table. And the effect – astonishingly – was none. He felt hot. And cold.

For the guards had shoved Ciri into the room.

‘Well I never,’ said Ciri, right after she’d been sat down in a chair and had her hands handcuffed behind the backrest. ‘Look what the cat’s dragged in!’

Artevelde made a brief gesture. One of the guards, a huge fellow with the face of a slow-witted child, drew his arm back in an unhurried swing and struck Ciri in the face so hard it made the chair rock.

‘Forgive her, Your Lordship,’ said the guard apologetically and astonishingly mildly. ‘She’s young and foolish. Skittish.’

‘Angoulême,’ Artevelde said slowly and emphatically. ‘I promised you I’d hear you out. But I meant I’d listen to your answers to my questions. Not to your badinage. You will be rebuked for your lack of respect. Understand?’

‘Sure, nuncle.’

The gesture. The slap. The chair rocked.

‘Young,’ mumbled the guard, rubbing his hand on his hip. ‘Skittish . . . ’

From the young woman's snub nose – Geralt could see now that it wasn't Ciri and was astonished at his mistake – trickled a thin stream of blood. The young woman sniffed hard and smiled predatorily.

'Angoulême,' the prefect repeated. 'Do you understand me?'

'Yes sir, Mr Fulko.'

'Who's this, Angoulême?'

The girl sniffed again, inclined her head and fixed Geralt with her huge eyes. Hazel, not green. Then she shook her untidy mane of flaxen hair, causing it to fall onto her forehead in unruly locks.

'Never seen him before.' She licked the blood which dripped onto her lip. 'But I know who he is. Anyway, I already told you that, Mr Fulko; now you know I wasn't lying. His name's Geralt. He's a witcher. He crossed the Yaruga about ten days ago and he's heading for Toussaint. Right, my white-haired nuncle?'

'She's young . . . Skittish . . .' said the guard quickly, looking somewhat anxiously at the prefect. But Fulko Artevelde just grimaced and shook his head.

'You'll still be fooling about on the scaffold, Angoulême. Very well, let's go on. With whom, according to you, was Geralt the Witcher travelling?'

'I've already told you that too! With a comely fellow called Dandelion, who's a troubadour and carries a lute. And a young woman, who has dark blonde, chin-length hair. I don't know her name. And another man, without a description, his name wasn't mentioned either. Four of them in all.'

Geralt rested his chin on his knuckles, observing the girl with interest. Angoulême didn't lower her gaze.

'What eyes you have,' she said. 'Creepy peepers!'

'Continue, Angoulême, continue,' Mr Fulko urged, scowling. 'Who else belonged to this witcher's cohort?'

'No one. I said there were four of them. Not been listening, nuncle?'

The gesture, the slap, the trickle. The guard kneaded his hip, but refrained from any more comments about the skittishness of youth.

'You lie, Angoulême,' said the prefect. 'How many of them are

there, I ask for the second time?'

'Whatever you say, Mr Fulko. Whatever you say. As you wish. There's two hundred of 'em. Three hundred! Six hundred!'

'Lord prefect.' Geralt forestalled the order to strike. 'Let's leave it, if we may. What she said is precise enough to show she's not lying; at most lacking in information. But where did she get her facts? She declared she's never seen me before. It's the first time I've seen her too. I give my word.'

'Thank you,' Artevelde frowned at him, 'for your help with the investigation. How valuable. When I start interrogating you I count on your being equally eloquent. Angoulême, did you hear what the gentleman said? Speak. And don't make me encourage you.'

'It was said,' replied the girl as she licked the blood dripping from her nose, 'that if the authorities were informed about a planned crime, if it was revealed who was planning villainy, there'd be clemency. So I'm telling you, ain't I? I know about a crime being prepared and I want to forestall the evil deed. Listen to what I say: Nightingale and his hanza are waiting in Belhaven for this here witcher and are planning to club him to death there. A half-elf gave them the contract. A stranger, no one knows where the hell he's from, no one knows him. The half-elf said it all: who he is, what he looks like, where he's from, when he'll arrive, in what company. He warned that the Witcher's no mug but an old hand, so not to play the hero, but stab him in the back, down him with a crossbow or better yet poison him, if he eats or drinks somewhere in Belhaven. The half-elf gave Nightingale some money. A lot of money. And promised there'd be more after the job's done.'

'After it's done,' Fulko Artevelde remarked. 'So the half-elf is still in Belhaven? With Nightingale's gang?'

'Perhaps. I don't know. It's over a fortnight since I escaped from Nightingale's hanza.'

'So would that be the reason you're grassing them up?' the Witcher smiled. 'Settling scores?'

The young woman's eyes narrowed and her swollen mouth twisted. 'Leave my sodding scores out of this, nuncle! And me grassing is saving your life, right? Some thanks would be in order!'

'Thank you.' Geralt again prevented the beating. 'I only meant to remark that if you're settling scores, it diminishes your credibility to turn imperial evidence. People grass to save their skin and their

life, but they lie when they want revenge.'

'Our Angoulême has no chance of saving her life,' Fulko Artevelde interjected. 'But she wants, naturally, to save her skin. To me that's an absolutely credible motive. Well, Angoulême? You do want to save your skin, don't you?'

The girl pursed her lips and visibly blanched.

'The boldness of a criminal,' said the prefect contemptuously, 'and of a snot-nosed kid at the same time. Swoop down in numbers, rob the weak, kill the defenceless, oh, yes. Look death in the eye, not so easy. That's beyond you.'

'We shall see,' she snarled.

'We shall,' nodded Fulko gravely. 'And we shall hear. You'll bellow your lungs out on the scaffold, Angoulême.'

'You promised me clemency.'

'And I shall keep my promise. If what you have testified proves to be the truth.'

Angoulême jerked on the chair, pointing at Geralt with a movement seemingly of her whole, slim body.

'And that?' she yelled. 'What's that? Isn't that the truth? Let him deny he's a witcher and he's Geralt! Let him say I'm not credible! Let him ride to Belhaven, and you'll have better proof that I'm not lying! You'll find his corpse in some gutter in the morning. But then you'll say I didn't prevent a crime, so the clemency'll still come to nothing! That right? You're fucking swindlers! Nothing but swindlers!'

'Don't hit her,' said Geralt. 'Please.'

There was something in his voice that checked the raised hands of the prefect and the guard. Angoulême sniffed, looking at him piercingly.

'Thanks, nuncle,' she said. 'But beating's nothing much. If they want, let 'em carry on. I've been beaten since a child, I'm used to it. If you want to be kind, confirm I'm telling the truth. Let them keep their word. Let them sodding hang me.'

'Take her away,' Fulko ordered, quietening Geralt, who was about to protest, with a gesture.

'She is of no use to us,' he explained, once they were alone. 'I know everything and you shall have your explanations. And then I

shall ask for reciprocity.'

'First of all,' the Witcher's voice was cold, 'explain what that noisy exit was all about. Ending with that curious request to be hanged. If she's turned imperial evidence the girl's done her work, hasn't she?'

'Not yet.'

'How is that?'

'Homer Straggen, nicknamed Nightingale, is an exceptionally dangerous scoundrel. Cruel and brazen, cunning and clever, and a lucky rogue. His impunity emboldens others. I must put an end to it. Which is why I made a deal with Angoulême. I promised her that if, as a result of her testimony, Nightingale is captured and his gang broken up, she will hang.'

'I beg your pardon?' The Witcher's astonishment was genuine. 'Is that what you call turning imperial evidence here? The noose in exchange for collaboration with the authorities? And what for refusing to collaborate?'

'Impalement. Preceded by gouging out the eyes and tearing the bosom with red-hot pincers.'

The Witcher didn't say a word.

'It is called exemplary terror,' Fulko Artevelde continued. 'Absolutely imperative in the fight against crime. Why do you clench your fists, so hard I can almost hear your knuckles grinding? Perhaps you favour humane killing? You can afford that luxury. You mainly fight creatures, which, however ridiculous it sounds, also kill humanely. I cannot afford it. I've seen merchants' convoys and homes pillaged by Nightingale and his like. I've seen what's done to people to make them reveal hiding places or magical passwords to jewel cases and strong boxes. I've seen the women Nightingale has taken a knife to just to check they weren't concealing valuables. I've seen worse things done to people simply for the sake of wanton amusement. Angoulême, whose fate moves you so, took part in such merriment – that is certain. She was in the gang long enough. And were it not for sheer accident and the fact she fled the gang no one would have found out about the ambush in Belhaven, and you would have learned of it some other way. Perhaps she'd have shot you in the back with a crossbow.'

'I don't like speculation. Do you know why she fled the gang?'

‘Her evidence in that regard was vague, and she didn’t want to divulge it to my men. But it’s no secret that Nightingale is one of those men who restrict women to a, let us say, primitively natural role. If he can’t do it any other way, he forces that role on women. Certainly generational conflicts contributed to it. Nightingale is a mature man, while Angoulême’s last gang were urchins like her. But those are speculations; in actual fact, it interests me not. And why, may I ask, do you care? Why has Angoulême evoked such interest from the moment you saw her?’

‘Strange question. The girl informs me about an attempt on my life being planned by her former comrades on the orders of some half-elf. A sensational matter in itself, since I have no long-standing feuds with any half-elves. The girl knows only too well what company I ride with. Including such details as the troubadour being called Dandelion, and that the woman has cut off her plait. That plait, particularly, makes me suspect lies or a trap in this. It wouldn’t have been hard to seize and question one of the forest beekeepers I’ve been journeying with for the last week. And swiftly stage a—’

‘That will do!’ Artevelde slammed his fist on the table. ‘You race too far ahead, sir. You’re accusing me of engineering something here? To what end? To deceive or ensnare you? And who are you that you so fear provocation and ensnarement? Only the thief fears the truth, m’lord witcher. Only the thief!’

‘Give me another explanation.’

‘No, you give me one, sir!’

‘Regrettably, I have none.’

‘I might say something,’ the prefect smiled maliciously. ‘But for what? Let’s be clear. I’m not interested in who wants to see you dead or why. I don’t care where that person came by such interesting information about you, including your comrade’s hair colour and length. I shall go further: I might have not informed you at all about the plot on your life, witcher. I could simply have treated your company as utterly ignorant bait for Nightingale. Lurked, waited until the Nightingale swallowed the hook, line and sinker. And then seized him as my own. For it’s him I’m interested in, him I want. And if you met your maker? Ha, a necessary evil, incidental!’

He fell silent. Geralt made no comment.

‘Know you, master witcher,’ the prefect continued after a pause, ‘that I swore to myself that the law would rule on my turf. At any cost, and using any methods, *per fas et nefas*. For the law is not jurisprudence, not a weighty tome full of articles, not philosophical treatises, not peevish nonsense about justice, not hackneyed platitudes about morality and ethics. The law means safe paths and highways. It means backstreets one can walk along even after sundown. It means inns and taverns one can leave to visit the privy, leaving one’s purse on the table and one’s wife beside it. The law is the sleep of people certain they’ll be woken by the crowing of the rooster and not the crashing of burning roof timbers! And for those who break the law; the noose, the axe, the stake and the red-hot iron! Punishments which deter others. Those that break the law should be caught and punished. Using all available means and methods . . . Eh, witcher? Is the disapproval written on your countenance a reaction to the intention or the methods? The methods, I think! For it’s easy to criticise methods, but we would all prefer to live in a safe world, wouldn’t we? Go on, answer!’

‘There’s nothing to say.’

‘Oh, I believe there is.’

‘Mr Fulko,’ Geralt said calmly, ‘the world you envision quite pleases me.’

‘Indeed? Your expression suggests otherwise.’

‘The world you envision is made for a witcher. A witcher would never be short of work in it. Instead of codes, articles and peevish platitudes about justice, your idea creates lawlessness, anarchy, the licence and self-serving of princelings and mandarins, the officiousness of careerists wanting to endear themselves to their superiors, the blind vindictiveness of fanatics, the cruelty of assassins, retribution and sadistic vengeance. Your vision is a world where people are afraid to venture out after dark; not for fear of cut-throats, but of the guardians of public order. For, after all, the result of all great crackdowns on miscreants is always that the miscreants enter the ranks of the guardians of public order en masse. Your vision is a world of bribery, blackmail and entrapment, a world of turning imperial evidence and false witnesses. A world of snoopers and coerced confessions. Informing and the fear of being informed upon. And inevitably the day will come in your world when the flesh of the wrong person will be torn with pincers, when an innocent person is hanged or impaled. And then it will be a

world of crime.

‘In short,’ he finished, ‘a world where a witcher would be in his element.’

‘Well, well,’ Fulko Artevelde said after moment’s silence, rubbing his eye socket through the leather patch. ‘An idealist! A witcher. A professional. A hired killer. But an idealist, nonetheless. And a moralist. That’s dangerous in your profession, witcher. A sign you begin to outgrow your profession. One day you’ll hesitate to despatch a striga. For what if it’s innocent? What if it’s blind vengeance and blind fanaticism? I don’t wish it on you. But what if, one day . . . I don’t wish this on you either, though it is possible . . . what if someone close to you is harmed in a cruel and sadistic way? Then I’d willingly return to this conversation, to the issue of the punishment fitting the crime. Who knows if we would then differ so greatly in our views? But today – here, now – that is not the subject of our consideration or discussion. Today we shall talk about hard facts. And you’re a hard fact.’

Geralt raised an eyebrow slightly.

‘Though you were scornful about my methods and my vision of a world of law, you shall aid me, my dear witcher, in the fulfilling of that vision. I repeat: I swore to myself that those who break the law will get their just desserts. All of them. From the minor felon who cheats with dishonest scales at the market, to he who swipes a cargo of bows and arrows meant for the army on the highway. Highwaymen, cutpurses, thieves, robbers. Terrorists from the Free Slopes organisation, who grandly call themselves “freedom fighters”. And Nightingale. Above all Nightingale. A fitting punishment must befall Nightingale; the method is inconsequential. As long as it’s quick. Before an amnesty is declared and he weasels out . . . Witcher, I’ve been waiting months for something that’ll let me get one step ahead of him. That’ll let me nudge him, make him trip up and make the decisive error which will be his undoing. Shall I continue, or do you follow?’

‘I do, but go on.’

‘The mysterious half-elf, seemingly the initiator and instigator of the attempt, warned Nightingale about a witcher, advocated caution, advised against a cavalier attitude or swaggering arrogance and bravado. I know he had his reasons. The warning will come to nothing, though. Nightingale will make a mistake. He will attack a witcher who’s been forewarned and is prepared to defend himself. A

witcher who's waiting to be attacked. And it'll be the end of the robber Nightingale. I wish to strike a bargain with you, Geralt. You shall be my informer. Don't interrupt; it's a simple agreement. Each side will meet their obligations. You put paid to Nightingale. While in exchange, I . . . '

He was silent for a while, smiling slyly.

'I shan't ask you who you are, where you're from, or where and why you journey. I shan't ask why one of you speaks with a barely detectable Nilfgaardian accent, and why sometimes dogs and horses bristle at your party's approach. I shan't order the roll of papers to be taken from the troubadour Dandelion, nor shall I check what they say. And I shall only inform imperial counter-intelligence about you when Nightingale is dead or in my dungeon. Or even later. Why hurry? I'll give you time. And a chance.'

'A chance to do what?'

'To reach Toussaint. That ridiculous fairy-tale duchy, whose borders even the Nilfgaardian counter-intelligence don't dare violate. And then much may change. There'll be an amnesty. There may be a truce on the far side of the Yaruga. Maybe even lasting peace.'

The Witcher was silent for a long time. The prefect's disfigured face was unmoving. His eye shone.

'Agreed,' Geralt finally said.

'Without haggling? Without conditions?'

'I have two.'

'How could it be otherwise? Go on.'

'I must first ride west for a few days. To Loch Monduirn. To the druids, since—'

'Are you making an ass of me?' Fulko Artevelde interrupted abruptly. 'Do you mean to gull me? West? Everyone knows where your route takes you! Including Nightingale, who is right now laying an ambush on your road. To the south, in Belhaven, at a spot where the Nevi valley cuts the Sansretour valley leading to Toussaint.'

'Does that mean . . . '

'. . . that the druids aren't by Loch Monduirn? No, nor have they been for almost a month. They headed down the Sansretour

valley to Toussaint, under the protective wings of Duchess Anarietta of Beauclair, who has a weakness for freaks, loonies and oddballs. Who gladly gives asylum to such in her little fairy-tale land. You know that as well as I do, witcher. Don't try to dupe me!'

'I won't try,' Geralt said slowly. 'I give you my word that I won't. I set out for Belhaven tomorrow.'

'Haven't you forgotten something?'

'No, I haven't forgotten. My second condition: I want Angoulême. You'll rush through her amnesty and release her from the dungeon. This witcher informer needs your informer. Quickly. Do you agree or not?'

'I do,' Fulko Artevelde replied almost at once. 'I have no choice. Angoulême is yours. For I know you're only cooperating for her sake.'

*

The vampire, riding at Geralt's side, listened attentively and didn't interrupt. The Witcher wasn't disappointed by his perspicacity.

'There are five or us, not four,' he concluded as soon as Geralt had finished his account. 'We've been travelling in a group of five since the end of August; the five of us crossed the Yaruga. And Milva only cut off her plait in Riverdell, about a week ago. Your fair-haired protégée knows about Milva's plait. But said four not five. Bizarre.'

'Is that the strangest part of this bizarre story?'

'Far from it. The strangest thing is Belhaven. The town where the ambush has reputedly been laid for us. A town set deep in the mountains, on the path through the Nevi valley and the Theodula pass—'

'—and we never planned to go there,' the Witcher finished, spurring on Roach, who was beginning to fall behind. 'Three weeks ago, when that highwayman Nightingale took the job to kill me from some half-elf, we were in Angren, heading to Caed Dhu, fearful of the Ysgith bogs. We didn't even know we'd have to cross the Yaruga. Dammit, we didn't know that this morning—'

'We did,' the vampire interrupted. 'We knew we were looking

for the druids. We knew that just as clearly this morning as three weeks ago. That mysterious half-elf is preparing an ambush on the road leading to the druids, certain we'll take that road. He simply—'

'Has a better idea than us which way that road leads,' it was the Witcher's turn to interrupt. 'How does he?'

'We shall have to ask. Which is precisely why you took the prefect's offer, isn't it?'

'Naturally. I'm counting on being able to have a chat with Mr Half-Elf.' Geralt smiled hideously. 'Before that happens, doesn't any explanation suggest itself to you? Or simply come to mind?'

The vampire observed him in silence for some time.

'I don't like what you're saying, Geralt,' he said at last. 'I don't like what you're thinking. I consider it an inopportune thought. Taken hurriedly, without reflection. Resulting from prejudice and resentment.'

'How else can one explain—'

'Any way,' Regis interrupted him with a tone Geralt had never heard from him. 'Any way but like that. Don't you think, for example, there's a possibility your fair-haired protégée is lying?'

'Hey, there, nuncle!' called Angoulême, riding behind them on the mule called Draakul. 'Don't accuse me of lying if you can't prove it!'

'I'm not your uncle, dear child.'

'And I'm not your dear child, nuncle!'

'Angoulême,' Witcher turned around in the saddle. 'Be quiet.'

'If you say so.' Angoulême calmed down immediately. 'You're allowed to give me orders. You got me out of that hole, wrested me from Mr Fulko's talons. I obey you, you're now the leader, the head of the hanza . . . '

'Be quiet please.'

Angoulême muttered under her breath, stopped urging Draakul on and remained at the rear, particularly since Regis and Geralt had put on speed to catch up with Dandelion, Cahir and Milva, who were riding in the vanguard. They were heading towards the mountains, along the bank of the River Nevi, whose waters, turbid and yellowish-brown following the last rains, rolled swiftly over rocks and shelves. They weren't alone. They frequently passed or

overtook troops of Nilfgaardian cavalry, lone horsemen, settlers' wagons or merchants' caravans.

The Amell Mountains rose up to the south, closer and closer and more and more menacing. And the pointed needle of Gorgon, Devil Mountain, was enveloped in the clouds which quickly covered the whole sky.

'When are you going to tell them?' the vampire asked, indicating with a glance the threesome riding ahead of them.

'When we make camp.'

*

Dandelion was the first to speak when Geralt had finished his account.

'Correct me if I'm wrong,' he said. 'But that girl, Angoulême, whom you have so cheerfully and carelessly added to our company, is a criminal. To save her from her well-deserved penalty you've agreed to collaborate with the Nilfgaardians. You've hired yourself out. Why, not just yourself – you've hired us all out. We are all to assist the Nilfgaardians capture or kill somebody. Some local brigand. In short: you, Geralt, have become a Nilfgaardian mercenary, a bounty hunter, a hired assassin. And we've been promoted to the rank of your acolytes . . . Or perhaps your fam—'

'You have an incredible talent for over simplification, Dandelion,' Cahir muttered. 'Have you really not understood what this is about? Or are you just talking for talking's sake?'

'Silence, Nilfgaardian. Geralt?'

'Let me begin by saying,' the Witcher threw a stick he'd been playing with for some time onto the fire, 'that no one's forced to help me with my plans. I can handle it by myself. Without acolytes or famuli.'

'You're audacious, nuncle,' Angoulême began. 'But Nightingale's hanza numbers twenty-four stout blades. They won't take fright at a witcher, and where it concerns swordsmanship, even if it were true what they say about witchers, no witcher could deal with two dozen by himself. You saved my life, so I'll repay you likewise. With a warning. And with help.'

‘What the bloody hell is a hanza?’

‘*Aen hanse*,’ Cahir explained. ‘In our tongue it’s an armed gang, but one linked by bonds of friendship—’

‘A company?’

‘Precisely. I see the word has entered the local slang here—’

‘A hanza’s a hanza,’ Angoulême interrupted. ‘In our lingo: a gang or hassa. What are we on about here? That was a serious warning. One man has no chance against the entire hanza. To make matters worse, one who knows neither Nightingale, nor anyone in Belhaven or the surroundings, neither foes, friends, nor allies. Who knows not the roads leading to the town – and there are various. I say: the Witcher won’t cope. I don’t know what customs prevail among you, but I won’t leave the Witcher alone. As Nuncle Dandelion said, he cheerfully and carelessly took me into your company, even though I’m a criminal. My hair still stinks of the cell; there was no way of washing it. The Witcher, and no other, got me out of that cell and into the daylight. I’m grateful to him for that. Which is why I won’t leave him alone. I’ll lead him to Belhaven, to Nightingale and that half-elf. I’m going with him.’

‘Me too,’ Cahir said at once.

‘And me and all!’ Milva barked.

Dandelion pressed to his chest the tube with the manuscripts which, lately, he wouldn’t be parted from for a single moment. He lowered his head. He was evidently struggling with his thoughts. And the thoughts were winning.

‘Stop meditating, poet,’ Regis said kindly. ‘For there’s nothing to be ashamed of. You’re even less cut out to participate in a bloody swordfight than I am. We weren’t taught to carve up our neighbours with a blade. Furthermore . . . Furthermore, I’m . . . ’

He raised shining eyes towards the Witcher and Milva.

‘I’m a coward,’ he confessed curtly. ‘If it’s not necessary, I don’t want to go through what we had on the ferry and the bridge again. Never. For which reason I request to be left out of the fighting team heading to Belhaven.’

‘You lugged me from that ferry and that bridge on your back,’ Milva began softly, ‘when infirmity robbed me of my legs. If there’d been a coward there, instead of you, he’d have left me and fled. There was no coward, though. Only you, Regis.’

‘Well said, aunty,’ said Angoulême with conviction. ‘I have no clue what you’re on about, but well said.’

‘I’m no aunt of yours!’ Milva’s eyes flashed ominously. ‘Have a care, miss! If you call me that again, you’ll see!’

‘What will I see?’

‘Quiet!’ the Witcher barked harshly. ‘That’s enough, Angoulême! I need to take all of you to task, I see. The time of lurching blindly towards the horizon is over, for now there might be something just over the horizon. The time for decisive action has arrived. Time for throats to be cut. For at last there’s someone to attack. Those who haven’t understood till now, let them understand – we finally have a clear-cut enemy within reach. The half-elf who wants us dead is an agent of forces hostile to us. Thanks to Angoulême we’ve been forewarned, and forewarned is forearmed, as the proverb has it. I have to get my hands on that half-elf and wring from him whose orders he’s acting on. Do you finally understand, Dandelion?’

‘I’d say,’ the poet began calmly, ‘that I understand more and better than you. Without any attacking or wringing needed, I surmise that the mysterious half-elf is acting on Dijkstra’s orders. The same Dijkstra you lamed on Thanedd by smashing his ankle. Following Marshal Vissegerd’s report, Dijkstra doubtless considers us Nilfgaardian spies. And following our flight from the corps of Lyrian partisans, Queen Meve has assuredly added a few points to the list of our crimes . . . ’

‘You’re mistaken, Dandelion,’ Regis softly interjected. ‘It’s not Dijkstra. Or Vissegerd. Or Meve.’

‘Then who?’

‘Any judgement or conclusion now would be premature.’

‘Agreed,’ the Witcher drawled icily. ‘Which is why the matter needs to be examined in situ. And conclusions drawn first-hand.’

‘And I,’ Dandelion said, not giving up, ‘still judge it a stupid and risky idea. It’s good we’ve been warned about the ambush, that we know about it. Now that we know, let’s give it a wide berth. Let that elf or half-elf wait for us as long as he wishes, and we’ll hurry along our own road—’

‘No,’ the Witcher interrupted. ‘That’s the end of the discussion, my little chicks. The end of anarchy. The time has come for our . . .

hanza . . . to have a ringleader.'

Everyone, not excluding Angoulême, looked at him in expectant silence.

'Angoulême, Milva and I,' he said, 'will make for Belhaven. Cahir, Regis and Dandelion will ride into the Sansretour valley and go to Toussaint.'

'No,' Dandelion said quickly, gripping his tube more tightly. 'Not a chance. I can't—'

'Shut up. This isn't a debate. It was an order from the hanza's leader! You're going to Toussaint with Regis and Cahir. You'll wait for us there.'

'Toussaint means death for me,' the troubadour declared emphatically. 'If I'm recognised in Beauclair, at the castle, I'm dead. I have to tell you—'

'No you don't,' the Witcher interrupted bluntly. 'It's too late. You could have turned back, but you didn't want to. You remained in the company. In order to rescue Ciri. Am I right?'

'You are.'

'So you'll ride with Regis and Cahir down the Sansretour valley. You'll wait for us in the mountains, without crossing the Toussaint border for now. But if . . . if the necessity arises, you'll have to cross it. For the druids, the ones from Caed Dhu, Regis's acquaintances, are allegedly in Toussaint. So if the necessity arises, you'll get information about Ciri from the druids and set off to get her . . . alone.'

'What do you mean alone? Do you anticipate—'

'I'm not anticipating, I'm bearing in mind the possibility. Just in case, so to speak. As a last resort, if you prefer. Perhaps it'll all go well and we won't have to show up in Toussaint. But in the event . . . well, then it's important that a Nilfgaardian force doesn't follow you to Toussaint.'

'Well, it won't,' Angoulême cut in. 'It's strange, but Nilfgaard respects Toussaint's marches. I've hidden from pursuers there before. But the knights there are no better than the Black Cloaks! Refined and courteous in their speech, but quick to seize the sword or lance. And they patrol the marches ceaselessly. They're called knights errant. They ride alone, or in twos or threes. And they persecute the rabble. Which means us. Witcher, one detail needs

changing in your plans.'

'What?'

'If we are to make for Belhaven and cross swords with Nightingale, you and Sir Cahir should go with me. And let aunty go with them.'

'Why so?' Geralt calmed Milva with a gesture.

'You need men for that job. Why are you raging, aunty? I know what I'm talking about! When the time comes, it may be necessary to act with menace, rather than force itself. And none of Nightingale's hanza will be scared of a band of three, where there are two women to one man.'

'Milva rides with us.' Geralt clenched his fingers around the archer's forearm, who was genuinely infuriated. 'Milva, not Cahir. I don't want to ride with Cahir.'

'Why's that?' Angoulême and Cahir asked almost at the same time.

'Precisely,' Regis said slowly. 'Why?'

'Because I don't trust him,' the Witcher said bluntly.

The silence which fell was unpleasant, weighty; almost tangible. From the forest, near which a merchants' caravan and a group of other travellers had made camp, came raised voices, shouts and singing.

'Explain,' Cahir said at last.

'Somebody has betrayed us,' Witcher said dryly. 'After our conversation with the prefect and Angoulême's revelations, there's no doubt about it. And if one thinks it over carefully, one comes to the conclusion that there's a traitor among us. And it takes little pondering to guess who.'

'It seems to me,' Cahir frowned, 'that you have taken the liberty to suggest that the traitor is me?'

'I don't deny that such a thought has occurred to me,' the Witcher's voice was cold. 'There's much to suggest it. It would explain much. Very much.'

'Geralt,' said Dandelion. 'Aren't you going a mite too far?'

'Let him speak.' Cahir curled his lip. 'Let him speak. Let him feel free.'

‘It puzzled us,’ Geralt swept his gaze over his companions’ faces, ‘how there could have been an error in the reckoning. You know what I’m talking about. That there are five of us and not four. We thought someone had simply made a mistake: the mysterious half-elf, the brigand Nightingale or Angoulême. But if we reject that then the following possibility suggests itself: the company numbers five, but Nightingale is only meant to kill four. Because the fifth is the assassins’ accomplice. Someone who keeps them constantly informed about the company’s movements. From the start, from the moment the celebrated fish soup was eaten and the company was formed. And we invited a Nilfgaardian to join us. A Nilfgaardian who must catch Ciri, must hand her over to Emperor Emhyr, for his life and further career depends on it . . . ’

‘So I wasn’t wrong, then,’ Cahir said slowly. ‘I’m a traitor after all. A lousy, two-faced turncoat?’

‘Geralt,’ Regis began again. ‘Excuse my frankness, but your theory is riddled with holes. And your thought, as I’ve already told you, is inopportune.’

‘I’m a traitor,’ Cahir repeated, as though he hadn’t heard the vampire’s words. ‘As I understand it, however, there is no proof of it, only vague circumstantial evidence and the Witcher’s speculations. As I understand it, the burden of proving my own innocence falls on me. So I’ll have to prove I’m not what I appear to be. Is that right?’

‘Don’t be pompous, Nilfgaardian,’ snapped Geralt, standing before Cahir and glaring at him. ‘If I had proof of your guilt, I wouldn’t be wasting time talking. I’d have filleted you like a herring already! Do you know the principle of *cui bono*? So answer me: who, aside from you, had even the slightest reason to betray me? Who, aside from you, would have gained anything from it?’

A loud and long-drawn-out crack resounded from the merchants’ camp. A firework exploded in a burst of red and gold, rockets shot out a swarm of golden bees and coloured rain fell against the black sky.

‘I’m not what I appear,’ said the young Nilfgaardian in a powerful, resonant voice. ‘Unfortunately, I can’t prove it. But I can do something else. Do what befits me, what I have to do, when I’m being slandered and insulted, when my honour is besmirched and my dignity sullied.’

His attack was as swift as lightning, but it still wouldn’t have

surprised the Witcher had it not been for Geralt's aching knee, which hampered his movements. Geralt was unable to dodge, and the gloved fist smashed him in the jaw with such force he fell backwards and tumbled straight into the campfire, throwing up clouds of sparks. He leaped up, too slow again owing to the pain in his knee. Cahir was already upon him. Again the Witcher didn't even manage to duck; the fist rammed into the side of his head, and colourful fireworks flared up in his eyes, even more glorious than the ones the merchants had set off. Geralt swore and pounced on Cahir, wrapped his arms around him and knocked him to the ground. They rolled around in the gravel, thumping and pummelling each other.

And all in the eerie and unnatural light of the fireworks bursting in the sky.

'Stop it!' Dandelion yelled. 'Stop it, you bloody fools!'

Cahir artfully knocked the ground out from under Geralt, and smote him in the teeth as he was trying to get up. And punched him again. Geralt crouched, tensed and kicked him, not in his crotch where he had aimed, but in the thigh. They grappled again, fell and rolled over, thumping one another wherever they could, blinded by the punches and the dust and sand getting into their eyes.

Then suddenly they came apart, rolling in opposite directions, cowering and shielding their heads from the blows raining down on them.

Having unfastened her sturdy, leather belt, Milva had seized it by the buckle, wound it around her fist, fallen on the fighters and begun to flog them with lusty blows, with all her might, sparing neither the strap nor her arm. The belt whistled and fell with a dry crack first on Cahir's then on Geralt's arms, back and shoulders. When they parted, Milva hopped from one to the other like a grasshopper, thrashing them evenly, so that neither of them received any less or any more than the other.

'You thick thickheads!' she yelled, cracking Geralt across the back. 'You doltish dolts! I'll teach you both a lesson!'

'Enough?' she yelled even louder, lashing Cahir's arms, with which he was shielding his head. 'Had enough? Calmed down now?'

'Stop!' the Witcher howled. 'Enough!'

'Enough!' echoed Cahir, who was huddled up in a ball. 'That'll do!'

‘That will suffice,’ said the vampire. ‘That really will suffice, Milva.’

The archer was panting heavily, wiping her forehead with her fist, belt still wound around it.

‘Bravo,’ said Angoulême. ‘Bravo, aunty.’

Milva turned on her heel and thrashed her across the shoulders with all her might. Angoulême screamed, sat down and burst into tears.

‘I told you,’ Milva puffed, ‘not to call me that. I told you!’

‘It’s all right!’ In a somewhat shaking voice Dandelion reassured the merchants and travellers, who had run over from the neighbouring campfires. ‘Just a misunderstanding between friends. A lovers’ tiff. It’s already been patched up!’

The Witcher probed a wobbly tooth with his tongue and spat out the blood dripping from his cut lip. He felt the welts beginning to rise on his back and shoulders, and his ear – which had been lashed by the strap – seeming to swell to the dimensions of a cauliflower. Beside him, Cahir clumsily hauled himself up from the ground, holding his cheek. Broad, red marks quickly spread over his exposed forearm.

Rain smelling of sulphur – ash from the last firework – was falling on the ground.

Angoulême sobbed woefully, holding her shoulders. Milva threw aside her belt, then after a moment’s hesitation knelt, embraced and hugged her without a word.

‘I suggest,’ said the vampire frigidly, ‘that you shake hands. I suggest never, ever, revisiting this matter.’

Unexpectedly, a gale came down from the mountains in whispered gusts in which it seemed some kind of ghastly howling, crying and wailing could be heard. The clouds being blown across the sky took on fantastic shapes as the crescent moon turned as red as blood.

*

They were woken before dawn by a furious chorus of goatsucker nightjars and the whirring of their wings.

They set off just after the rising of the sun, which later lit up the snows on the mountain peaks with blinding flame. They had left much earlier than that, before the sun had appeared from behind the peaks. Actually, before it appeared, the sky had become overcast.

They rode amongst forests, and the road led higher and higher, which was discernible in the tree species. The oak and hornbeam finished abruptly, and they rode into a gloom of beech lined with fallen leaves, smelling of mould, cobwebs and mushrooms. The mushrooms were in abundance. The damp year end had yielded a plentiful harvest. In places, the forest floor literally vanished beneath the caps of ceps, morels and agarics.

The beechwood was quiet and looked as though most of the songbirds had flown away to their mysterious winter haven. Only crows at the edge of the undergrowth cawed, feathers dripping.

Then the beech ended and spruce replaced it. The scent of resin filled the air.

More and more often they encountered bald hillocks and stone runs, where they were caught by strong winds. The River Nevi foamed over steps and cascades. Its water – in spite of the rain – had turned crystal clear.

Gorgon loomed up on the horizon. Ever closer.

All year long, glaciers and snows flowed from the angular sides of the huge mountain, which meant Gorgon always looked as though it were clad in white sashes. The peak of Devil Mountain was constantly swathed in veils of clouds, like the head and neck of an enigmatic bride. Sometimes, though, Gorgon shook her white raiment like a dancer. The sight was breathtaking, but brought death – avalanches ran from the peak's sheer walls, wiping out everything in their path, down to the scree at the foot and further down the hillside, to the highest spruce stands above the Theodula pass, above the Nevi and Sansretour valleys, above the black circles of mountain tarns. The sun, which in spite of everything had managed to penetrate the clouds, set much too quickly – it simply hid behind the mountains to the west, setting light to them with a purple and golden glow.

They stopped for the night.

The sun rose.

And the time came for them to part.

*

Milva carefully wrapped a silk scarf around her head. Regis put on his hat. Yet again he checked the position of the sihill on his back and the daggers in his boots.

Beside them, Cahir was whetting his long Nilfgaardian sword. Angoulême tied a woollen band around her forehead and slipped a hunting knife – a present from Milva – into her boot. The archer and Regis saddled up their horses. The vampire handed Angoulême the reins to his black, while he mounted the mule Draakul.

They were ready. Only one thing remained to be taken care of.

'Come here, everybody.'

They approached.

'Cahir, son of Ceallach,' Geralt began, trying not to sound pompous. 'I wronged you with unfounded suspicion and behaved shabbily towards you. I hereby apologise, before everyone, with bowed head. I apologise and ask you to forgive me. I also ask you all for forgiveness, as I shouldn't have made you watch or listen to it.

'I vented my fury and resentment on Cahir and all of you. It was caused by knowing who betrayed us. I know who betrayed and abducted Ciri, whom we aim to rescue. I'm angry because I'm talking about a person who was once very close to me.

'Where we are, what we're planning, what route we're taking and whither we're heading . . . all was uncovered with the help of scanning, detecting magic. It's none too difficult for a mistress of magic to remotely detect and observe a person who was once well-known and close, with whom they had a long-term psychic contact which permits the creation of a matrix. But the sorcerer and sorceress of whom I speak made a mistake. They've revealed themselves. They made an error when counting the members of the company, and that error betrayed them. Tell them, Regis.'

'Geralt may be right,' Regis said slowly. 'Like every vampire, I'm invisible to magical visual probing and scanning; that is, to a detecting spell. A vampire may be tracked using an analytical spell, from close up, but it is not possible to detect a vampire with a remote, scanning spell. The detection will report that there's no one

there. Thus only a sorcerer could be mistaken regarding us: to register four people, where there were actually five; that is, four people and one vampire.'

'We shall exploit the sorcerers' error,' the Witcher continued. 'Cahir, Angoulême and I shall ride to Belhaven to talk to the half-elf who hired assassins to kill us. We won't ask the half-elf on whose orders he's acting, for we know that already. We'll ask him where the sorcerers on whose orders he is acting are. When we learn their location we'll go there. And exact our revenge.'

Everybody was silent.

'We stopped counting the date, so we haven't even noticed it's the twenty-fifth of September. Two days ago it was the night of the Equinox. The Equinox. Yes, that's exactly the night you're thinking about. I see your dejection, I see what your eyes are saying. We received a signal, that dreadful night, when the merchants camping beside us were keeping their courage up with aqua vitae, singing and fireworks. You probably had a less distinct sense of foreboding than Cahir and I, but you're speculating too. You suspect. And I'm afraid your suspicions are well founded.'

The crows flying over the moorland cawed.

'Everything indicates that Ciri is dead. She perished, two nights ago, at the Equinox. Somewhere far from here, alone amongst hostile people; strangers.

'And all that's left to us is vengeance. A cruel and bloody revenge, about which stories will still be told a hundred years hence. Stories which folk will be afraid to listen to after nightfall. And the hand of any who would repeat such a crime will tremble at the thought of our vengeance. We shall give a horrible example of terror! Using the ways of Mr Fulko Artevelde, wise Mr Fulko, who knows how blackguards and scoundrels should be treated. The illustration of terror we shall give will astonish even him!

'So let us begin and may Hell assist us! Cahir, Angoulême, to horse. We ride up the Nevi, towards Belhaven. Dandelion, Milva, Regis, make for Sansretour, towards Toussaint's borders. You won't get lost, Gorgon will point the way. Goodbye.'

*

Ciri stroked the black cat, which had returned to the cottage in the swamp, as is customary with all cats in the world, when its love of freedom and dissolution had been undermined by cold, hunger and discomfort. Now it was lying in the girl's lap and arching its back against her hand with a purr signifying profound bliss. The cat couldn't have cared less about what the girl was saying.

'It was the only time I dreamed of Geralt,' Ciri began. 'From the time we parted on the Isle of Thanedd, from the Tower of the Seagull, I'd never seen him in a dream. So I thought he was dead. And then suddenly came that dream, like the ones I used to have, dreams which Yennefer said were prophetic, precognitive; that they either show the past or the future. That was the day before the Equinox. In a small town whose name I don't recall. In a cellar where Bonhart had locked me. After he'd flogged me and made me admit who I am.'

'Did you divulge to him who you are?' Vysogota raised his head. 'Did you tell him everything?'

'I paid for my cowardice,' she swallowed, 'with humiliation and self-contempt.'

'Tell me about your dream.'

'In it I saw a mountain; lofty, sheer, and sharp, like a stone knife. I saw Geralt. I heard what he was saying. Exactly. Every word, as though he were with me. I remember I wanted to call out and say it wasn't like that at all, that none of it was true, that he'd made an awful mistake . . . That he'd got everything wrong! That it wasn't the Equinox yet, so even if I happened to have died on the Equinox, he shouldn't have declared me dead earlier, when I was still alive. And he shouldn't have accused Yennefer or said such things about her . . . '

She was silent for a time, stroking the cat and sniffing hard.

'But I couldn't say a word. I couldn't even breathe . . . As though I was drowning. And I awoke. The last thing I saw, that I recall from that dream, was three riders. Geralt and two others, galloping along a ravine, with water gushing from its walls . . .'

Vysogota said nothing.

*

Had someone crept up to the shack with the sunken, moss-grown thatched roof after nightfall, had they peered through the gaps in the shutters, they would have seen a grey-bearded old man listening raptly to a story told by an ashen-haired girl in the dimly lit interior, her cheek disfigured by a nasty scar.

They would have seen a black cat lying on the girl's lap, purring lazily, demanding to be stroked – to the delight of the mice scampering around the room.

But no one could have seen it. For the cottage with the sunken, moss-grown thatched roof was well hidden among the fog, in the boundless Pereplut Marshes, where no one dared to venture.

It is well known that when a witcher inflicts pain, suffering and death he experiences absolute ecstasy and bliss such as a devout and normal man only experiences during sexual congress with his wedded spouse, ibidem cum ejaculatio. This leads one to conclude that, also in this matter also, a witcher is a creature contrary to nature, an immoral and filthy degenerate, born of the blackest and most foul-smelling Hell, since surely only a devil could derive bliss from suffering and pain.

Anonymous, *Monstrum, or a description of a witcher*

CHAPTER SIX

They left the main track leading along the Nevi valley and took a short cut through the mountains. They rode as quickly as the track would allow. It was narrow and winding, hugging fantastically-shaped rocks covered in patches of colourful moss and lichen. They rode between vertical rocky cliffs, from which ragged ribbons of cascades and waterfalls tumbled. They rode through ravines and gorges, across small rickety bridges over precipices at the bottom of which streams seethed with white foam.

The angular blade of Gorgon seemed to rear up directly above their heads. The peak of Devil Mountain was not visible, but shrouded in the clouds and fog cloaking the sky. The weather – as happens in the mountains – worsened in the course of a few hours. It began to drizzle bitingly and disagreeably.

When dusk fell, the three of them nervously and impatiently looked around for a shepherd's bothy, a tumbledown barn or even a cave. Anything that would protect them from the weather during the night.

*

'I think it's stopped raining,' Angoulême said hopefully. 'It's only dripping from the holes in the roof now. Tomorrow, fortunately, we'll be near Belhaven, and we can always sleep in a shed or a barn on the outskirts.'

'Aren't we entering the town?'

'Out of the question. Mounted strangers on horses are conspicuous and Nightingale has plenty of informers in the town.'

'We were thinking about using ourselves as bait—'

'No,' she interrupted. 'That's a rotten plan. The fact that we're together will arouse suspicion. Nightingale's a cunning bastard and news of my capture has certainly spread. And if anything alarms him, it'll also reach the half-elf.'

'So what do you suggest?'

‘We skirt around the town from the east, from the mouth of the Sansretour valley. There are ore mines there. I’ve a mate who works in one of them. We’ll visit him. Who knows, with a bit of luck the visit might prove profitable.’

‘Could you speak more plainly?’

‘I’ll tell you tomorrow. In the mine. So as not to jinx it.’

Cahir threw some birch branches on the fire. It had been raining all day and no other fuel would have burned. But the birch, though wet, crackled a little and then flared up in a tall, blue flame.

‘Where are you from, Angoulême?’

‘From Cintra, Witcher. It’s a country by the sea, by the mouth of the Yaruga—’

‘I know where Cintra is.’

‘So why do you ask, if you know all that? Do I fascinate you so?’

‘A little, let’s say.’

They fell silent. The fire crackled on.

‘My mother,’ Angoulême finally said, staring into the flame, ‘was a Cintran noblewoman, from a high-ranking family, I believe. The family had a sea-cat in its coat of arms. I’d show it to you, I used to have a little medallion with that bloody sea-cat on it, from my mother, but I lost it at dice . . . That family, though – sod them and their sea-cat – disowned me, because my mother was said to have slept with some churl, a stableman, I believe, and so I was a bastard, a disgrace, an ignominious stain on their honour. They gave me away to be raised by distant relatives. Admittedly they didn’t have a cat, dog or any other fucker on their arms, but they weren’t bad to me. They sent me to school and generally didn’t beat me . . . Though they reminded me pretty often who I was. A bastard, conceived in the straw. My mother visited me maybe three or four times when I was small. Then she stopped. And to be honest, I didn’t give a shit . . . ’

‘How did you fall among criminals?’

‘You sound like an examining magistrate!’ she snorted, contorting her face grotesquely. ‘Among criminals, pshaw! Fallen from virtue, huh?’

She grunted, rummaged around in her bosom and took

something out which the Witcher couldn't see clearly.

'One-eyed Fulko,' she said indistinctly, rubbing something vigorously into her gum and inhaling, 'isn't a bad old fellow. He took what he took, but left the powder. Want a pinch, Witcher?'

'No. I'd rather you didn't take it either.'

'Why?'

'I just would.'

'Cahir?'

'I don't use fisstech.'

'Well, it's clear I've landed up with a couple of goody-goodies.' She shook her head. 'You'll probably start preaching that I'll go blind, deaf and bald from this stuff, I suppose? And give birth to a crippled child?'

'Leave it, Angoulême. And finish the story.'

The young woman sneezed loudly.

'Very well, as you wish. Where was I . . . ? Aha. The war broke out, you know, with Nilfgaard. My relatives lost everything, had to abandon their house. They had three children of their own, and I'd become a burden to them, so they gave me away to an orphanage. It was run by the priests of some temple or other. It was a jolly place, as it happens. A bordello, a whorehouse, simple as that, for people who like their fruit tart and with white pips, get it? Young girls. And young boys too. So when I joined them I was too grown up, adult, there were no takers for me . . . '

Quite unexpectedly she blushed with shame, visible even in the firelight.

'Well, almost none,' she added through clenched teeth.

'How old were you then?'

'Fifteen. I met one girl and five boys there, my age and a bit older. And we teamed up in no time. We knew, didn't we, the legends and tales. About Mad Dea, about Blackbeard, about the Cassini brothers . . . We wanted to get out on the road, to taste freedom, to maraud! So what, we told ourselves, if they feed us twice a day? Does that give some lechers the right to screw us—'

'Language, Angoulême! Keep it in moderation.'

The girl hawked noisily and spat into the campfire.

‘Prig! Very well, I’ll get to the point, because I don’t feel like talking. We found knives in the orphanage kitchen. We just had to whet them well on a stone and strop them on a belt. We made some excellent clubs from the turned legs of an oaken chair. All we needed was horses and coin, so we waited for two perverts, regular customers, old buggers of, ugh, at least forty. They came, sat down, sipped wine and waited for the priests to tie the chosen kid to a special contraption, as was customary . . . But they didn’t get their oats that day!’

‘Angoulême.’

‘All right, all right. In short: we knifed and clubbed to death those two lecherous creeps, three priests and a page; the only one not to bolt, he was guarding the horses. We roasted the temple warden’s soles until he changed his mind about giving us the key to the coffer, but we spared his life, because he was a nice old gaffer, always kind to us. And we took to the road to plunder. We had our ups and downs, won some, lost some, we gave and took some beatings. Full bellies, empty bellies. Ha, more often empty. I’ve eaten everything that crawls, anything you can fucking catch. And things that fly? I even ate a child’s kite once, because it was made of flour and water paste.’

She fell silent, then distractedly messed up her flaxen hair.

‘What’s past is past. I’ll just say this: no one who escaped with me from the orphanage is still alive. The last two, Owen and Abel, were dispatched a few days ago by Mr Fulko’s pikemen. Abel surrendered, like me, but they stuck him anyway, even though he’d thrown down his sword. They spared me. Don’t think it was out of the goodness of their hearts. They’d already spread-eagled me on a cloak, but an officer ran up and stopped their sport. And then you saved me from the scaffold . . . ’

She was silent for a time.

‘Witcher?’

‘Yes.’

‘I know how to express gratitude. So if you’d ever like to . . . ’

‘Excuse me?’

‘I’ll go and look over the horses,’ Cahir said hurriedly and rose, wrapping himself in his cloak. ‘I’ll take a walk . . . around the place . . . ’

The girl sneezed, sniffed, and cleared her throat.

‘Not a word, Angoulême,’ Geralt warned her, genuinely angry, genuinely confused, genuinely embarrassed. ‘Not another word!’

She gave a slight cough again.

‘Do you really not want me? Not even a bit?’

‘You’ve already tasted Milva’s strap, little punk. If you’re not quiet this instant, you’ll get a second helping.’

‘I won’t say another thing.’

‘Good girl.’

*

Pits and holes – shored up and lined with planks, connected by footbridges, ladders and scaffolding – gaped in a hillside covered in misshapen and twisted pine trees. Catwalks supported by crisscrossed posts protruded from the holes. People were busily pushing carts and wheelbarrows along some of the catwalks. The contents of the carts and wheelbarrows – which at first sight seemed to be dirty, stony soil – were being tipped from the catwalks into a great quadrangular trough, or rather a complex of increasingly small troughs divided up by shutters. Water, supplied from a forested hillock along gutters supported on low trestles, gushed through them, and yet more channelled it away down towards a cliff.

Angoulême dismounted and indicated to Geralt and Cahir to do likewise. Leaving their mounts by a fence, they headed towards the buildings, wading through mud beside the leaking gutters and pipes.

‘It’s an iron ore washing plant,’ Angoulême said, pointing at the equipment. ‘The ore is carted out of those mineshafts, tipped into the troughs and rinsed with water from the stream. The ore settles on the sifter, and it’s taken from there. There are tons of mines and washing plants around Belhaven. And the ore is carted down the valley to Mag Turga, where there are bloomeries and forges, because there are more forests there and you need wood for smelting—’

‘Thanks for the lesson,’ Geralt cut her off sourly. ‘I’ve seen a

few mines in my lifetime; I know what's needed for smelting. Why have we come here?'

'To have a chat with one of my mates. The foreman here. Follow me. Ah, I can see him! Over there, outside the joiner's shop. Let's go.'

'You mean that dwarf?'

'Yeah. He's called Golan Drozdeck. As I said, he's—'

'The foreman here. You said. You didn't say, though, what you want to chat with him about.'

'Look at your boots.'

Geralt and Cahir obediently examined their footwear, which was covered in sludge of a strange, reddish hue.

'The half-elf we're seeking,' Angoulême anticipated the question, 'had the same crimson mud on his shoes when he was talking to Nightingale. Get it?'

'I do now. And the dwarf?'

'Don't say a word to him. I'll do the talking. He should take you for types that don't talk, just cleave. Look tough.'

They didn't have to make a special effort. Some of the miners who were watching quickly looked away, others froze with mouths open. The ones in their way hurriedly stood aside. Geralt guessed why. He and Cahir still had visible bruises, cuts and swellings – vivid tokens of their fight and the hiding Milva had given them. They looked like types who took pleasure from punching each other in the face, and wouldn't need much persuasion to punch someone else.

The dwarf, Angoulême's mate, was standing outside a building bearing the sign 'joinery shop' and painting something on a board made of two planed staves. He saw them coming, put down his brush and tin of paint and scowled. Then an expression of utter amazement suddenly appeared behind his paint-spattered beard.

'Angoulême?'

'What cheer, Drozdeck?'

'Is it you?' The dwarf's hairy jaw fell open. 'Is it really you?'

'No. It isn't. It's the freshly resurrected prophet Lebioda. Ask me another, Golan. A more intelligent one, perhaps.'

‘Don’t mock, Flaxenhair. I never expected to see you again. Mulica were ’ere five days since, he says they nabbed you and stuck you on a stake in Riedbrune. He vowed it were true!’

‘Everything has its benefits,’ the girl shrugged. ‘Next time Mulica borrows some money and vows he’ll pay it back you’ll know what his vow’s worth.’

‘I knew that before,’ the dwarf replied, blinking quickly and twitching his nose like a rabbit. ‘I wouldn’t lend ‘im a broken farthing, even if he bent down and licked my boots. But you’re alive and kicking, I’m glad, I’m glad. Hey! Perhaps you’ll pay back your debt too, eh?’

‘P’raps. Who knows?’

‘And who’ve you got with you? Eh, Flaxenhair?’

‘Sound fellows.’

‘Righto, mates . . . And where are the gods leading you?’

‘Astray, as usual.’ Angoulême, unconcerned by the Witcher looking daggers at her, sniffed up a pinch of fisstech, rubbing the rest into her gum. ‘Fancy a snort, Golan?’

‘I should say.’ The dwarf took and inhaled a pinch of the narcotic.

‘Truth be told,’ the girl continued, ‘I’m thinking about going to Belhaven. You don’t know if Nightingale and his hanza are hanging around somewhere there?’

Golan Drozdeck cocked his head.

‘You, Flaxenhair, should stay out of Nightingale’s way. He’s as pissed off with you, they say, as a wolverine roused from his winter sleep.’

‘Blow that! And when the news reached him that I’d been spitted on a palisade by a two-horse team, didn’t his heart change? Didn’t he regret it? Didn’t he shed a tear, foul his beard with snot?’

‘Not at all. I heard he said: “Angoulême’s finally got what she had coming to her: a stake up the arse”.’

‘Oh, the boor. Vulgar, loutish chump. Prefect Fulko would call him the arse end of society. To me he’s what comes out of the arse!’

‘You’d be better off, Flaxenhair, saying things like that out of his earshot. And not hanging around Belhaven, give it a wide birth.

And if you have to enter the town, better go in disguise—'

'Hey, Golan, don't teach your grandmother to suck eggs.'

'Wouldn't dream of it.'

'Then listen, dwarf.' Angoulême rested a boot on a step leading to the joinery shop. 'I'll ask you a question. Don't hurry with the answer. Think it over well.'

'Ask away.'

'A half-elf hasn't caught your eye recently, by any chance? A stranger, not from round here?'

Golan Drozdeck breathed in, sneezed loudly and wiped his nose on his wrist.

'A half-elf you say? What half-elf?'

'Don't play the fool, Drozdeck. The one who hired Nightingale for a contract. A contract killing. Of a witcher . . . '

'A witcher?' Golan Drozdeck laughed, picking his board up from the ground. 'Well I never! Believe it or not, we're looking for a witcher. Look, we're painting signs and putting them up all around here. See: "Witcher wanted, decent pay, board and lodgings included. Particulars at the office of the Petite Babette ore mine". How's it spelt, anyway? "Particulars" or "putticulars"?'

'Just paint it out and write "details". What do you need a witcher at the mine for?'

'Now she's asking. Monsters, of course.'

'Like what?'

'Vespertyls and barbegazis. They're running rampant in the lower galleries.'

Angoulême glanced at Geralt, who nodded to confirm he knew what that was about. And coughed meaningfully to signal that she ought to get back to the subject.

'Getting back to the subject –' the girl understood at once '– what do you know about that half-elf?'

'I don't know nothing about no 'alf-elf.'

'I told you to think it over well.'

'So I did.' Golan Drozdeck suddenly assumed a sly expression. 'And I decided it doesn't pay to know anything about this case.'

‘Meaning?’

‘Meaning, it’s shaky here. The ground’s shaky and the times are shaky. Gangs, Nilfgaardians, partisans from the Free Slopes . . . And diverse foreign elements, half-elves. Each one raring to commit assault . . . ’

‘Meaning?’ Angoulême wrinkled her nose.

‘Meaning you owe me money, Flaxenhair. And rather than pay it back, you’re getting deeper into debt. Serious debt, because you might get a whack on the head for what you’re asking, and not with a bare hand, but an axe. What kind of business is that for me? Will it pay if I *do* know something about the half-elf, eh? Will I get anything out of it? For if it’s only risk and no profit—’

Geralt had had enough. The conversation was boring him, the jargon and the dwarf’s mannerisms annoying him. As quick as lightning he caught the dwarf by the beard, yanked down and pushed him over. Golan Drozdeck tripped over the can of paint and fell. The Witcher leaped on him, pressed his knee against his chest and flashed a knife in front of his eyes.

‘You may profit,’ he growled, ‘by escaping with your life. Talk.’

Golan’s eyes looked as though they would pop out of their sockets and go for a stroll.

‘Talk,’ Geralt repeated. ‘Tell us what you know. Otherwise, when I slash your throat open you’ll drown before you bleed to death.’

‘The Rialto . . . ’ the dwarf stammered. ‘The Rialto pit . . . ’

*

The Rialto mine didn’t differ very much from the Petite Babette mine, or from the other mines and quarries that Angoulême, Geralt and Cahir had passed on the way, which were called Autumn Manifest, Old Mine, New Mine, Juliet Mine, Celestine, Common Cause and Lucky Pit. Work was in full swing in all of them, soil and ore being carted out of every shaft and pit to be tipped onto a sluice and washed in the sifters. There was an abundance of the characteristic red mud in all of them.

Rialto was a large mine, located near the top of the hill. The

crown had been sliced away and formed a quarry. The actual washing station was located on a terrace carved out of the hillside. Here, at the foot of a vertical wall – in which shafts and drifts gaped – was a sluice, sifters, gutters and other mining paraphernalia. There was also a veritable village of wooden huts, sheds, shacks and hovels covered in bark.

'I don't know anyone here,' said the girl, tying her reins to the fence. 'But let's try and talk to the overseer. Geralt, if you could, maybe don't seize him by the throat immediately or threaten him with a shiv. First we'll talk—'

'Don't teach your grandmother to suck eggs, Angoulême.'

They didn't get as far as talking. They didn't even reach the building where they suspected the overseer had his office. They ran straight into five horsemen in the square where the ore was being loaded onto wagons.

'Oh, shit,' said Angoulême. 'Oh, shit. Look what the cat dragged in.'

'What's up?'

'They're Nightingale's men. Here to extort protection money . . . and they've recognised me . . . Dammit! Now we're in the shit . . . '

'Can't you lie our way out of it?' Cahir muttered.

'I wouldn't count on it.'

'Why?'

'I skinned Nightingale when I escaped from the hanza. They won't forgive me for that. But I'll try . . . Be quiet. Keep your eyes open and stay alert. For anything.'

The horsemen rode up, with two of them at the head; a fellow with long, grizzly hair, wearing a wolfskin, and a young beanpole with a beard, clearly grown to cover acne scars. They feigned indifference, but Geralt noticed veiled flashes of hatred in the glances they were casting at Angoulême.

'Flaxenhair.'

'Novosad. Yirrel. Greetings. Nice out today. Pity about the rain.'

The grizzly-haired man dismounted, or rather leaped down from the saddle, briskly swinging his right leg over his horse's head.

The others also dismounted. Grizzled Hair handed his reins to Yirrel, the beanpole with the beard, and came closer.

'Well, well,' he said. 'Our big-mouthed little magpie. Looks like you're alive and well?'

'Alive and kicking.'

'You brazen little upstart! There was a rumour you were kicking, but on a stake. Rumour has it One-Eyed Fulko caught you. Rumour has it you sang like a bird when you were tortured, told them everything they asked!'

'Rumour has it,' Angoulême snapped, 'that your mother only charged her customers four shillings, but no one would give her more than two.'

The brigand spat at her feet contemptuously. Angoulême hissed again, just like a cat.

'Listen, Novosad,' she said insolently, arms akimbo. 'I need to talk something over with Nightingale.'

'Interesting. Likewise he with you.'

'Shut your trap and listen, while I still feel like talking. Two days ago, a mile outside Riedbrune, me and these companions of mine slaughtered that witcher the contract's out for. Get it?'

Novosad glanced knowingly at his comrades and then pulled up his sleeves, scrutinising Geralt and Cahir.

'Your new companions,' he drawled. 'Ha, I see from their faces they're no choirboys. They killed the witcher, you say? How? A stab in the back? Or in their dreams?'

'That's a minor putticular.' Angoulême grimaced like a little monkey. 'The major putticular is that the witcher is six feet under. Listen, Novosad. I don't want to quarrel with Nightingale or get in his way. But a deal's a deal. The half-elf gave you an advance on the contract, so I shan't demand it, that's your money, for costs and for your trouble. But the second instalment – which the half-elf promised after the job was done – that's mine by right.'

'By right?'

'Yes!' Angoulême ignored his sarcastic tone. 'We carried out the contract and killed the witcher, proof of which we can show the half-elf. Then I'll take what's mine and head off into the sunset. I don't mean to compete with Nightingale, because the Slopes aren't

big enough for the both of us. Tell him that, Novosad.'

'Is that all?' Stinging sarcasm again.

'And a kiss,' Angoulême snorted. 'You can hold your arse out on my behalf, *per procura*.'

'I've a better idea,' Novosad declared, glancing at his companions. 'I'll drag your arse to him, Angoulême. I'll deliver you to him in fetters, and then he'll discuss and straighten everything out with you. And settle up. Everything. The question is who owns the money from the half-elf Schirrú's contract. And your repayment for what you stole. And that the Slopes aren't big enough for all of us. Everything will be sorted out the same way. In fine detail.'

'There's one snag.' Angoulême lowered her hands. 'How do you plan to take me to Nightingale, Novosad?'

'Like this!' The brigand held out a hand. 'By the neck!'

Geralt's sihill was out in a flash and under Novosad's nose.

'I advise against it,' he snarled.

Novosad sprang back, drawing his sword. Yirrel drew a curved sabre with a hiss from the scabbard on his back. The others followed their example.

'I still advise against it,' the Witcher said.

Novosad swore. His eyes swept over his comrades. Arithmetic wasn't his strong point, but he calculated that five was considerably more than three.

'Get 'em!' he yelled, lunging at Geralt. 'Kill 'em!'

The Witcher evaded the blow with a half-turn and slashed him viciously across the temple. Even before Novosad had fallen, Angoulême ducked forward with a short jab, her knife whistled in the air and Yirrel reeled away, the bone handle jutting from beneath his chin. The brigand dropped his sabre and jerked the knife from his throat with both hands, spurting blood, but Angoulême sprang up to kick him in the chest and knocked him to the ground. Meanwhile, Geralt had struck another bandit. Cahir hacked the next one to death; something shaped like a slice of watermelon dropped from the robber's skull after a powerful blow of his Nilfgaardian blade. The last thug fled and jumped onto his horse. Cahir tossed up his sword, seized it by the blade and hurled it like a javelin, striking the brigand right between the shoulder blades. The horse neighed and jerked its head, sat hard on its

haunches and stamped its hooves, dragging the corpse over the red mud, its hand tangled up in the reins.

The whole thing took less than five heartbeats.

'Heeey!' yelled somebody from among the buildings. 'Heeeelp! Heeeelp! Murder, vicious killers!'

'Troops! Call out the troops!' shouted another miner, shooing away children who – as is the immemorial custom of all the world's children – had appeared from nowhere to watch and get in the way.

'Someone run and call the army!'

Angoulême picked up her knife, wiped and sheathed it.

'Let them run, by all means!' she shouted back, looking around. 'What is it, quarrymen, are you blind or what? That was self-defence! They fell on us, the bloody thugs! Don't you know them? Haven't they done you enough harm? Haven't they extorted enough from you?'

She sneezed loudly. Then she tore the purse from the belt of the still twitching Novosad and leaned over Yirrel.

'Angoulême.'

'What?'

'Leave it.'

'Why should I? It's spoils! Short of money?'

'Angoulême . . . '

'You,' a voice suddenly shouted. 'This way, please.'

Three men stood in the open doorway to a barrack serving as the tool store. Two of them were heavies with low foreheads and closely-cropped hair, of undoubtedly limited intelligence. The third – the one who'd shouted to them – was a very tall, dark-haired, handsome man.

'I couldn't help overhearing the conversation preceding the incident,' the man said. 'I found it hard to believe you'd killed a witcher, thinking it empty bragging. I don't think that now. Step inside.'

Angoulême drew an audible intake of breath. She glanced at the Witcher and nodded barely perceptibly.

The man was a half-elf.

*

The half-elf Schirrú was tall – well over six feet. He wore his dark hair tied on his neck in a ponytail falling down his back. His mixed blood was betrayed by his eyes, which were large, almond-shaped and yellowish-green, like a cat's.

'So you killed the Witcher,' he said again, smiling repulsively. 'Forestalling Homer Straggen, also called Nightingale? Fascinating, fascinating. Put simply, I ought to pay you fifty florins. The second instalment. Which means Straggen received his two score and ten florins for nothing. For you surely can't suppose he'll give it up.'

'How I settle accounts with Nightingale is my business,' said Angoulême, sitting on a crate and swinging her legs. 'The contract on the Witcher was a one-off commission. And we carried out that commission. We did, not Nightingale. The Witcher's in the ground. His company, all three of them, are in the ground. In other words: job done.'

'At least that's what you claim. How did it happen?'

Angoulême kept swinging her legs.

'I'll write my life story when I'm old,' she declared in her usual impudent tone. 'I'll describe how this, that and the other took place. You'll have to hold on until then, Mr Schirrú.'

'It shames you that much, then,' the half-breed remarked coldly. 'So, you did the deed foully and treacherously.'

'Does that bother you?' Geralt asked.

Schirrú looked at him intently.

'No,' he answered after a moment. 'Geralt the Witcher of Rivia didn't deserve a better fate. He was a simpleton and a fool. If he'd had a finer, more honest and honourable death, legends would have sprung up around him. But he didn't merit a legend.'

'Death is always the same.'

'Not always.' The half-elf turned his head, trying to catch a glimpse of Geralt's eyes, shaded by his hood. 'Not always, I assure you. I presume *you* dealt the mortal blow.'

Geralt didn't reply. He felt the overwhelming urge to grab the

cross-breed by the ponytail, knock him to the floor and wring every detail out of him, knocking his teeth out one by one with his sword pommel. He held himself back. Good sense suggested Angoulême's hoax might bear better results.

'As you wish,' said Schirrú, not getting an answer. 'I won't insist on a report about the course of events. It's clearly difficult for you to talk about it, and there's clearly not very much to boast about. Supposing, of course, that your silence doesn't stem from something quite different . . . For example, that nothing at all occurred. Do you perhaps have any proof of the veracity of your words?'

'We cut off the Witcher's right hand,' Angoulême replied impassively. 'But later a raccoon took it and devoured it.'

'So we have only this.' Geralt slowly unbuttoned his shirt and drew out his medallion with the wolf's head. 'The Witcher wore it around his neck.'

'May I?'

Geralt didn't hesitate for long. The half-elf hefted the medallion in his palm.

'*Now* I believe,' he said slowly. 'The gewgaw emanates powerful magic. Only a witcher could have had something like this.'

'And a witcher,' Angoulême continued, 'wouldn't have let it be taken from him while he was still breathing. It's rock-solid evidence. So slap the cash on the table, mester.'

Schirrú carefully put the medallion away, took a wad of papers from his bosom, put them down on the table and spread them out with a hand.

'Over here, please.'

Angoulême hopped off the crate and walked over, mocking him and swinging her hips. She leaned over the table. As quick as a flash, Schirrú grabbed her hair, slammed her down on the table and shoved a knife to her throat. The girl didn't even have time to cry out.

Geralt and Cahir already had their swords in their hands. But it was too late.

The half-elf's assistants – the musclemen with low foreheads – were holding iron hooks. But they were in no hurry to come closer.

‘Drop your swords,’ Schirrú snarled. ‘Both of you; swords on the floor. Or I’ll widen the slut’s smile.’

‘Don’t listen—’ Angoulême began – and ended with a shriek as the half-elf ground his fist into her hair. And scored her skin with a dagger; a glistening red wavy line trickled down the girl’s neck.

‘Swords on the ground! I’m serious!’

‘Perhaps we could talk this out?’ Geralt, heedless of the rage seething inside him, decided to stall for time. ‘Like civilised folk?’

The half-elf laughed venomously.

‘Talk it out? With you, Witcher? I was sent here to finish you off, not talk. Yes, yes, freak. You were lying, putting on a song and dance, but I recognised you the moment I saw you. You’d been described precisely to me. Can you guess who described you so precisely? Who gave me precise instructions about where and in what company I’d find you? Oh, I’m certain you’ve guessed.’

‘Release the girl.’

‘But I don’t just know you from the description,’ Schirrú continued, with no intention of releasing Angoulême. ‘I’ve seen you before. I even tracked you once. In Temeria. In July. I followed you on horseback to the town of Dorian and to the chambers of the jurists Codringher and Fenn. Ring any bells?’

Geralt twisted his sword so that the blade flashed in the half-elf’s eyes.

‘I wonder,’ he said icily, ‘how you mean to get out of this stalemate, Schirrú? I see two solutions. The first: you let go of the girl right away. The second: you kill the girl . . . And a second later your blood paints the walls and ceiling a pretty red.’

‘Your weapons,’ Schirrú brutally yanked Angoulême’s hair, ‘will be lying on the ground before I count to three. Then I start butchering the slut.’

‘We’ll see how much you manage to cut off. Not much, I reckon.’

‘One!’

‘Two!’ Geralt had begun his own reckoning, whirling the sihill in a hissing moulinet.

The thudding of hooves, the neighing and snorting of horses and yelling reached them from outside.

‘And what now?’ Schirrú laughed. ‘That’s what I was waiting for. It’s not stalemate but checkmate! My friends have arrived.’

‘Really?’ said Cahir, looking through the window. ‘I see the uniforms of the imperial light horse.’

‘Checkmate indeed, but against you,’ said Geralt. ‘You lose, Schirrú. Release the girl.’

‘Like hell.’

The barrack doors yielded to kicks and about a dozen men entered, most of them in identical black uniforms. They were led by a fair-haired, bearded man with a silver bear on his spaulder.

‘Que aen suecc’s?’ he asked menacingly. ‘What’s going on here? Who answers for this brawl? For the bodies in the yard? Speak up this minute!’

‘Commander—’

‘Glaeddyvan vort! Drop your swords!’

They obeyed, for crossbows and arbalests were being aimed at them. Released by Schirrú, Angoulême meant to spring up from the table, but suddenly found herself in the grasp of a stocky, colourfully dressed bruiser with bulging frog eyes. She tried to cry out, but the bruiser clamped a gloved fist over her mouth.

‘Let’s abstain from violence,’ Geralt suggested coolly to the commander with the bear. ‘We aren’t criminals.’

‘Well I never.’

‘We’re acting with the knowledge and permission of Mr Fulko Artevelde, the Prefect of Riedbrune.’

‘Well I never,’ repeated the Bear, signalling for Geralt and Cahir’s swords to be picked up and confiscated. ‘With the knowledge and permission. Of Mr Fulko Artevelde. The esteemed Mr Artevelde. Hear that, lads?’

His men – those dressed in the black and colourful clothes – cackled in unison.

Angoulême struggled in the grip of Frog-Eyes, vainly trying to scream. Needlessly. Geralt already knew. Even before the smiling Schirrú began to shake the hand proffered to him. Even before the four black-uniformed Nilfgaardians seized Cahir and three others aimed their crossbows straight at his face.

Frog-Eyes pushed Angoulême into the arms of his comrades. The girl sagged in their grasp like a ragdoll. She didn't even try to offer any resistance.

The Bear walked slowly over to Geralt and suddenly slammed him in the crotch with his armoured-gloved fist. Geralt bent over but didn't fall. Cold fury kept him on his feet.

'Then the news that you aren't the first asses to be used by One-Eyed Fulko for his own purposes may console you.' said the Bear, 'Profitable business deals – like the one I'm carrying out here with Mr Homer Straggen, known by some as "Nightingale" – are a thorn in his side. It pisses Fulko off that I've recruited Homer Straggen into the imperial service and appointed him commander of the volunteer mines defence company to expedite those deals. Unable, thus, to avenge himself officially, he hires a variety of rogues.'

'And witchers,' a smiling Schirrú interjected scathingly.

'Outside,' said the Bear loudly, 'five bodies are getting soaked in the rain. You murdered men in the Imperial service! You disrupted the work of this mine! I have no doubt about it: you're spies, saboteurs and terrorists. Martial Law applies here. I hereby summarily sentence you to death.'

Frog-Eyes cackled. He walked over to Angoulême, who was being held up by the bandits, grasped one of her breasts, and squeezed it hard.

'Well then, Flaxenhair?' he croaked, and it transpired that his voice was more froglike than his eyes. His bandit soubriquet – assuming he'd christened himself with it – showed a sense of humour. But if it was an alias intended to disguise it was extremely effective.

'We meet again, then!' the froglike Nightingale croaked, pinching Angoulême in the breast. 'Happy?'

The girl groaned in pain.

'Where are the pearls and stones you stole from me, you whore?'

'One-Eyed Fulko took them for safe keeping!' Angoulême yelled, ineffectually pretending that she wasn't afraid. 'Go and claim them back!'

Nightingale croaked and goggled his eyes – now he looked like

a genuine frog, which any moment would start catching flies with its tongue. He pinched Angoulême even harder. She struggled and groaned even more pathetically. Through the red fog of fury covering Geralt's eyes the girl had once again begun to resemble Ciri.

'Take them,' the Bear ordered impatiently. 'To the yard with them.'

'He's a witcher,' said one of the bandits from Nightingale's mines defence company, hesitantly. 'He's a hard case! How can we take him with our bare hands? He's liable to cast a charm on us, or summat else . . . '

'No fear.' A smiling Schirrú patted his pocket. 'Without his witcher's amulet he's unable to work magic, and I have it. Take him.'

*

There were more armed Nilfgaardians in black cloaks in the yard, and more of Nightingale's colourful hassa. A clutch of miners had also gathered. The ubiquitous children and dogs were also milling around.

Nightingale suddenly lost control of himself, quite as though a devil had possessed him. Croaking furiously, he punched Angoulême, and when she fell, kicked her repeatedly. Geralt strained in the grip of the bandits and was hit on the back of the neck with something hard for his pains.

'They said,' croaked Nightingale, hopping over Angoulême like a frantic toad, 'that you'd had a stake shoved up your backside in Riedbrune, you little strumpet! You were destined for the stake then and you'll expire on the stake today! Boys, find a post and sharpen it to a spike. Look lively!'

'Mr Straggen.' The Bear grimaced. 'I see no reason to indulge in such a time-consuming and bestial execution. The prisoners ought simply to be hanged . . . '

He fell silent under the evil gaze of the froglike eyes.

'Be quiet, captain,' croaked the bandit. 'I pay you too much for you to make improper remarks. I promised Angoulême a foul death and now I'm going to deliver it. Hang those two if you must. I'm not

bothered about them—'

'But I am,' Schirrú interrupted. 'I need them both. Especially the Witcher. Especially him. And since skewering the girl will take some time, I shall make use of it.'

He walked over and fixed his feline eyes on Geralt.

'You ought to know, freak,' he said, 'that it was *I* that dispatched your comrade, Codringher, in Dorian. I did it on the orders of my lord, Master Vilgefortz, whom I've served for many years. But I did it with immense pleasure.

'The old rogue Codringher,' the half-elf continued, without getting a reaction, 'had the audacity to stick his nose into Master Vilgefortz's affairs. I gutted him with a knife. And I torched that loathsome monstrosity Fenn among his papers and roasted him alive. I could have simply stabbed him, but I devoted a little time and effort to listen to his howling and squealing. And howl and squeal he did, I swear, like a stuck piglet. There was nothing, absolutely nothing, human in that howling.

'Do you know why I'm telling you all this? Because I could also simply knife you or order you stabbed to death. But I shall put in a little time and effort. And listen as you howl. You said death is always the same? You'll soon see it isn't. Hey boys, heat up some pitch in a tar kettle. And fetch a chain.'

Something smashed against the corner of the barracks and exploded with a red flash and a frightful crash. A second vessel containing petroleum – Geralt recognised it by the smell – landed plumb in the tar kettle, and a third shattered just beside the men restraining the horses. It boomed and belched fire and the horses fell into a frenzy. There was a turmoil and from it rushed a howling dog in flames. One of Nightingale's bandits suddenly spread his arms and keeled over in the mud with an arrow in his back.

'Long live the Free Slopes!'

Figures in grey mantles and fur hats loomed at the top of the hill, on the scaffoldings and the catwalks. More missiles, trailing wakes of flames and smoke behind them like fireworks fell onto the people, horses and mine buildings. Two flew into the workshop; onto the floor strewn with shavings and sawdust.

'Long live the Free Slopes! Death to the Nilfgaardian invaders!'

Arrow fletchings and crossbow bolts sang.

One of the black-uniformed Nilfgaardians tumbled down under his horse, one of Nightingale's bandits fell with his throat pierced, and one of the close-cropped musclemen dropped with a bolt in his nape. The Bear sprawled with a ghastly groan. An arrow had hit him in the chest, under the sternum, beneath the gorget. The arrow had been stolen – though no one could have known that – from a military convoy and was standard issue of the imperial army, slightly adapted. The wide, two-bladed arrowhead had been filed in several places with the aim of fragmentation.

The arrowhead fragmented beautifully in the Bear's guts.

'Down with the tyrant Emhyr! The Free Slopes!'

Nightingale croaked, grabbing his arm, grazed by a bolt.

One of the children rolled over in the mud, pierced through by an arrow from one of the less accurate freedom fighters. One of the men holding Geralt dropped. One of the men holding Angoulême fell over. The girl wrested herself free of the second, drew a knife from her boot in an instant, swung hard and slashed. In her frenzy she missed Nightingale's throat, but mutilated his cheek splendidly, almost down to the teeth. Nightingale croaked more gratingly than usual, and his eyes bulged more bulgingly. He slumped to his knees, blood spurting between hands clutching his face. Angoulême gave an unearthly scream and leaped forward to finish the job, but couldn't, for another bomb exploded between her and Nightingale, belching fire and clouds of foul-smelling smoke.

Fire roared all around and a fiery pandemonium raged. Horses thrashed, whinnied and kicked. The bandits and Nilfgaardians yelled. The miners ran in a panic – some fled and others tried to put out the blazing buildings.

Geralt had managed to pick up his sihill, which the Bear had released. He jabbed it into the forehead of a tall woman in a chain mail vest, who was aiming a blow at Angoulême with a morning star as she rose to her feet. He sliced open the thigh of a black-uniformed Nilfgaardian running at him with a half-pike. He then slashed the throat of the next one who simply happened to be in the way.

Right alongside him, a frantic, scorched horse rushing blindly knocked over and trampled another child.

'Seize the horse! Seize the horse!' Cahir was now right beside him, and created room for them both with great swings of his

sword. Geralt wasn't listening or looking. He slew another Nilfgaardian. He looked around for Schirrú. Angoulême, on bended knee, shot a crossbow she'd picked up, sending the bolt – at a distance of three paces – into the belly of a bandit from the mines defence company who was coming for her. Then she sprang to her feet and hung onto the bridle of a horse running by.

'Grab one of them, Geralt!' Cahir yelled. 'And ride!'

The Witcher slit open another Nilfgaardian from breastbone to hip with a downward stroke. He shook blood from his eyebrows and eyelashes with a sharp jerk of his head. 'Schirrú! Where are you, you bastard?'

A stroke. A cry. Warm drops on his face.

'Mercy!' howled a lad in a black uniform, kneeling in the mud. The Witcher hesitated.

'Wake up!' yelled Cahir, grabbing him by the shoulders and shaking him hard. 'Control yourself! Are you in a frenzy?'

Angoulême was returning at a gallop, dragging another horse by the reins. She was being followed by two riders. One of them fell – hit by the arrow of a fighter for the freedom of the Slopes. The other was hurled from the saddle by Cahir's sword.

Geralt leaped into the saddle. And then he saw Schirrú in the light of the blaze, summoning the panicked Nilfgaardians to himself. Beside the half-elf, Nightingale, croaking and bawling out curses with his bloody maw, looked like a veritable cannibal troll.

Geralt roared furiously, reined his horse around and whirled his sword.

Beside him, Cahir shouted and swore, wobbling in the saddle, blood from his forehead pouring over his eyes and face.

'Geralt! Help me!'

Schirrú had gathered a group around him, and was yelling and ordering them to shoot their crossbows. Geralt slapped his horse on the rump with the flat of his sword, ready for a suicidal charge. Schirrú had to die. Nothing else meant anything. Or mattered. Cahir meant nothing. Angoulême meant nothing . . .

'Geralt!' Angoulême yelled. 'Help Cahir!'

He came to his senses. And was ashamed.

Geralt held Cahir up, supported him. Cahir wiped his eyes with

a sleeve, and the blood instantly poured over them again.

'It's nothing – a scratch . . . ' His voice shook. 'Ride, Witcher . . . follow Angoulême . . . Ride!'

From the foot of the mountain came a great cry and a crowd armed with picks, crowbars and axes came rushing out. For miners from the neighbouring mines of Common Cause and Lucky Pit were hurrying to help their mates and comrades from the Rialto colliery. Or from some other. Who could possibly know?

Geralt kicked his horse with his heels. They rode at a gallop, recklessly, *ventre à terre*.

*

They pounded on, not looking back, hugging their horses' necks. Angoulême had landed the best horse, a small but fleet and sturdy bandit steed. Geralt's horse, a bay with Nilfgaardian trappings, was beginning to snort and wheeze and was having difficulty holding its head up. Cahir's horse, also an army beast, was stronger and tougher, but what of that when its rider was causing problems, swaying in the saddle, mechanically clenching with his thighs and bleeding profusely onto his mount's mane and neck.

But they galloped on.

Angoulême, who had pulled ahead, was waiting for them on a bend, in a place where the road went downhill, winding amongst rocks.

'Our pursuers . . . ' she panted, smearing dirt on her face, 'will come after us, they won't give up . . . The miners saw which way we fled. We oughtn't to stay on the highway . . . We have to head into the forests, get off the road . . . Lose them . . .'

'No,' the Witcher protested, anxiously listening to the sounds coming from the horse's lungs. 'We must stay on the highway . . . Take the straightest and shortest route to Sansretour.'

'Why?'

'There's no time to talk. Let's ride! Squeeze what you can from the horses . . . '

They galloped on. The Witcher's bay wheezed.

*

The bay wasn't fit to ride any further. It was barely walking, legs as stiff as boards, panting hard, the air escaping from it in a hoarse wheezing. It finally fell over on its side, kicked stiffly, looked at its rider; and there was reproach in its cloudy eye.

Cahir's horse was in somewhat better shape, but Cahir's condition was worse. He simply fell from the saddle, raised himself, but only onto his hands and knees, and retched spasmodically, though his stomach was empty.

When Geralt and Angoulême tried to touch his bloodied head he screamed.

'Dammit,' said the girl. 'It's quite a haircut they've given him.'

The skin of the young Nilfgaardian's forehead and temple, along with the hair, was detached from the skull along a considerable length. Were it not for the fact that the blood had formed a sticky clot, the loose patch would probably have fallen off all the way to his ear. It was a gruesome sight.

'How did that happen?'

'They threw a hatchet right at him. To make it even funnier, it wasn't a Nilfgaardian, nor any of Nightingale's men, but one of the quarrymen.'

'Doesn't matter who threw it.' The Witcher bound Cahir's head tightly with a torn-off shirtsleeve. 'It matters, luckily, that he was a poor shot, and he just scalped him, rather than smashing his skull in. But Cahir took a hefty whack in the pate. And the brain felt it too. He won't stay upright in the saddle, even if the horse could bear his weight.'

'What shall we do then? Your horse has died, his is almost dead, and the sweat's dropping off mine . . . And they're on our trail. We can't stay here . . . '

'We have to stay here. Me and Cahir. And Cahir's horse. You ride on. Hard. Your horse is strong, it can withstand a gallop. And even were you to exhaust it . . . Angoulême, somewhere in Sansretour valley Regis, Milva and Dandelion are waiting for us. They don't know anything of this and may fall into Schirrú's clutches. You have to find them and warn them, and then all four of

you must ride as fast as you can to Toussaint. You won't be followed there. I hope.'

'What about you and Cahir?' Angoulême bit her lip. 'What will happen to you? Nightingale isn't stupid. When he sees a half-dead riderless horse he'll rake over every hollow in the region! And you won't get far with Cahir!'

'Schirrú – for he's the one pursuing us – will follow your trail.'

'Do you think so?'

'I'm certain. Go.'

'What will aunty say when I show up without you?'

'You'll explain. But not to Milva; to Regis. Regis will know what's to be done. And we . . . When Cahir's mop dries a bit harder onto his pate, we'll make for Toussaint. We'll meet up there somehow. Very well, don't dally. Get on your horse and ride. Don't let our pursuers get any closer. Don't let them hunt you by sight.'

'Don't teach your grandmother to suck eggs. Look after yourselves! Farewell!'

'Farewell, Angoulême.'

*

He didn't move too far from the road. He couldn't deny himself a glance at their pursuers. And in fact he didn't fear any trouble from them, knowing they wouldn't waste time and would pursue Angoulême.

He wasn't mistaken.

The riders who thundered into the pass less than a quarter of an hour later stopped, admittedly, at the sight of the dead horse, shouted, argued, trotted around the roadside bushes, but returned almost at once to the road to resume their pursuit. They clearly believed that two of the three fugitives were now riding one horse and it would be possible to catch them quickly if they didn't dawdle. Geralt saw that some of the pursuing horses weren't in the best of shape either.

There weren't too many black cloaks of the Nilfgaardian light horse among them. Nightingale's colourful brigands predominated.

Geralt couldn't see if Nightingale himself was taking part in the hunt, or if he'd stayed behind to treat his mutilated face.

When the hoof beats of the vanishing pursuers had faded away, Geralt stood up from his hiding place in the bracken, lifted and held up the moaning and groaning Cahir.

'The horse is too feeble to bear you. Will you be able to walk?'

The Nilfgaardian made a noise which might as easily have been agreement or disagreement. Or something else. But he shuffled forward, and that was the main idea.

They went down to the stream bed in the ravine. Cahir negotiated the final few yards of the slippery slope in a rather chaotic descent. He crawled to the stream, drank, and poured the icy water copiously over the bandage on his head. The Witcher didn't hurry him. He was breathing heavily himself, gathering his strength.

He walked upstream, supporting Cahir and pulling the horse at the same time, wading in the water and stumbling on pebbles and fallen tree trunks. After some time Cahir stopped cooperating, stopped shuffling his legs obediently – in fact he stopped moving them at all, so the Witcher simply dragged him. It was impossible to continue like that, particularly since the stream bed was obstructed by rocks and waterfalls. Geralt grunted and lifted the wounded man onto his back. Neither did pulling the horse make life any easier. When they finally emerged from the ravine, the Witcher simply collapsed on the wet forest floor and lay, panting, completely drained, beside the groaning Cahir. He lay there for a long time. His knee had begun to throb again with intense pain.

Cahir finally started to show signs of life once more, and soon after – astonishingly – got up, swearing and holding his head. They set off. Cahir marched bravely at first. Then slowed. Then slumped down.

Geralt heaved him onto his back again and lugged him, grunting, slipping over the stones. Pain shot through his knee, and fiery, black bees seemed to flash in front of his eyes.

'Just a month ago . . .' Cahir moaned from his back. 'Who'd have thought you'd be lugging me like this . . .'

'Quiet, Nilfgaardian . . . You're heavier when you talk . . .'

When they finally made it to the rocks and the rock walls, it

was almost dark. The Witcher didn't look for or find a cave – he fell exhausted by the first opening he came across.

*

Human skulls, ribs, pelvises and other bones were strewn around on the cave floor. But – more importantly – there were also dry branches there.

Cahir was feverish, trembling and shivering. He endured the sewing of the patch of skin to his skull using twine and a crooked needle manfully and fully conscious, with his faculties intact. The crisis came later, during the night. Geralt lit a fire in the cave, disregarding safety considerations. Actually, outside it was drizzling and a strong wind was blowing, so it was unlikely that anybody was wandering around watching out for the glare of a fire. And he had to keep Cahir warm.

The fever lasted the entire night. He trembled, moaned and raved. Geralt enjoyed no sleep – he kept the fire burning. And his knee hurt like hell.

*

A young and sturdy fellow, Cahir came around the following morning. He was pale and sweaty, and the heat of his fever could still be felt. His chattering teeth somewhat complicated articulation. But what he said was comprehensible. And he spoke lucidly. He was complaining of a headache – a fairly normal symptom for someone whose scalp has been torn from their head by an axe.

Geralt divided his time between anxiously catnapping and catching rainwater dripping from the rocks in beakers he had fashioned from birch bark. Thirst was tormenting both him and Cahir.

*

'Geralt?

‘Yes?’

Cahir tidied up the wood in the fire using a femur he’d found.

‘When we were fighting in the mine . . . I was scared.’

‘I know.’

‘For a moment it looked as though you’d gone berserk. That nothing mattered to you any longer . . . Aside from killing . . .’

‘I know.’

‘I was afraid,’ he calmly finished, ‘that you’d butcher Schirrú to death in your frenzy. And we wouldn’t get any information out of a dead man, would we?’

Geralt cleared his throat. He was growing to like the young Nilfgaardian more and more. He was not only brave, but smart too.

‘You did right, sending Angoulême away,’ Cahir continued, his teeth chattering only slightly. ‘It isn’t for girls . . . Not even for girls like her. We’ll sort it out, the two of us. We’ll ride down our pursuers. But not in order to slaughter them in a berserker frenzy. What you said about revenge that time . . . Geralt, even in vengeance there must be some method. We’ll catch up with that half-elf . . . And force him to tell us where Ciri is . . .’

‘Ciri’s dead.’

‘Not true. I don’t believe she’s dead . . . And you don’t either. Admit it.’

‘I don’t want to believe it.’

A gale was whistling outside and the rain was whispering. It was cosy in the cave.

‘Geralt?

‘Yes.’

‘Ciri’s alive. I’ve had dreams again . . . Yes, something happened at the Equinox, something dreadful . . . Yes, without doubt, I felt and saw it . . . But she’s alive . . . She’s definitely alive. Let’s hurry . . . But not to avenge and murder. To find her.’

‘Yes. Yes, Cahir. You’re right.’

‘And you? Don’t you have dreams now?’

‘I do,’ he said bitterly. ‘But seldom since we crossed the Yaruga. And I remember nothing after waking. Something has

ended in me, Cahir. Something has burned out. Something has ruptured in me . . .'

'Never mind, Geralt. I shall dream for both of us.'

*

They set off at dawn. It had stopped raining. It even seemed that the sun was trying to find a hole in the greyness enveloping the sky.

They rode slowly, on the single horse with the Nilfgaardian military trappings.

The horse trudged over the pebbles, moving at a walk along the bank of the Sansretour, the small river leading to Toussaint. Geralt knew the way. He had been there once. A long, long time ago; much had changed since then. But the valley had not changed, and neither had the Sansretour stream, which, the further they went, become more and more the River Sansretour. Neither the Amell Mountains, nor the obelisk of the Gorgon, Devil Mountain, had changed.

There were certain things that simply didn't change.

*

'A soldier doesn't question his orders,' said Cahir, feeling the dressing on his head. 'Doesn't analyse them, doesn't ponder over them, doesn't wait for them to be explained to him. That's the first thing they teach a soldier where I come from. So you can understand that not for a second did I ever question an order which was issued to me. The thought of *why* I had to capture a Cintran princess didn't even cross my mind. An order's an order. I was cross, naturally, because I wanted to taste fame, fighting against the knighthood, against the regular army . . . But working for the intelligence service is also treated as an honour where I come from. If it had only concerned a more taxing task, a more important prisoner . . . But a girl?'

Geralt threw a trout's spine onto the fire. Before nightfall they had caught enough fish in a stream flowing into the Sansretour to eat their fill. The trout were spawning and easy to catch.

He listened to Cahir's account, and the curiosity in him struggled with a feeling of profound hurt.

'It was essentially chance,' Cahir went on, gazing into the flames. 'Pure chance. There was – as I found out later – a spy at the Cintran court, a valet. When we'd captured the city and were preparing to encircle the castle the spy stole out and gave a sign that he would try to get the princess out of the city. Several squads like mine were formed. By accident, it was my group the men spiriting Ciri away ran into.

'A chase through the streets began, in quarter that was already on fire. It was sheer hell. Nothing but the roar of flames, walls of fire. The horses didn't want to go there, and the men, what can I say, were in no hurry to urge them. My subordinates – there were four of them – began to claim I'd gone mad, that I was leading them to their doom . . . I barely managed to wrest back control . . .

'We pursued them through that fiery bedlam and caught up with them. We suddenly had them before us: five mounted Cintrans. And a bloody fight began, before I could tell them to watch out for the girl. Who ended up on the ground at once anyway, as the man who was carrying her perished first. One of my men lifted her up and onto his horse, but he didn't get far, for one of the Cintrans stabbed him through the back. I saw the blade pass an inch from Ciri's head and she fell in the mud again. She was dazed with fear; I saw her cuddling up to the dead man, saw her trying to crawl under him . . . Like a kitten by its dead mother . . .'

He fell silent and swallowed audibly.

'She didn't even know she was cuddling up to the enemy. To a hated Nilfgaardian.'

'We ended up alone, she and I,' he continued a moment later, 'and all around us corpses and fire. Ciri was grovelling in a puddle, and the water and blood were beginning to steam. A house collapsed, and I could see very little through the sparks and smoke. The horse wouldn't go any closer. I called to her, appealed to her to come to me. My voice had almost gone, trying to outshout the conflagration. She saw and heard me but didn't react. The horse wouldn't move, and I couldn't control it. I had to dismount. There was no way I could lift her with one arm, and I had to hold the reins with the other; the horse was struggling so much it almost threw me. When I lifted her she began to scream. Then she tensed up and fainted. I wrapped her in my cloak which I had wetted in a

puddle; in mud, muck and blood. And we rode on. Straight through the fire.

'I don't know by what miracle we managed to get out of there. But a breach in the wall suddenly appeared and we were by the river. Unluckily, it turned out, for it was the spot the fleeing Nordlings had chosen. I discarded my officer's helmet, for they would have recognised me right away by it, even though the wings had burned off. The rest of my clothing was so blackened it couldn't have betrayed me. But had the girl been conscious, had she screamed, they would have put me to the sword. I was lucky.

'I rode a few furlongs with them, and then fell back and hid in the bushes by a river bearing dead bodies.'

He fell silent, coughed slightly, and felt his bandaged head with both hands. And blushed. Or was it merely the glare of the flames?

'Ciri was so dirty. I had to undress her . . . She didn't resist, didn't scream. She just trembled, eyes closed. Each time I touched her to clean her or dry her, she tensed and stiffened . . . I know, I ought to have spoken to her, calmed her . . . But suddenly I couldn't find the words in your language . . . In my mother's language, which I've known from a child. Unable to find the words, I tried to calm her by touch, by gentleness . . . But she stiffened and whimpered . . . Like a baby . . .'

'That haunted her in her nightmares,' Geralt whispered.

'I know. Mine too.'

'What then?'

'She fell asleep. So did I. From fatigue. When I woke she wasn't beside me. She was nowhere to be seen. I don't recall the rest. Those who found me claimed I was running around in circles howling like a wolf. They had to tie me up. When I'd calmed down, I was taken in hand by intelligence agents, Vattier de Rideaux's subordinates. They wanted to know about Cirilla. Where she was, where she fled to, how she gave me the slip, why I let her escape. And again, from the beginning: where was she, where had she fled to . . . ? Infuriated, I yelled something about the emperor hunting a little girl like a sparrowhawk. For that I spent a year locked up in the citadel. But then I was back in grace, for I was needed. On Thanedd, they needed someone who spoke the Common Speech and knew what Ciri looked like. The emperor wanted me to go to

Thanedd . . . And not to fail this time. But bring him Ciri.'

He was silent for a time.

'Emhyr gave me a chance. I could have refused. It would have meant absolute, total, perpetual disfavour and oblivion, but I could have declined if I'd wanted. But I didn't decline. For you see, Geralt . . . I couldn't forget her.

'I won't lie to you. I saw her constantly in my dreams. And not as the skinny child she was by the river, when I undressed and washed her. I saw her . . . and I still see her . . . as a woman; comely, aware, provocative . . . With such details as a crimson rose tattooed on her groin . . . '

'What are you talking about?'

'I don't know. I don't know myself . . . But that's how it has been and is yet. I see her in my dreams, just as I saw her in my dreams back then . . . That is why I volunteered for the mission to Thanedd. That's why I wanted to join you afterwards. I . . . I want to see her . . . again. I want to touch her hair again, look into her eyes . . . I want to gaze on her. Kill me if you will. But I won't pretend any longer. I think . . . I think I love her. Please don't laugh.'

'I don't feel like laughing.'

'So that's why I'm riding with you. Do you understand?'

'Do you want her for yourself or for your emperor?'

'I'm a realist,' he whispered. 'I mean, she won't want me. But as the emperor's spouse I could at least see her.'

'As a realist,' the Witcher snapped, 'you should remember we have to find and rescue her first. Assuming your dreams aren't lying and Ciri is really still alive.'

'I'm aware of that. And should we find her? What then?'

'We shall see. We shall see, Cahir.'

'Don't deceive me. Be frank. You won't let me take her, will you?'

He didn't reply. Cahir didn't repeat the question.

'Until then,' he asked coolly, 'may we be comrades?'

'We may, Cahir. I apologise again for back there. I don't know what came over me. I've never seriously suspected you of treachery

or duplicity.'

'I'm not a traitor. I'll never betray you, Witcher.'

*

They rode along a deep gorge, which the swift-flowing and wide Sansretour – now a river – had carved out of the hills. They rode east towards the border of the Duchy of Toussaint. Gorgon, Devil Mountain, rose above them. To look at the summit they would have had to crane their necks.

But they didn't.

*

First they smelled smoke, then a moment later beheld a campfire, with spits over it and filleted trout roasting on them. They then beheld a solitary individual sitting beside the fire.

Not long before, Geralt would have mocked, mercilessly ridiculed and thought a complete idiot anyone who would have dared claim that he – a witcher – would feel great joy at the sight of a vampire.

'Oho,' Emiel Regis Rohellec Terzieff-Godefroy said placidly, adjusting the spits. 'Look what the cat dragged in.'

*The **Knocker**, likewise called a knacker, coblynau, bucca, polterduk, karkorios, rübezahl, or pustecki, is a form of kobold, which, nonetheless, the **K.** considerably surpasses in magnitude and strength. The **K.** as a rule also wears a great beard, which kobolds habitually do not. The **K.** dwells in adits, vertical shafts, spoil heaps, precipices, tenebrous hollows, inside rocks, in diverse grottos, caves and stone wildernesses. Wherever it dwells, natural riches such as metal, ore, carbon, salt or petroleum are surely buried in the earth. Thus, one may often encounter a **K.** in mines, particularly abandoned ones, although it is also likely to appear in active ones. It is a vicious scourge and pest, a curse and veritable divine retribution for miners and quarrymen, whom the vexatious **K.** leads astray. By knocking on the rock it beguiles and frightens, obstructs galleries, steals and spoils mining equipment and all kinds of belongings, and is also inclined to strike one on the head a place of concealment. But it may be bribed, to curb its mischief-making, by placing in a dark gallery or shaft some bread and butter, a smoked cheese, or a flitch of smoked gammon; but best of all is a demijohn of alcohol, since the **K.** is extremely greedy for such.*

Physiologus

CHAPTER SEVEN

‘They’re safe,’ assured the vampire, spurring on his mule, Draakul. ‘All three of them. Milva, Dandelion and, of course, Angoulême, who drove us into the Sansretour valley just in time and told us everything, not stinting with her colourful expressions. I‘ve never understood why the majority of human curses and insults refer to the erotic sphere. Sex is wonderful and associated with beauty, joy and pleasure. How can the names of the sexual organs be used as a vulgar synonym for—’

‘Drop the subject, Regis,’ Geralt interrupted.

‘Of course, I apologise. Warned by Angoulême about the approaching brigands, we crossed the marches of Toussaint without delay. Milva, admittedly, wasn’t overjoyed, and was spoiling to turn tail and bring you both aid. I managed to dissuade her. And Dandelion, astonishingly, rather than enjoy the asylum afforded by the borders of the duchy, clearly had his heart in his mouth . . . You don’t by any chance know what he fears so in Toussaint?’

‘I don’t, but I can guess,’ Geralt replied sourly. ‘It wouldn’t be the first place where our dear friend the bard has been up to no good. He has settled down now somewhat, for he moves in decent society, but nothing was sacred to him in his youth. Only urchins and women who had climbed to the tops of tall trees were safe from him. Husbands regularly held grudges against the troubadour for unknown reasons. There is doubtless a man in Toussaint for whom the sight of Dandelion will bring back memories . . . But these are essentially trifling matters. Let’s return to the facts. What of our pursuers? I hope—’

‘I don’t think,’ Regis smiled, ‘that they followed us into Toussaint. The border is teeming with errant knights, who are extremely bored and hankering for a fight. Furthermore, we and a group of pilgrims we bumped into on the border ended up in the sacred grove of Myrkvid. And that place is fearsome. Even the pilgrims and infirm people who make for Myrkvid from the most distant corners to be healed stop in the settlement near the forest edge, not daring to go deeper. There are rumours that any who dare enter the sacred oak groves end up burned over a slow flame in the Wicker Hag.’

Geralt inhaled.

‘You mean—’

‘Of course,’ the vampire interjected again. ‘The druids are in the grove of Myrkvid. The ones who were previously in Caed Dhu, Angren, later journeyed to Loch Monduirn, and finally to Myrkvid in Toussaint. We were fated to find them. Did I say we were? I don’t recall.’

Geralt sighed deeply. Cahir, riding at his back, also sighed.

‘That friend of yours, is he among those druids?’

The vampire smiled once more.

‘Not he, but she,’ he explained. ‘Indeed, she is. She has even been promoted. She leads the entire Circle.’

‘Is she the hierophantess?’

‘She is the flaminika. That’s the highest druidic title when borne by a woman. Only men may be hierophants.’

‘True, I’d forgotten. So am I to understand that Milva and the rest—’

‘Are now in the care of the flaminika and her Circle.’ The vampire – as was his custom – answered the question while it was being asked, after which he set about answering a question not yet asked.

‘I, however, hurried to meet you. For a mysterious thing occurred. The flaminika – to whom I began to present our case – didn’t let me complete it. She said she knew everything. That she had been anticipating our arrival for some time—’

‘Really?’

‘I couldn’t hide my disbelief either.’ The vampire reined in the mule, stood up in his stirrups and looked around.

‘Are you seeking somebody or something?’ asked Cahir.

‘I’m no longer searching, I’ve found it. Let’s sit down.’

‘I’d prefer to—’

‘Let’s sit down. I’ll explain everything.’

They had to raise their voices to be able to converse over the roar of a waterfall tumbling from a considerable height down the vertical wall of a rocky precipice. Down below, where the waterfall

had hollowed out a largish lake, a black cave mouth gaped in the rock. The Witcher stared at it.

'Yes, right there,' Regis confirmed the Witcher's suspicion. 'I rode here to meet you, for I was instructed to direct you there. You will have to enter that cave. I told you, the druids knew about you, knew about Ciri, knew about our mission. And they learned about it from someone who lives down there. That person – if one is to believe the druidess – wishes to talk to you.'

'"If one is to believe the druidess",' Geralt repeated sneeringly. 'I've been in these parts before. I know what dwells in the deep caves beneath Devil Mountain. There are various denizens there. But it's impossible to talk to the vast majority of them, except with a sword. What else did your druidess say? What else am I to believe?'

'She gave me clearly to understand –' the vampire's black eyes bored into Geralt '– that she isn't generally fond of individuals who destroy and kill flora and fauna, and of witchers in particular. I explained that at the present moment you are a more of a titular witcher. That you absolutely don't pester flora or fauna, as long as the aforementioned doesn't pester you. The flaminika, you ought to know, is an extremely shrewd woman, and noted that you have abandoned witcherhood, not as a result of ideological changes, but because you were compelled to by circumstances. I know very well, she said, that misfortune has befallen a person close to the Witcher. The Witcher was thus forced to abandon witcherhood and go to her rescue . . . '

Geralt didn't comment, but his gaze was expressive enough to make the vampire hurry to explain.

'She declared, and I quote: "The Witcher-who-is-not-a-witcher will prove he is capable of humility and sacrifice. He will enter the sombre mouth of the earth. Unarmed. Having laid down all weapons, all sharp iron. All sharp thoughts. All aggression, fury, anger and arrogance. He will enter in humility. And then in the abyss, the humble not-witcher will find answers to the questions which torment him. He will find answers to many questions. But should the Witcher remain a witcher, he will find nothing".'

Geralt spat towards the waterfall and the cave.

'It's a game,' he declared. 'A jest! A prank! Soothsaying, sacrifice, mysterious encounters in caverns, answers to questions . . . You can only encounter such hackneyed devices from ragged

wandering storytellers. Somebody's mocking me. At best. And if it's not mockery—'

'I would not call it mockery under any circumstances,' Regis said firmly. 'None at all, Geralt of Rivia.'

'What, then, is it? One of those notorious druidic peculiarities?'

'We shan't know,' Cahir chipped in, 'until we find out. Come on, Geralt, we'll enter together—'

'No.' The vampire shook his head. 'The flaminika was categorical in this respect. The Witcher must enter alone. Without a weapon. Give me your sword. I shall look after it during your absence.'

'To hell with that—' Geralt began, but Regis interrupted his flow of words with a rapid gesture.

'Give me your sword.' He held out a hand. 'And if you have any other weapons leave them with me too. Remember the flaminika's words. No aggression. Sacrifice. Humility.'

'Do you know who I will encounter down there? Who . . . or what . . . is waiting for me in that cave?'

'No, I don't. Various creatures inhabit the subterranean corridors beneath Gorgon.'

'I may be struck down!'

The vampire softly cleared his throat.

'That cannot be ruled out,' he said gravely. 'But you must take that risk. I know you will, of course.'

*

Geralt was not disappointed – as he had expected, the entrance to the cave was filled with an impressive heap of skulls, ribs, tibulas and other bones. There was no stench of putrefaction, however. The mortal remains were clearly ancient and functioned as decorations intended to scare away intruders.

At least so he thought.

He entered the darkness and the bones crunched and grated beneath his feet.

His vision quickly adjusted to the gloom.

He was in a gigantic cave, a rocky cavern whose dimensions the eye was unable to take in, for its proportions broke up and vanished in the forest of stalactites suspended from the ceiling in striking festoons. Stalagmites, stocky and squat at the base, becoming slender towards the top, rose white and pink from the colourful, shimmering gravel glistening with water on the cave floor. Some of their points reached well above the Witcher's head. Some of them were fused with stalactites, forming columns of stalagnates. No one called out. The only audible sounds were from the water, which echoed as it splashed and dripped.

He walked on, slowly, straight ahead, into the gloom, between the columns of stone. He knew he was being watched.

He felt the lack of the sword on his back intensely, importunately and distinctly – like the lack of his recently knocked-out tooth.

He slowed.

What a moment earlier he had taken as rounded boulders lying at the foot of some stalagmites now goggled great, glowing eyes at him. Great maws opened and conical fangs flashed in the matted mass of grey and brown shaggy, dust-covered hair.

Barbegazis.

He walked slowly, and stepped cautiously. Barbegazis of all sizes were everywhere. They lay in his way, with no intention of yielding. Though they had behaved extremely peacefully until that moment, he was nonetheless uncertain as to what would happen if he trod on one of them.

The stalagnates were like a forest, so there was no way of walking straight; he had to weave around them. Above, water dripped from the ceiling bristling with needles of stalactites.

The barbegazis – more and more of them were appearing – accompanied him as he walked, waddling and rolling over the cave floor. He could hear their monotonous babbling and puffing. He smelled their pungent, sour scent.

He had to stop. In his way, between two stalagmites, in a place he couldn't pass around, lay a large echinops, bristling with masses of long spines. Geralt swallowed. He knew only too well that the echinops was capable of shooting its spines a distance of ten feet.

The spines had a peculiar property – once stuck into the body they broke off and the sharp tips penetrated and worked they way in deeper and deeper until they finally reached a sensitive organ.

'Stupid witcher,' he heard in the gloom. 'Cowardly witcher! He's frit, ha, ha!'

The voice sounded odd and weird, but Geralt had heard similar voices many times. Creatures not accustomed to communicating using articulated speech spoke like that, they accented and intoned strangely, drawing out the syllables unnaturally.

'Stupid witcher! Stupid witcher!'

He refrained from comment. He bit his lip and carefully moved past the echinops. The monster's spines swayed like a sea anemone's tentacles. But only for a moment, then the echinops stopped moving and once again seemed nothing more than a clump of bog grass.

Two immense barbegazis waddled across his path, jabbering and growling. From the ceiling came the flapping of webbed wings and a hissing cackle, unerringly signalling the presence of vampyrodes and vespertyls.

'He's come here, a murderer, a killer! A witcher!' The same voice which had spoken previously reverberated in the gloom. 'He's come down here! He dared! But he has no sword, the killer. So how means he to kill? With his gaze? Ha, ha!'

'Or maybe,' came a second voice, with even more unnatural articulation, 'we kill him? Haaaa?' The barbegazis babbled in a noisy chorus. One of them, as large as a mature pumpkin, rolled closer and closer and snapped its teeth right by Geralt's heels. The Witcher stifled the curse pressing itself against his lips and walked on. Water dripped from the stalactites, jingling with a silvery echo.

Something seized his leg. He refrained from pushing it roughly away.

The strange creature was small, not much larger than a Pekinese dog. It resembled a Pekinese a little, too. At least, its face did. The rest of it was like a small monkey. Geralt had no idea what it was. He had never seen anything like it.

'Wi-tcha!' sang the almost-Pekinese, in a high-pitched voice, but quite distinctly, clutching Geralt's boot. 'Wi-tch-tcha. Ba-stard!'

'Get off,' he said through clenched teeth. 'Get off my boot or

I'll kick your arse.'

The barbegazis babbled louder, more urgently and menacingly. Something lowed in the darkness. Geralt didn't know what it was. It sounded like a cow, but the Witcher bet it wasn't.

'Wi-tcha, the ba-stard.'

'Let go of my boot,' he repeated, fighting to control himself. 'I came here unarmed, in peace. You're bothering me—'

He broke off and choked on a wave of repellent fetor, making his eyes water and his hair curl. The strange Pekinese-like creature digging into his calf goggled and defecated right on his boot. The hideous stink was accompanied by even more hideous noises.

He swore appropriately to the situation and shoved the aggressive creature away with his foot. Much more gently than he should have. But what he was expecting happened anyway.

'He kicked the little one!' something roared in the darkness, above the literally thunderous jabbering and howling of the barbegazis. 'He kicked the little one! He harmed something smaller than himself!'

The nearest barbegazis rolled right over to his feet. He felt the gnarled and steely claws grabbing and immobilising him. He didn't fight back; he was resigned to his fate. He wiped his befouled boot on the fur of the largest and most aggressive one. He sat down, tugged by his clothes.

Something large descended a stalagnate, jumping down onto the cave floor. He knew at once what it was. A knocker. Stocky, pot-bellied, hairy, bow-legged, at least two yards across the shoulders, with an even broader ruddy beard. The knocker's approach was heralded by the ground shaking, as though not a knocker but a Shire horse was approaching. Each of the monster's callused and wide feet were – however ridiculous it sounds – a foot and a half long.

The knocker leaned over him and its breath smelled of vodka. The rascals distil hooch here, Geralt thought mechanically.

'You hit someone smaller than you, witcher,' the knocker said, breathing his foul breath into Geralt's face. 'You harmed a small, gentle, innocent creature without cause. We knew you couldn't be trusted. You're aggressive. You have the instincts of a murderer. How many of our kind have you killed, you scoundrel?'

He didn't deign to answer.

'Ooooh!' The knocker breathed alcohol fumes harder. 'I've dreamed of this since I was a child! Since I was a child! My dream has finally come true. Look to the left.'

Like an idiot he looked. And was punched in the teeth with a right hook so hard he saw an intense brightness.

'Oooooh!' The knocker bared huge crooked teeth from the mass of his reeking beard. 'I've dreamed of this since I was a child! Look to the right.'

'Enough.' A loud and sonorous order resounded from somewhere in the depths of the cave. 'Enough of this fun and games. Let him go, please.'

Geralt spat blood from his cut lip. He cleaned his boot in a small stream of water flowing down the rock. The almost-Pekinese grinned at him sneeringly, but from a safe distance. The knocker also grinned, massaging its fist.

'Go, witcher,' it growled. 'Go to him, since he summons you. I shall wait. For you will have to return this way, after all.'

*

The cave he entered was – astonishingly – full of light. Through openings in the ceiling, bristling with stalactites, shone criss-crossing columns of brightness, drawing from the rocks and dripstone formations a kaleidoscope of brilliance and colour. Furthermore, a magical ball blazing with light – amplified by reflections in the quartz on the walls – was suspended in the air. In spite of all this illumination the end of the cave faded into the gloom, and black darkness loomed in the vista of the colonnade of stalagnates.

An immense cave painting was in the process of being created on the wall, which nature had seemingly prepared for that purpose. The painter was a fair-haired elf dressed in a paint-smudged mantle. His head seemed to be ringed by a luminous halo in the magical-natural brilliance.

'Sit down,' said the elf, without wresting his gaze away from the painting. He gestured to a boulder with a wave of his brush. 'They didn't harm you, did they?'

‘No. Not really.’

‘You’ll have to forgive them.’

‘Indeed. I will.’

‘They’re a bit like children. They were awfully glad you were coming.’

‘I noticed.’

Only then did the elf glance at him.

‘Sit down,’ he repeated. ‘I shall be at your disposal shortly. I’m just finishing.’

What the elf was finishing was a stylised animal, probably a bison. For the moment only its outline was complete – from its splendid horns to its equally magnificent tail. Geralt sat down on the boulder indicated and swore to be patient and meek – to the bounds of his abilities.

The elf, softly whistling through clenched teeth, dipped his brush into a bowl of paint and coloured his bison purple with swift flourishes. After a moment’s thought he painted tiger stripes on the animal’s side.

Geralt watched in silence.

Finally the elf took a step back, admiring the fresco which now depicted an entire hunting scene. The striped purple bison was being pursued in wild leaps by skinny human figures with bows and spears, painted with careless brushstrokes.

‘What’s it meant to be?’ asked Geralt, unable to contain himself.

The elf glanced at him in passing, sticking the clean end of the brush in his mouth.

‘It is,’ he declared, ‘a prehistoric painting executed by the primitive people who lived in this cave thousands of years ago and who mainly lived by hunting the purple bison, which became extinct long ago. Some of the prehistoric hunters were artists and felt a profound artistic need to immortalise what was in their hearts.’

‘Fascinating.’

‘It most certainly is,’ the elf agreed. ‘Your scholars have roamed through caves like this for ages, searching for traces of

primitive man. And whenever they find something like this they are inordinately fascinated. For it is proof that you aren't strangers in this land and in this world. Proof that your forebears have lived here for centuries; thus proof that this world belongs to their heirs. Why, every race has the right to some roots. Even your – human – race, whose roots should be sought in the treetops, after all. Ha, an amusing quip, don't you think? Worthy of an epigram. Are you fond of light poetry? What do you think I ought to add to the painting?'

'Draw huge, erect phalluses on the primitive hunters.'

'That's a thought.' The elf dipped his brush in the paint. 'The phallic cult was typical for primitive civilisations. It could also serve as the birth of a theory that the human race is yielding to physical degeneration. Its forebears had phalluses like clubs, but their descendants were left with ridiculous, vestigial little pricks . . . Thank you, Witcher.'

'Don't mention it. It was somehow in my heart. The paint looks very fresh for something prehistoric.'

'In three or four days the colours will fade due to the salt exuded by the wall and the painting will look so prehistoric you won't believe it. Your scholars will wet themselves with joy when they see it. Not one of them, I swear, will see through my deceit.'

'They will.'

'How is that?'

'You won't be able to resist signing your masterpiece, will you?'

The elf laughed dryly.

'Quite right! You've seen through me. Oh, fire of vanity, how difficult it is for an artist to quell you. I've already signed the cave painting. Right here.'

'That isn't a dragonfly?'

'No. It's an ideogram denoting my name. I am Crevan Espane aep Caomhan Macha. For convenience I use the alias Avallac'h, and you may also address me as such.'

'I shall be sure to.'

'You, though, are called Geralt of Rivia. You're a witcher. Presently you are not, however, destroying monsters or beasts, but are busy hunting for missing girls.'

‘News spreads astonishingly quickly. Astonishingly far. And astonishingly deep. You allegedly foresaw that I’d show up here. You can foretell the future, I gather?’

‘Anyone,’ Avallac’h wiped his hands on a rag, ‘can foretell the future. And everyone does it, for it is simple. It is no great art to foretell it. The art is in foretelling it accurately.’

‘An elegant deduction, worthy of an epigram. You, naturally, can prophecy accurately.’

‘And often. I, my dear Geralt, know much and am capable of much. Actually, my academic title – as you, humans, would say – indicates that. It reads in full “Aen Saevherne”.’

‘A Sage – a Knowing One.’

‘Precisely.’

‘And willing, I hope, to share that knowledge?’

Avallac’h said nothing for a moment.

‘Share?’ he finally drawled. ‘With you? Knowledge, my dear, is a privilege, and privileges are only shared with one’s equals. And why would I, an elf, a Sage, a member of the elite, share anything with a descendant of a creature that appeared in the universe barely five million years ago, having evolved from an ape, a rat, a jackal or some other such mammal? A creature that took around a million years to discover that one can execute some sort of operation with a gnawed bone using its two hairy hands? After which it shoved the bone up its rectum and shrieked for joy?’

The elf fell silent, turning and fixing his gaze on his painting.

‘Why indeed,’ he repeated, ‘do you dare to think I would share any knowledge at all with you, human? Tell me!’

Geralt wiped the rest of the shit from his boot.

‘Because, perhaps,’ he replied dryly, ‘it is inevitable?’

The elf spun around.

‘What,’ he asked through clenched teeth, ‘is inevitable?’

‘Perhaps –’ Geralt didn’t feel like raising his voice ‘– for the reason that a few years will pass and people will simply take all knowledge for themselves, heedless of whether anyone wants to share it with them or not? Including knowledge which you, elf and Sage, cunningly conceal behind cave paintings? Counting on the

fact that people will not want to take pickaxes to that wall, painted with the false evidence of primitive human existence? Eh? O, my fire of vanity?'

The elf snorted. Quite cheerfully.

'Oh, yes,' he said. 'It would be vanity truly carried to stupidity to believe you wouldn't smash something. You smash everything. But what of it? What of it, man?'

'I don't know. Tell me. And if you don't think it fit, I'll take myself off. Ideally through a different exit, since your mischievous chums are waiting for me by the other one, longing to crack my ribs.'

'By all means.' The elf spread his arms wide in a sudden movement, and the rock wall opened with a grinding and a cracking, brutally splitting the purple bison in two. 'Leave this way. Tread towards the light. Metaphorically or literally, that is usually the right way.'

'A bit of a shame,' Geralt muttered. 'I liked the frescoes.'

'You must be jesting,' the elf said after a brief silence, sounding quite astonishingly kindly and friendly. 'The fresco won't be harmed. I shall close the rock with an identical charm, and not even the trace of a crack will remain. Come. I'll go out with you, I shall escort you. I've reached the conclusion that I have something to tell you. And show you.'

It was dark inside, but the Witcher knew right away that the cave was immense – he could tell from the temperature and air currents. The gravel they walked over was wet.

Avallac'h conjured light in the elven fashion, simply using a gesture, without uttering a spell. A glowing ball rose towards the ceiling and the formations of rock crystal in the cave walls sparkled in a myriad of reflections and gleams. Shadows danced. The Witcher gasped involuntarily.

It wasn't the first time he'd seen elven sculptures and statues, but the impression was the same each time. That the figures of elves and she-elves frozen in mid-movement, in mid-flicker, weren't the work of a sculptor's chisel, but the result of a powerful spell, able to change living tissue into the white marble of Amell. The nearest statue depicted a she-elf sitting with her feet tucked beneath her on a basalt slab. The she-elf was turning her head away, as though alarmed by the patter of approaching steps. She was utterly naked.

The white marble, polished to a milky brilliance, meant one virtually felt the warmth emanating from the statue.

Avallac'h stopped and leaned against one of the columns marking the way among an avenue of statues.

'You have seen through me for a second time, Geralt,' he said softly. 'Yes, you were right, the bison cave painting *was* camouflage. Intended to discourage hacking and drilling through the wall. Intended to defend everything in here from plunder and devastation. Every race – the elven too – has a right to its roots. What you see here are our roots. Tread carefully, please. It is essentially a graveyard.'

The reflections of light dancing over the rock crystals drew further details from the gloom. Beyond the avenue of statues could be seen colonnades, stairways, amphitheatrical galleries, arcades and peristyles. Everything made of white marble.

'I want it,' Avallac'h continued, stopping and indicating with a hand, 'to survive. Even when we depart, when this whole continent and this whole world ends up under a mile-thick layer of ice and snow, Tir ná Béa Arainne will endure. We shall leave this place, but one day we shall return. We elves. We are promised this by Aen Ithlinnespeath, the Ithlinne Aegli aep Aevenien prophecy.'

'Do you really believe in it? In that prophecy? Does your fatalism really run so deep?'

'Everything –' the elf looked not at him, but at the marble columns covered with reliefs as delicate as cobwebs '– has been foreseen and prophesied. Your arrival on the continent, the war, the shedding of elven and human blood. The rise of your race, your decadence. The battle between the rulers of the North and the South. And the king of the South shall rise up against the kings of the North and overrun their lands like a flood, they will be crushed, and their nations devastated . . . And so shall begin the extinction of the world. Do your recall Ithlinne's text, Witcher? Who is far shall die at once; who is near shall fall from the sword; who hides shall die of hunger, who survives shall perish from the frost . . . For Tedd Deireadh, the Time of the End, the Time of the Sword and the Battle Axe, the Time of Contempt, the Time of the White Cold and the Wolfish Snowstorm shall come . . . '

'Poetry.'

'Do you prefer it less poetic? As a result of a change in the

angle of the sun's rays, the margin of permafrost will shift – significantly. Then the mountains will be crushed and pushed back southwards by the ice sliding from the North. Everything will be buried under snow. Under a thick layer more than a mile deep. And it will become very – *very* – cold.'

'We'll wear warm britches,' Geralt said without emotion. 'Sheepskins. And fur hats.'

'You took the words right out of my mouth,' the elf agreed calmly. 'And you'll survive in those hats and britches, in order to return one day, dig holes and poke around in these caves, to wreck and plunder. Ithlinne's prophecy doesn't say so, but I know it. It's impossible to utterly destroy humans and cockroaches; at least one pair always remains. As far as we elves are concerned, Ithlinne is more explicit: only those who follow the Swallow will survive. The Swallow, the symbol of spring, is the saviour, the one who will open the Forbidden Door, signal the way of salvation. And make possible the world's rebirth. The Swallow, the Child of the Elder Blood.'

'You mean Ciri?' Geralt burst out. 'Or Ciri's child? How? And why?'

Avallac'h seemed not to hear.

'The Swallow of the Elder Blood,' he said again. 'From her blood. Come. And look.'

The statue Avallac'h pointed at stood out even among the other astoundingly realistic statues; most captured mid-movement or mid-gesture. The white marble she-elf reclining on the slab gave the impression that – having been awoken – she was about to sit up and get to her feet. Her face was turned towards the empty place by her side, and her raised hand seemed to be touching something invisible.

There was an expression of calm happiness on the she-elf's face.

It was a long time before Avallac'h broke the silence.

'That is Lara Dorren aep Shiadhal. It's not a grave, naturally, but a cenotaph. Does the statue's position surprise you? Support was not gained for the plan to carve both of the legendary lovers in marble. Lara and Cregennan of Lod. Cregennan was a man; it would be sacrilege to waste Amell marble on a statue of him. It would be blasphemy to erect a statue of a man here, in Tir ná Béa Arainne.

On the other hand, it would be an even greater crime to deliberately destroy the memory of this emotion. So a happy medium was found. Formally . . . Cregennan is not here. And yet he is. In Lara's aspect and pose. The lovers are together. Nothing was able to separate them. Neither death, nor oblivion . . . Nor hatred.'

It seemed to the Witcher that the elf's indifferent voice had changed for a moment. But that would have been impossible. Avallac'h approached the statue and stroked the marble arm with a cautious, gentle movement. Then he turned around and the usual, slightly sneering smile reappeared on his angular face.

'Do you know, Witcher, what the greatest snag of longevity is?'

'No.'

'Sex.'

'What?'

'You heard right. Sex. After almost a hundred years it becomes boring. There's nothing in it to fascinate or excite any longer, nothing that has the exciting appeal of novelty. It has all been done already . . . In this or that way, but it has happened. And then suddenly comes the Conjunction of the Spheres and you, people, appear here. Human survivors, come from another world, from your former world, which you managed utterly to destroy with your still-hirsute hands, barely five million years after evolving as a species. There's only a handful of you, your life expectancy is ridiculously low, so your survival depends on the pace of reproduction. Thus unbridled lust never leaves you, sex totally governs you; it's a drive more powerful even than the survival instinct. To die? Why not, if one can fuck around beforehand. That is your entire philosophy.'

Geralt didn't interrupt or comment, although he felt a strong desire to.

'And what suddenly happens?' Avallac'h continued. 'Elves, bored by she-elves, court the always-willing human females. Bored she-elves give themselves, out of perverse curiosity, to human males, always full of vigour and verve. And something happens that no one can explain: she-elves, who normally ovulate once every ten or twenty years, when copulating with a man begin to ovulate with each powerful orgasm. Some hidden hormone, or combination of hormones, became active. She-elves suddenly understand they can, in practice, only have children with humans. So, owing to the she-elves, we didn't exterminate you when we were still the more

powerful race. And later you were more powerful and began to exterminate us. But you still had allies in the she-elves. For they were the advocates of coexistence and cooperation . . . and they didn't want to admit that essentially it was about commingling.'

'What does that –' Geralt cleared his throat '– have to do with me?'

'With you? Absolutely nothing. But with Ciri, a great deal. For Ciri is a descendant of Lara Dorren aep Shiadhal, and Lara Dorren was an advocate of coexistence with humans. Chiefly with one human. Cregennan of Lod, a human sorcerer. Lara Dorren coexisted with Cregennan often and effectively. To put it more simply: she became pregnant.'

The Witcher kept silent this time too.

'The snag was that Lara Dorren wasn't an ordinary she-elf. She was genetic potential. Especially prepared. The result of many years' work. In combination with another charge – an elven one, naturally – she was meant to bear an even more special child. Engaging with the seed of a man, she ruined that chance, wasted hundreds of years' planning and preparation. At least so it was thought at the time. No one supposed that the cross-breed begat by Cregennan could inherit anything positive from its pure-blood mother. No, such a misalliance could not bring any good—'

'For which reason,' Geralt interjected, 'he was severely punished.'

'Not the way you think.' Avallac'h glanced at him. 'Although the relationship between Lara Dorren and Cregennan caused incalculable damage to the elves, and it could have turned out well for humans, it was, however, humans – and not elves – who murdered Cregennan. Humans – and not elves – brought Lara to ruin. Thus it was, despite the fact that many elves had reason to hate the lovers. Personally, too.'

For the second time, the slight change in the elf's voice puzzled Geralt.

'One way or another,' Avallac'h continued, 'the peaceful coexistence burst like a soap bubble, and the races went for each other's throats. A war began which endures until today. And meanwhile Lara's genetic material . . . exists, as you've probably guessed. And has even developed. Unfortunately, it mutated. Yes, yes. Your Ciri is a mutant.'

This time, again, the elf didn't wait for a comment.

'Of course, the sorcerers had a hand in this, cleverly combining breeding individuals into pairs, but it got out of control. Few can guess how Lara Dorren's genetic material regenerated so powerfully in Ciri, what the trigger was. I think it is known by Vilgefortz, the one who gave you a hiding on Thanedd. The sorcerers who experimented with Lara and Riannon's progeny, running a veritable breeding farm, didn't get the expected results, so they became bored and abandoned the experiment. But the experiment continued; just spontaneously. Ciri, the daughter of Pavetta, the granddaughter of Calanthe, the great-great-granddaughter of Riannon, was Lara Dorren's true descendant. Vilgefortz learned about it, probably by accident. It is also known about by Emhyr var Emreis, the Emperor of Nilfgaard.'

'And you know about it.'

'I know more about it than the two of them. But that means nothing. The mill of destiny is turning, the querns of fate are grinding . . . Whatever is destined must occur.'

'So what must occur?'

'Whatever is destined to. That which was determined above, in the metaphorical sense, of course. Something that is determined by the action of an unerringly functioning mechanism, at the root of which lies the Purpose, the Plan and the Result.'

'That's either poetry or metaphysics. Or the one and the other, for they are occasionally difficult to distinguish. Are any hard facts possible? If only a very few? I'd love to discuss this and that with you, but it so happens I'm in a hurry.'

Avallac'h gave him a long look.

'And where are you hurrying to? Ah, forgive me . . . You, it seems to me, haven't understood anything I've said to you. So I'll tell you straight: your great rescue expedition is meaningless. It has lost all meaning.

'There are several reasons,' the elf continued, looking at the Witcher's granite-like face. 'Firstly, it's too late now, the serious evil has already occurred; you're no longer in a position to save the girl from it. Secondly, now that she has taken the right road, the Swallow will cope wonderfully by herself. She carries too mighty a force inside her to fear anything. She doesn't need your help. And thirdly . . . Hmmm . . . '

‘I’m still all ears, Avallac’h. All ears!’

‘Thirdly . . . Thirdly, someone else will help her now. You can’t be so arrogant as to think that the girl’s destiny is exclusively bound to you.’

‘Is that all?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then farewell.’

‘Wait.’

‘I said I’m in a hurry.’

‘Let’s suppose for a moment,’ the elf said serenely, ‘that I know what will happen, that I can see the future. What if I tell you what is to happen, what will happen anyway, irrespective of the efforts you make? Of the initiatives already undertaken? What if I told you that you could search for a peaceful place on earth and stay there, doing nothing, waiting for the inevitable consequences of the course of events. Would you choose to do something like that?’

‘No.’

‘What if I communicated to you that your activities – testifying to your lack of faith in the unwavering mechanisms of the Purpose, Plan and Result – may, though the likelihood is slight, indeed change something, but only for the worse? Would you reconsider? Oh, I see from your expression that you wouldn’t. Then I’ll simply ask you: why not?’

‘Do you really want to know?’

‘I do.’

‘Because I don’t believe in your metaphysical platitudes about goals, plans and preordained ideas of creators. Nor do I believe in the celebrated prophecy of Ithlinne or other prophecies. I consider them, if you can imagine it, the same bullshit and humbug as your cave painting. The purple bison, Avallac’h. Nothing more. I don’t know if you can’t – or won’t – help me. Nonetheless, I don’t feel resentment towards you . . . ’

‘You say I can’t or don’t want to help you. And how might I help?’

Geralt pondered for a moment, absolutely aware that much depended on how the question was put.

‘Will I get Ciri back?’

The answer was immediate.

‘You will. Only to lose her at once. And to be clear: forever; irrevocably. Before it comes to that, you will lose everybody who accompanies you. You will lose one of your companions in the next few weeks, perhaps even days. Perhaps even hours.’

‘Thank you.’

‘I haven’t finished yet. The direct effect of your interference in the grinding querns of the Purpose and the Plan will be the death of tens of thousands of people. Which, as a matter of fact, doesn’t matter much, since soon after, tens of millions of people will lose their lives. The world as you know it will simply vanish, cease to exist, in order – after a suitable time has passed – to revive in a totally different form. But in fact no one has, nor will have, any influence on it, no one is capable of preventing it nor staving off the course of events. Not you, not I, not sorcerers nor Sages. Not even Ciri. What do you say to that?’

‘Purple bison. All the same, I thank you, Avallac’h.’

‘While we’re about it,’ the elf shrugged, ‘I’m somewhat curious as to what a pebble falling in the gears of the querns might accomplish . . . May I do anything else for you?’

‘Not really. Because you can’t show me Ciri, I imagine?’

‘Who said so?’

Geralt held his breath. Avallac’h headed towards the cave wall with rapid steps, indicating the Witcher to follow him.

‘The walls of Tir ná Béa Arainne –’ he pointed to the sparkling rock crystals ‘– have special qualities. And I, though I say it as shouldn’t, have special abilities. Place your hands on this. Fix your gaze on it. Think intensively. About how much she needs you right now. And declare, so to speak, the mental willingness to help. Think about how you want to run and rescue her, be beside her; something like that. The image should appear by itself. And be distinct. Look, but refrain from impulsive reactions. Say nothing. It will be a vision, not communication.’

He obeyed.

The first images, in spite of the promise, weren’t distinct. They were vague, but so brutal that he stepped back involuntarily. A severed hand on a table . . . Blood splashed on a glazed surface . . .

Skeletons on skeleton horses . . . Yennefer, in manacles . . .

A tower? A black tower? And behind it, in the background . . . The northern lights?

And suddenly, without warning, the image became all too clear.

'Dandelion!' Geralt yelled. 'Milva! Angoulême!'

'Eh?' Avallac'h took an interest. 'Ah, yes. You seem to have spoiled everything.'

Geralt leaped back from the cave wall, almost falling over on a basalt plinth.

'It doesn't bloody matter!' he cried. 'Listen, Avallac'h, I must get to that druidic forest as quickly as possible . . . '

'Caed Myrkvid?'

'Very likely! My companions are in mortal danger there! They're fighting for their lives! Other people are also in danger . . . What's the quickest way . . . ? Oh, dammit! I'm going back for my sword and horse—'

'No horse,' the elf calmly interrupted, 'is capable of carrying you to the Myrkvid grove before nightfall—'

'But I—'

'I haven't finished yet. Go and get your legendary sword, and meanwhile I'll find you a mount. A perfect steed for mountain tracks. It's a somewhat unusual one, I'd say . . . But with its help you'll be in Caed Myrkvid in less than half an hour.'

*

The knocker reeked like a horse – but that was where the similarity ended. Geralt had once seen in Mahakam a mountain goat-riding contest organised by dwarves, which had seemed to be a totally reckless sport. But it was only now, as he sat on the back of the knocker as it hurtled insanely up the cliff, that he learned what true recklessness was.

In order not to fall off, he dug his fingers tightly into the rough shaggy coat and squeezed his thighs against the monster's fleecy sides. The knocker stank of sweat, urine and vodka. It flew as

though possessed, the earth thudding under the impact of its gigantic feet, as though its soles were of bronze. Slowing slightly, it climbed up hillsides and pelted down them so fast the wind howled in Geralt's ears. It rushed across ridges, mountain paths and ledges so narrow Geralt kept his eyes tightly closed so as not to look down. It cleared waterfalls, cascades, chasms and clefts too extreme even for a mountain goat, and each successful leap was accompanied by a savage and deafening roar. That is, more savage and deafening than the knocker's usual roar – which was something it did almost constantly.

'Don't race like that!' The rush of air shoved the words back down his throat.

'Why not?'

'You've been drinking!'

'Uuuaaahaaaaaaaa!'

They raced on. The wind whistled in his ears.

The knocker reeked.

The clatter of immense feet on rock fell silent. Instead, rock fields and scree rattled. Then the ground became less rocky, and something that might have been a dwarf pine flashed by. Then a blur of green and brown, for the knocker was loping in insane bounds through a fir forest. The scent of resin mingled with the monster's stench.

'Uaaahaaaaaa!'

The firs ceased and fallen leaves whispered. Now red, now claret, ochre and golden.

'Slow down!'

'Uaaaahahhahaha!'

The knocker cleared a pile of fallen trees with a huge bound. Geralt almost bit his tongue off.

*

The breakneck ride ended as unceremoniously as it had begun. The knocker dug its heels into the ground, roared, and tossed the Witcher onto the leaf-strewn forest floor. Geralt lay still for a while

and couldn't even curse, from lack of breath. Then he stood up, hissing and rubbing his knee, which had begun to throb again.

'You never fell off,' the knocker stated with surprise in its voice. 'Well, well.'

Geralt didn't comment.

'We've arrived.' The knocker pointed with one shaggy paw. 'That's Caed Myrkvid.'

Beneath them was a basin, densely filled with mist. The tops of great trees showed through the haze.

'That fog,' the knocker anticipated the question, sniffing, 'isn't natural. What's more I can smell smoke from over there. If I were you, I'd hurry. Eeeh, I'd go with you . . . I'm sick with the desire to fight! And I dreamed as a child of one day charging at people with a witcher on me back! But Avallac'h forbad me from showing myself. It's to do with the safety of our whole tribe. . . '

'I know.'

'Don't bear a grudge that I smacked you in the mouth.'

'I don't.'

'You're alright. For a human.'

'Thank you. For the lift too.'

The knocker bared his teeth among his red beard, and breathed vodka.

'The pleasure's all mine.'

*

The fog lying on Myrkvid Forest was dense and had an irregular shape, calling to mind a heap of whipped cream squeezed onto a cake by a lunatic cook. The fog reminded the Witcher of Brokilon – the Forest of the Dryads was often covered by a similarly dense, protective and camouflaging magical haze. Like Brokilon it had the dignified and menacing atmosphere of an ancient forest, here at the edge consisting predominantly of alder and beech.

And just like in Brokilon, right at the edge of the forest, on the leaf-strewn road, Geralt almost tripped over a corpse.

*

The cruelly massacred people weren't druids or Nilfgaardians, and they certainly didn't belong to Nightingale and Schirrú's hassa. Before Geralt had even spied the outlines of wagons in the fog, he recalled that Regis had spoken of pilgrims. It appeared that for some the pilgrimage had not ended happily.

The stench of smoke and burning, unpleasant in the damp air, became more and more distinct, and pointed the way. Soon after, the way was also indicated by voices. Cries. And the discordant music of fiddles. Geralt made haste.

A wagon stood on the rain-softened road. More bodies lay beside the wheels.

One of the bandits was rummaging around the wagon, chucking objects and tackle onto the road. Another was holding the unharnessed horses and a third was stripping a foxskin coat from a dead pilgrim. A fourth was sawing a fiddle with a bow – evidently found among the loot – and utterly failing to get even a single pure note from the instrument.

The cacophony came in useful. It muffled Geralt's steps.

The music broke off abruptly, the fiddle stings whined piercingly, the brigand slammed down onto the leaves and spattered them with blood. The one holding the horses didn't even manage to shout; the sihill severed his windpipe. The third brigand didn't manage to jump down from the wagon. He fell, yelling, with his femoral artery carved open. The last one even managed to draw his sword. But not to raise it.

Geralt shook blood from the fuller with his thumb.

'Yes, boys,' he said to the forest and the scent of smoke. 'This was a stupid idea. You oughtn't to have listened to Nightingale and Schirrú. You should have stayed at home.'

*

He soon came across further wagons and further victims. Druids in bloodstained white robes also lay among the numerous mutilated

pilgrims. The smoke from the now close fire crawled low over the ground.

This time, the brigands were more vigilant. He only managed to stalk one of them, who was occupied pulling cheap rings and bracelets from the bloody hands of a murdered woman. Geralt, without hesitation, slashed the bandit, the bandit roared, and then the remaining men – brigands mixed up with Nilfgaardians – attacked him, yelling.

He dodged into the forest, to the foot of the nearest tree, so the trunk would protect his back. But before the brigands could run over, hooves thudded, and from the bushes and fog emerged a mighty horse draped in a caparison with a red and gold diagonal chequered pattern. The horse was carrying a rider clad in full armour, a snow-white cloak, and a helmet with a perforated pig-faced visor. Before the bandits could compose themselves, the knight was already breathing down their necks and carving every which way with his sword, and blood was gushing in fountains. It was a splendid sight.

Geralt didn't have time to watch, however, having two on his hands himself: a brigand in a cherry-red jerkin and a black-uniformed Nilfgaardian. The brigand exposed himself as he lunged, so Geralt slashed him across the face, and the Nilfgaardian – seeing teeth flying – took to his heels and vanished into the fog.

Geralt was almost trampled by the horse in the chequered caparison, now running and riderless.

Without delaying, he leaped through the undergrowth towards cries, curses and thudding.

Three bandits had dragged the knight in the white cloak from the saddle and were trying to kill him. One of them, standing with legs astride, was smiting with a poleaxe; the second was striking with a sword; and the third – small and red-haired – was hopping beside them like a hare, seeking a chance and an unprotected place where he could stab with his bear spear. The knight – lying on his back – was yelling incomprehensibly from inside his helmet and deflecting the blows with a shield held in both hands. The shield sank lower with each blow; it was almost resting on his breastplate. There was no doubt. One or two more blows and the knight's innards would burst through every slit in his armour.

Geralt was in the thick of it in three bounds, slashing the hopping red-head with the bear spear across the nape and carving

open the belly of the one with the poleaxe. The knight, agile in spite of his armour, whacked the third brigand in the knee with the shield rim, and pummelled him thrice in the face as he lay on the ground until blood sprayed across his shield. He rose onto his knees, fumbled among ferns in search of his sword, buzzing like a great iron-plated drone. He suddenly saw Geralt and froze.

'In whose hands am I?' He trumpeted from deep within his helmet.

'In no one's. The men lying there are also my foes.'

'Aha . . .' The knight tried to raise his visor, but the metal plate was bent and the mechanism had blocked. ''Pon my word! Thank you a hundredfold for your succour.'

'I thank you. For it was you who came to my aid.'

'Indeed? When?'

He didn't see anything, thought Geralt. He hadn't even noticed me through the holes in that iron pot.

'What is your name?' the knight asked.

'Geralt. Of Rivia.'

'Coat of arms?'

'It is not the time, sir knight, for heraldry.'

''Pon my word, 'tis the truth, stout-hearted Sir Geralt.' Having found his sword the knight stood up. His chipped shield – like the horse's caparison – was decorated with a gold and red diagonal chequered pattern, the letters A and H alternating in the fields.

'They are not my ancestral arms,' he boomed in explanation. 'They are the initials of my suzerain lady, Duchess Anna Henarietta. I'm called the Chequered Knight. I'm a knight errant. And forbidden from revealing my name or arms. I have taken knightly vows. 'Pon my word, thanks again for the help, sir knight.'

'The pleasure's all mine.'

One of the defeated bandits groaned and rustled in the leaves. The Chequered Knight leaped and pinned him to the ground with a mighty thrust. The brigand's arms and legs waved like a spider impaled on a pin.

'Let us hurry,' the knight said. 'The rabble is still raging here. 'Pon my word, it's not time to repose yet!'

‘True,’ Geralt agreed. ‘There’s a gang marauding through the forest, killing pilgrims and druids. My friends are in a predicament . . .’

‘Excuse me for a moment.’

A second brigand was showing signs of life. He was also vigorously pinned and his turned-up feet cut such a caper that his boots fell off.

‘’Pon my word!’ The Chequered Knight wiped his sword on the moss. ‘These good-for-nothings are loath to depart this life! Let it not astound you, sir knight, that I’m finishing off the wounded. ’Pon my word, I’ve not done it for many years. But these imps recover so swiftly an honest fellow may only envy them. Ever since I happened to cross swords with the same rascal thrice in a row, I began to finish them off more meticulously. Once and for all.’

‘I understand.’

‘I – you see – am errant. But not, ’pon my word, erratic! Oh, it’s my horse. Come here, Bucephalus!’

*

The forest became more open and brighter; great oaks with spreading but thin crowns began to predominate. They could now smell the smoke and stench of the fire nearby. And a moment later they could see it.

Three cottages with thatched roofs – an entire small settlement – were on fire. The tarpaulins of the nearby wagons were also on fire. Corpses were lying between the wagons; from a distance it was evident that many were wearing white druidic gowns.

The bandits and Nilfgaardians, drumming up courage by yelling, and concealed behind wagons they were pushing in front of them, were attacking a large house on stilts leaning against the trunk of a gigantic oak. The house was built from robust beams with a shingle roof down which the torches thrown by the bandits were harmlessly rolling. The besieged house was defending itself and striking back effectively – before Geralt’s eyes one of the brigands leaned imprudently out from behind a wagon and fell as though struck by lightning with an arrow in his skull.

‘Your friends,’ the Chequered Knight displayed his acuity,

‘must be in that building! ’Pon my word, they’re in desperate straits! Onward! Let us hasten to their aid!’

Geralt heard screeching yells and orders, and recognised the robber Nightingale with his bandaged cheek. He also glimpsed the half-elf Schirrú, hiding behind some Nilfgaardians in black cloaks. Suddenly horns roared, so loudly that leaves fell from the oak trees. The hooves of war horses rumbled and the swords and armour of charging knights flashed. The robbers fled, yelling, in all directions.

‘’Pon my word!’ the Chequered Knight roared, spurring on his horse. ‘It’s my comrades! They’re ahead of us! Attack, so a little glory will be left for us! Smite, kill!’

Galloping ahead on Bucephalus the Chequered Knight fell on the fleeing robbers, hacked down two in a flash, and scattered the rest like a hawk among sparrows. Two of them turned towards Geralt, and the Witcher dealt with them in the blink of an eye.

A third shot at him with a Gabriel.

A certain Gabriel, a craftsman from Verden, had invented and patented a miniature crossbow. He advertised them with the slogan “Defend yourself”. His handbill declared “Banditry and violence are rampant among us. The law is powerless and inept. Defend yourself! Don’t leave home without a handy Gabriel crossbow. A Gabriel is your guardian, a Gabriel will protect you and your dear ones from bandits.”

Sales were phenomenal. Soon every bandit packed a Gabriel during robberies.

Geralt was a witcher and could dodge a bolt. But he’d forgotten about his painful knee. His evasive manoeuvre was an inch late, and the leaf-shaped point gashed his ear. The pain blinded him, but just for a moment. The brigand was too slow to reload and defend himself. The furious Witcher slashed him across the hands, and then disembowelled him with a sweeping flourish of his sihill.

Geralt hadn’t even managed to wipe the blood from his ear and neck when he was attacked by a small character as agile as a weasel, with unnaturally shining eyes, armed with a curved Zerrikanian sabre which he was twirling with admirable skill. He parried two of Geralt’s blows, and the fine steel of the two blades rang and showered sparks. The weasel was alert and keen-eyed – he noticed at once that the Witcher was limping. He immediately

began to circle and attack from a more favourable position. He was astonishingly quick. The sabre's blade seemed to wail as he made dangerous diagonal thrusts. Geralt was finding it more and more difficult to avoid the blows. He was limping worse and worse, forced to stand on his aching leg.

The weasel suddenly hunched forward, jumped, and made a dexterous feint and lunge, slashing diagonally downwards. Geralt parried obliquely and deflected. The bandit spun nimbly, moving from his stance to a nasty cut from below, when he suddenly goggled, sneezed loudly and covered himself in snot, dropping his guard for a moment. The Witcher jabbed him fast in the neck and the blade went in as far as the vertebrae.

'Well, who'll tell me now,' he panted, looking at the twitching corpse, 'that taking drugs isn't bad for your health?'

A bandit attacking him with a raised club tripped and fell face down in the mud, an arrow sticking out of the back of his head.

'I'm coming, Witcher!' Milva screamed. 'I'm coming! Hold on!'

Geralt turned, but there was no one left to hack. Milva had shot the only brigand remaining in the vicinity. The rest fled into the forest, pursued by the colourful knighthood. Several were being tormented by the Chequered Knight on Bucephalus. He caught them, and his terrible raging could be heard from the forest.

One of the black-uniformed Nilfgaardians, not finished off precisely, suddenly leaped to his feet and bolted. Milva raised and tautened her bow in a second. The fletchings howled and the Nilfgaardian fell on the leaves with a grey-feathered arrow between his shoulder blades. The archer sighed heavily.

'We'll hang for this,' she said.

'Why do you think so?'

'This is Nilfgaard, isn't it? And it's the second month I've been mainly shooting at Nilfgaardians.'

'This is Toussaint, not Nilfgaard.' Geralt felt the side of his head, and took away a bloody hand.

'Dammit. What is it? Have a look, Milva.'

The archer examined it carefully and critically.

'Your ear's been torn off,' she finally said. 'Nothing to worry about.'

‘Easy for you to say. I was fond of that ear. Help me to bind it with something, it’s dripping down my collar. Where are Dandelion and Angoulême?’

‘In the cottage, with the pilgrims . . . Oh, a pox on it . . . ’

Hooves pounded, and from the mist emerged three riders on warhorses, cloaks and pennants fluttering as they galloped. Before their war cries resounded, Geralt had grabbed Milva by the arm and pulled her under a wagon. There was no fooling around with someone charging with a lance, which gave the riders an effective range of ten feet in front of their horse’s head.

‘Get out!’ The knights’ mounts churned the earth around the wagon with their horseshoes. ‘Drop your weapons and get out!’

‘We’re going to hang,’ Milva murmured. She might have been right.

‘Ha, thugs!’ one of the knights, bearing a shield with a black bull’s head on a silver field, roared . ‘Ha, rogues! ’Pon my word, you shall hang!’

‘’Pon my word!’ crowed the other, with a uniformly blue shield, in a youthful voice. ‘We’ll carve them up on the spot!’

‘Hi, I say! Stop!’

The Chequered Knight emerged from the fog on Bucephalus. He had finally managed to lift his twisted visor, from beneath which luxuriant flaxen moustaches now peeped.

‘Free them with all haste!’ he called. ‘They are not bandits, but upright and honest folk. The lady manfully acted in defence of the pilgrims. And that fellow is a goodly knight!’

‘A goodly knight?’ Bull’s Head raised his visor and scrutinised Geralt extremely incredulously. ‘’Pon my word! It cannot be!’

‘’Pon my word!’ The Chequered Knight thumped an armoured fist into his breastplate. ‘It can, I give my word! This doughty fellow saved my life when I was in need, after I was flung to the ground by ne’er-do-wells. He is called Geralt of Rivia.’

‘Arms?’

‘I’m forbidden from revealing them,’ the Witcher grunted. ‘I can share neither my true name nor my arms. I have taken knightly vows. I am the errant Geralt.’

‘Oooh!’ a familiar insolent voice suddenly yelled. ‘Look what

the cat dragged in. Ha, I told you, aunty, that the Witcher would come and rescue us!'

'And just in time!' shouted Dandelion, approaching with Angoulême and a small group of terrified pilgrims. He was carrying his lute and the ever-present tube of scrolls. 'And not a second too soon. You have a fine sense of drama, Geralt. You ought to write plays for the stage!'

He suddenly fell silent. Bull's Head leaned over in his saddle and his eyes shone.

'Viscount Julian?'

'Baron de Peyrac-Peyran?'

Two more knights emerged from behind the oaks. One, in a great helm adorned with a very good likeness of a white swan with outstretched wings, was leading two prisoners in a lasso. The other knight, errant, but practical, was preparing a noose and looking for a suitable bough.

'Neither Nightingale,' Angoulême noticed the Witcher's expression, 'nor Schirrú. Pity.'

'Pity,' Geralt admitted. 'But we'll try to correct that. Sir knight . . . '

But Bull's Head – or rather Baron de Peyrac-Peyran – wasn't paying any attention to him. He only had eyes, it seemed, for Dandelion.

''Pon my word,' he drawled. 'My eyes do not deceive me! It's Viscount Julian in person. Ha! The Duchess *will* be pleased!'

'Who is Viscount Julian?' the Witcher asked curiously.

'That would be me,' Dandelion muttered. 'Don't interfere, Geralt.'

'Lady Henrietta *will* be pleased,' Baron de Peyrac-Peyran repeated. 'Ha, 'pon my word! We shall take you all to Beauclair Castle. But no excuses, viscount. I won't hear of any excuse!'

'Some of the brigands fled,' Geralt spoke in quite a cool tone. 'I suggest we catch them first. And then think about what to do with this day – so interestingly begun. What say you, baron?'

''Pon my word,' said Bull's Head, 'nothing will come of it. Pursuit is impossible. The criminals fled across the stream, and we mustn't put a foot over it, not even a scrap of hoof. That part of the

Myrkvid Forest is an inviolable sanctuary, in accordance with the compacts entered into with the druids by Her Majesty Duchess Anna Henarietta, who benignly reigns over Toussaint—'

'The robbers bolted in there, dammit!' Geralt interrupted, growing furious. 'They're going into that inviolable sanctuary to kill! And you're telling me about some compacts—'

'We've given our knightly word!' It seemed a mutton head would have suited Baron de Peyrac-Peyran's shield better than a bull's head. 'We are forbad! Compacts! Not a single step onto druidic territory!'

'If they're forbidden, well that's too bad,' Angoulême snorted, pulling two bandit horses by their bridles. 'Drop that empty talk, Witcher. Let's go. I still have unfinished business with Nightingale and you, I think, would like to talk some more with the half-elf.'

'I'm with you,' said Milva. 'I'll just find some mare or other.'

'Me too,' Dandelion muttered. 'I'm with you too . . . '

'Oh, no, no, no!' called the bull-headed baron. ''Pon my word, Viscount Julian will ride with us to Beauclair Castle. The duchess wouldn't forgive us if after meeting you we didn't bring you to her. I shan't stop the rest of you, you are free in your plans and ideas. As the companions of Viscount Julian, Her Grace, Lady Henarietta, would have gladly received you with all due respect and invited you to stay at the castle, but why, if you scorn her hospitality. . . '

'We scorn it not,' Geralt interrupted, with a menacing glance restraining Angoulême, who was making insulting gestures with her hand behind the baron's back. 'Far be it from us to scorn it. We shall not fail to pay our respects and due homage to the duchess. But first we will accomplish what we must accomplish. We also gave our word; one might say that we've also made compacts. Once we have carried them out we shall make for Beauclair Castle. We shall unfailingly go there.'

'If only,' he added knowingly and with emphasis, 'to ensure that no disgrace or dishonour befalls our comrade, Dandelion. I meant Julian, by thunder.'

''Pon my word!' the baron suddenly laughed. 'No disgrace nor dishonour will befall Viscount Julian, I'm prepared to give my word on it! For I omitted to tell you, viscount, that Duke Raymund died of apoplexy two years past.'

‘Ha, ha!’ Dandelion shouted, beaming all over. ‘The duke kicked the bucket! These truly are marvellous and joyous tidings! I mean, I meant to say, sorrow and grief, a great loss . . . May the earth lie lightly on him . . . If that is the case, let’s ride with all haste to Beauclair, noble knights! Geralt, Milva and Angoulême, I’ll see you in the castle!’

*

They forded the stream and spurred the horses into the forest, among spreading oaks and stirrup-high ferns. Milva found the trail of the fleeing gang without difficulty. They rode as quickly as they could, for Geralt feared for the druids. He was afraid the survivors of the gang, feeling safe, would want to seek vengeance on the druids for the massacre sustained from the knights errant of Toussaint.

‘Well, Dandelion’s come up trumps,’ Angoulême suddenly said. ‘When Nightingale’s men surrounded us in that cottage, he told me what he feared in Toussaint.’

‘I’d guessed,’ Witcher replied. ‘I just didn’t know he’d aimed so high. The duchess, ho!’

‘It was a good few years ago. And Duke Raymund, the one who croaked, had apparently sworn he’d tear out the poet’s heart, have it roasted and make his inconstant duchess eat it for supper. Dandelion’s lucky he didn’t fall into the duke’s clutches while he was still alive. We’re also lucky . . .’

‘That remains to be seen.’

‘Dandelion claims that Duchess Henarietta is madly in love with him.’

‘Dandelion always claims that.’

‘Shut your traps!’ Milva snapped, reining in her horse and reaching for her bow.

A brigand rushed blindly towards them, without a hat, weaving from oak to oak. He was running, falling over, getting up and running again. And screaming. Shrilly, dreadfully, awfully.

‘What the . . . ?’ Angoulême asked in astonishment.

Milva tautened her bow in silence. She didn’t shoot, but waited

until the brigand approached and rushed straight for them, as though he couldn't see them. He ran between the horses of the Witcher and Angoulême. They saw his face, as white as a sheet and contorted in horror. They saw his bulging eyes.

'What the . . . ?' Angoulême repeated.

Milva recovered from her astonishment, turned in the saddle and sent an arrow into the fleeing man's back. The brigand roared and tumbled into the ferns.

The earth shook, making acorns fall from a nearby oak.

'I wonder,' said Angoulême, 'what he was fleeing from . . .'

The earth shook again. The bushes rustled and broken branches cracked.

'What is it?' Milva stammered, standing up in her stirrups. 'What is it, Witcher?'

Geralt looked, saw it and sighed loudly. Angoulême also saw it. And paled.

'Oh, fuck!'

Milva's horse also saw it. It neighed wildly, reared and then bucked. The archer flew from the saddle and sprawled heavily onto the ground. The horse raced into the forest. Without a second thought the Witcher's steed rushed after it, unfortunately choosing a path under an overhanging oak branch. The branch toppled the Witcher from the saddle. The impact and the pain in his knee almost made him lose consciousness.

Angoulême managed to stay in control of her frenzied horse the longest, but finally she too ended up on the ground and her horse fled, almost trampling Milva as she was getting up.

And they saw more clearly the thing that was coming for them. And absolutely, absolutely lost their astonishment at the animals' panic.

The creature resembled a gigantic tree, a branching, ancient oak; perhaps it *was* an oak. But if so it was a very unusual oak. Instead of standing somewhere in a clearing among fallen leaves and acorns, instead of letting squirrels scamper over it and linnets shit on it, this oak was marching briskly through the forest, stamping its sturdy roots steadily and waving its boughs. The stout trunk – or torso – of the monster had a diameter of more or less four yards, and the hollow gaping in it was probably not a hollow,

but its maw, for it was snapping with a sound like the slamming of a heavy door.

Though the ground trembled beneath its terrible weight, making it difficult for them to keep their balance, the creature was loping through the ravines quite nimbly. And it wasn't doing it aimlessly.

In front of their eyes the monster swung its boughs, swished its branches and plucked from a pit a bandit who was cowering there, just as deftly as a stork plucks a frog hidden in the grass. Entwined in the branches, the thug hung among the boughs, howling pitifully. Geralt saw that the monster was carrying three brigands caught in the same way. And one Nilfgaardian.

'Run . . .' he moaned, vainly trying to stand. He felt as though someone was banging a white-hot nail into his knee with the rhythmic blows of a hammer. 'Milva . . . Angoulême . . . Run . . .'

'We won't leave you!'

The tree creature heard them, stamped its roots joyfully and rushed towards them. Angoulême, vainly trying to lift Geralt, swore hideously. With trembling hands, Milva tried to nock an arrow on the bowstring. Quite pointlessly.

'Run away!'

It was already too late. The tree creature was upon them. Paralysed by terror, they could now see its prey: four robbers, hanging in a tangle of branches. Two were still alive, for they were emitting hoarse croaks and kicking their legs. The third, probably unconscious, was hanging limply. The monster was clearly trying to catch its prey alive. But it had been unsuccessful with the fourth, and it had inadvertently squeezed too hard – which was obvious from its victim's bulging eyes and distended tongue, which was flopping down over a chin soiled with blood and vomit.

The next second they were hanging in the air, tangled in the branches, all three of them howling to high heaven.

'Graze, graze, graze,' they heard from below, near the roots. 'Graze, graze, Little Tree.'

A young druidess in a white robe with a flower wreath on her head strode behind the tree creature, driving it lightly with a leafy twig.

'Don't harm them, Little Tree, don't squeeze. Gently. Graze,

graze, graze.'

'We aren't brigands . . .' Geralt grunted from above, barely able to produce a sound from his chest, which was being crushed by the bough. 'Order it to let us go . . . We're innocent . . .'

'They all say that.' The druidess shooed away a little butterfly fluttering around her brow. 'Graze, graze, graze.'

'I've pissed myself . . .' Angoulême whimpered. 'I've bloody pissed myself!'

Milva only wheezed. Her head was lolling on her chest. Geralt swore vilely. It was the only thing he could do.

Driven by the druidess, the tree creature ran jauntily through the forest. During the run, all of the prisoners – at least those that were conscious – teeth were chattering to the rhythm of the creature's leaps, so loudly it echoed.

After a short while they were in a large clearing. Geralt saw a group of white-robed druids, and besides them another tree creature. The other had a poorer collection – only three bandits hung from its boughs, and probably only one was still alive.

'Oh, criminals, malefactors, oh, contemptible ones!' declaimed one of the druids from below. He was an old man resting on a long crosier. 'Observe carefully. See what punishment befalls criminals and base individuals in Myrkvid Forest. Look on and remember. We shall release you, that you might tell others about what you will soon behold. As a warning!'

In the very centre of the clearing stood a cage woven from wicker, a great, human-shaped effigy upon a huge pile of logs and faggots. The cage was full of yelling and struggling people. The Witcher could clearly hear the frog-like croaking of the robber Nightingale, hoarse with terror. He saw the face of the half-elf Schirrú, as white as a sheet and contorted in panicked fear, pressed against the wicker lattice.

'Druids!' Geralt yelled, puting all his strength into the cry, in order to be heard despite the general clamour. 'Lady flaminika! I am the Witcher Geralt!'

'I beg your pardon?' responded a tall, thin woman with hair the colour of grey steel falling over her back, bound around her brow with a wreath of mistletoe.

'I am Geralt . . . The Witcher . . . A friend of Emiel Regis . . .'

‘Again, please. I didn’t catch that.’

‘Geraaaaalt! A friend of the vampiiiire’s!’

‘Oh! You ought to have said so at once!’

At a sign from the druidess, the tree creature put them on the ground. Not very gently. Milva was unconscious, with blood dripping from her nose. Geralt stood up with difficulty and kneeled before her.

The steely-haired flaminika stood beside them and gave a slight cough. Her face was very lean, even haggard, evoking unpleasant associations of a skull covered in skin. Her cornflower-blue eyes were kind and gentle.

‘I believe she has broken ribs,’ she said, looking at Milva. ‘But we shall soon remedy that. Our healers will give her help immediately. I regret what has happened. But how was I to know who you were? I didn’t invite you to Caed Myrkvid or give my permission for you to enter our sanctuary. Emiel Regis vouched for you, admittedly, but the presence of a witcher in our forest, a paid killer of living creatures . . .’

‘I shall get out of here without a moment’s delay, honourable flaminika,’ Geralt assured her. ‘As soon as I—’

He broke off, seeing druids with flaming torches walking up to the pyre and the effigy full of people.

‘No!’ he cried, clenching his fists. ‘Stop!’

‘That cage,’ said the flaminika, seeming not to hear him, ‘was originally meant to serve as a winter manger for starving animals, was meant to have stood in the forest, stuffed with hay. But when we seized those scoundrels, I recalled the nasty rumours and calumnies which people spread about us. Very well, I thought, you can have your Wicker Hag. You made it up as a horrific nightmare, so I shall treat you to that nightmare . . .’

‘Order them to stop,’ the Witcher gasped. ‘Honourable flaminika . . . Don’t set light to it . . . One of the bandits has important information for me . . .’

The flaminika folded her arms on her chest. Her cornflower-blue eyes were still soft and gentle.

‘Oh, no,’ she said dryly. ‘No chance. I don’t believe in the institution of turning imperial evidence. Wriggling out of a punishment is immoral.’

‘Stop!’ The Witcher yelled. ‘Don’t set fire to it! Stooo— ’

The flaminika made a short gesture with her hand and Little Tree, still standing nearby, stamped down its roots and laid a bough on the Witcher’s shoulder. Geralt sat down with a thump.

‘Light it!’ the flaminika ordered. ‘I’m sorry, Witcher, but it must be thus. We druids cherish and venerate life in all its forms. But sparing the lives of criminals is sheer stupidity. Only terror deters criminals. So we shall give them an example of it. I pin great hopes on not having to repeat this example.’

The brushwood caught fire in an instant. The pyre belched smoke and flames leaped up. The yelling and screaming coming from the Wicker Hag made the Witcher’s hair stand on end. Of course, it was impossible among the cacophony – made louder by the crackle of the fire – but it seemed to Geralt that he could make out Nightingale’s desperate croaking and the high-pitched, pain-filled shrieks of the half-elf Schirrú.

The half-elf had been right, he thought. Death isn’t always the same.

And then – after a terribly long time – the pyre and the Wicker Hag mercifully exploded into an inferno of roaring fire, a fire in which nothing could survive.

‘Your medallion, Geralt,’ said Angoulême, standing beside him.

‘Eh?’ He cleared his throat, for his throat was tight. ‘What did you say?’

‘Your silver medallion with the wolf. Schirrú had it. Now you’ve lost it forever. It’ll melt in that heat.’

‘Too bad,’ he said a moment later, looking into the flaminika’s cornflower-blue eyes. ‘I’m no longer a witcher. I’ve stopped being a witcher. I’ve learned that now. On Thanedd, in the Tower of the Seagull. In Brokilon. On the bridge on the Yaruga. In the cave beneath Gorgon. And here, in Myrkvid Forest. No, I’m not a witcher now. So I’ll have to learn to manage without my medallion.’

The king loved the queen boundlessly, and she loved him with all her heart. Something so fair had to finish unhappily.

Flourens Delannoy, *Fairy Tales and Stories*

***Delannoy**, Flourens, linguist and historian b. 1432 in Vicovaro, in the years 1460–1475 secretary and librarian to the imperial court. Indefatigable scholar of legends and folktales, he wrote many treatises considered classics of ancient language and literature of the Empire's northern regions. His most important works are:* Myths and Legends of the Peoples of the North; Fairy Tales and Stories; The Surprise, or the Myth of the Elder Blood; A Saga about a Witcher*, and* The Witcher and the Witcher Girl, or the Endless Search. *From 1476 professor at the academy in Castell Graupian, where d. 1510.*

Effenberg and Talbot,

Encyclopaedia Maxima Mundi, Volume IV

CHAPTER EIGHT

A strong wind blew in from the sea, ruffling the sails, and a drizzle like thin hail stung the voyagers' faces painfully. The water in the Great Canal was leaden, rippled by the wind and flecked by a rash of rain.

'Come this way, sire. The boat is waiting.'

Dijkstra sighed heavily. He was thoroughly sick of the sea voyage. He'd been delighted by those few moments on the hard and solid rock wharf, and he was pissed off at the thought of stepping onto a wobbly deck once again. But what else to do? Lan Exeter, Kovir's winter capital, differed fundamentally from the world's other capital cities. In the harbour of Lan Exeter, travellers arriving by sea disembarked onto the stone quay only to immediately embark onto another craft; a slender many-oared boat with a highly upturned prow and slightly lower stern. Lan Exeter was built on the water, in the wide estuary of the River Targo. The city had canals instead of streets – and all municipal transportation was by boat.

He got in, greeting the Redanian ambassador waiting for him by the gangway. The boat was pushed away from the quay, the oars struck the water evenly, the boat moved off and picked up speed. The Redanian ambassador said nothing. *Ambassador*, Dijkstra thought mechanically. For how many years had Redania been sending ambassadors to Kovir? A hundred and twenty, at most. For a hundred and twenty years Kovir and Poviss had been foreign to Redania. Though it hadn't always been that way.

From time immemorial Redania had treated the countries in the North, on the Gulf of Praxeda, as part of its fiefdom. Kovir and Poviss were – it was said at the Tretogorian court – the greatest protectorates in the "Crown dominions". Successive earls were called Troydenids, since they were descended – or so they claimed – from their common forebear, Troyden. Prince Troyden had been the natural brother of Radovid I, King of Redania, later called the Great. Even in his youth Troyden was already a lewd and extremely beastly character. People were afraid when they realised he would develop with time. King Radovid – no exception in this regard – detested his brother like the plague. He thus appointed him Earl of Kovir in order to be rid of him, to move him as far away as possible.

And nowhere was further away than Kovir.

Earl Troyden was formally a liegeman of Redania, but an atypical one – he didn't bear any feudal obligations or duties. Why, he didn't even have to take the ceremonial feudal oath! All that was demanded of him was a pledge of 'no interference'. Some said that Radovid simply pitied his brother, knowing that the Koviran "protectorate" couldn't afford to pay tax or raise armies. Others, though, claimed Radovid simply wanted the earl out of his sight – the thought that his younger brother might turn up in Tretogor in person with money or military aid made him sick. No one knew what was true, but so it was, and so it remained. Many years after the death of Radovid I, the law established by the great king was still binding in Redania. Firstly, the county of Kovir was a vassal, but did not have to pay or serve. Secondly, the Koviran inheritance was in the exclusive control of the House of Troyden. Thirdly, Tretogor did not interfere in the affairs of the House of Troyden. Fourthly, members of the House of Troyden were not invited to Tretogor for ceremonies celebrating state holidays. Fifthly, nor for any other occasion.

Essentially, few knew and few were interested in what went on in the North. News about conflicts between Kovir and smaller northern rulers reached Redania, mainly by a roundabout route through Kaedwen. About alliances and wars; with Hengfors, Malleore, Creyden, Talgar and other lands with difficult-to-remember names. Someone conquered someone else and swallowed them up, someone allied with someone else in a dynastic union, someone routed and subjugated someone else. Essentially: no one knew who, whom or why.

However, news about wars and battles lured to the North a whole myriad of brawlers, adventurers, thrill seekers and other restless spirits, looking for plunder and the chance to blow off steam. They were drawn there from all the corners of the world, even from countries as distant as Cintra and Rivia. But they were above all citizens of Redania and Kaedwen. Entire cavalry squadrons came to Kovir, in particular from Kaedwen; rumour even trumpeted that the notorious Aideen, the rebellious, illegitimate daughter of the Kaedwenian monarch, rode at the head of one of them. In Redania it was said that designs were forming at the court in Ard Carraigh for the annexation of the northern county and severing it from the Redanian crown. Some even began clamouring for armed intervention.

Tretogor, however, ostentatiously announced that the North didn't interest it. As the royal jurists deemed, the principle of mutuality applied – the Koviran state had no obligations to the crown, so the crown wouldn't come to Kovir's aid. All the more so since Kovir had never asked for any help.

Meanwhile, Kovir and Poviss had emerged stronger and more powerful from the wars waged in the North. Few knew about that back then. A clearer signal of the North's growing might was a more and more vigorous export market. For decades it had been said of Kovir that the land's only wealth was sand and sea water. That joke was recalled when production from the Koviran foundries and salt works virtually monopolised the world's glass and salt markets.

But although hundreds of people drank from glasses with the mark of the Koviran foundries and seasoned their soup with Poviss salt, in people's awareness it was still an extremely distant, inaccessible, harsh and hostile land. And, above all, foreign.

In Redania and Kaedwen, rather than 'go to Hell' people said 'get to Poviss'. If you don't like working for me, a master would say to his unruly journeymen, 'the path's clear to Kovir'. 'We won't have Koviran order here', shouted a schoolmaster at his disobedient and boisterous pupils. 'Go mouth off in Poviss', called a farmer to his son when he was critical of his forefathers' ard and swidden agriculture.

If anyone doesn't like the old order, 'the road's open to Kovir'!

The recipients of these statements slowly – very slowly – began to ponder them and soon noticed that indeed nothing, absolutely nothing, was barring their way to Kovir and Poviss. A second wave of emigration set off for the North. Just like the previous one, this one mainly consisted of discontented mavericks who were different and wanted things done differently. But this time they weren't troublemakers and misfits at odds with life. Well, at least not all of them.

Scholars who believed in their theories, although they had been shouted down and called demented, headed North. Technicians and constructors, convinced that contrary to popular opinion it was possible to build the machines and devices invented by the scholars. Sorcerers, for whom the use of magic to erect breakwaters wasn't a sacrilegious offence. Merchants for whom the prospect of a growth in turnover was capable of exploding the rigid, static and short-sighted limits of risk. Farmers and stock breeders,

convinced that one could create fertile fields from even the worst soil, that it was always possible to breed varieties of animals in a given climate.

Miners and geologists, for whom the bleakness of Kovir's barren mountains and rocks was an infallible signal that if there was such paucity on the surface there must be wealth beneath, also headed North. For nature loves equilibrium.

There *was* wealth beneath those wastes.

A quarter of a century passed – and Kovir had extracted as many minerals as Redania, Aedirn and Kaedwen taken together. Only Mahakam surpassed Kovir in the extraction and processing of iron ore, but transports full of metal serving the production of alloys went from Kovir to Mahakam. Kovir and Poviss accounted for a quarter of the world's yield of silver, nickel, lead, tin and zinc, half of the extraction of copper ore and native copper, three quarters of the yield of manganese, chromium, titanium and tungsten ores, and the same amount of metals occurring only in their native form: platinum, ferroaurum, kryobelitium and dimeritium.

And more than eighty per cent of the world's gold production.

Gold, with which Kovir and Poviss bought what didn't grow or wasn't bred in the North. And what Kovir and Poviss didn't produce. Not because they were unable to or didn't have the expertise, but because it didn't pay. A craftsman from Kovir or Poviss – the son or grandson of an immigrant who went there with a bindle on his back – now earned fourfold that of his counterpart in Redania or Temeria.

Kovir traded and wanted to trade with the whole world, on a greater and greater scale. But it couldn't.

Radovid III became king of Redania, and shared with Radovid the Great – his great-grandfather – the same name as well as the same cunning and miserliness. That king – called the Bold by fawners and hagiographers, and Rufus by everybody else – had observed what none before him had wanted to. Why didn't Redania have a single farthing of the gigantic trade engaged in by Kovir? Why, Kovir was just a meaningless county, a fiefdom, a tiny jewel in the Redanian crown. It was time the Koviran vassal began to serve its suzerain!

A wonderful opportunity occurred to do so; Redania had a

border dispute with Aedirn, as usual concerning the Pontar valley. Radovid III was determined to take up arms and began to prepare for it. He promulgated a special tax for military purposes, called the 'Pontar tithe'. All of his subjects and vassals were to pay it. Without exception. Kovir included. Rufus rubbed his hands. Ten per cent of Kovir's income; that was something!

Redanian emissaries made for Pont Vanis, imagined as a small town with a wooden palisade. They communicated astonishing news to Rufus on their return.

Pont Vanis wasn't a small town. It was a great city, the summer capital of Kovir, whose ruler, King Gedovius, sent King Radovid the following answer:

The Kingdom of Kovir is no one's vassal. Redania's petitions and claims are groundless and based on the dead letter of a law which never had any force. The kings of Redania have never been the overlords of Kovir, for the rulers of Kovir – as can easily be checked in the annals – have never paid Redania tribute, have never carried out military servitude and, most importantly, have never been invited to celebrations of state holidays. Or any others.

Therefore, the King of Kovir informed the emissaries – with regret – that he could not recognise King Radovid as his seigneur or suzerain, much less pay him a tithe. Nor could any of the Koviran vassals or arriere vassals – which were subject exclusively to the Koviran suzerainty.

In short: let Redania mind its own business and not stick its nose into the affairs of Kovir, a sovereign kingdom.

Cold fury welled up in Rufus. A sovereign kingdom? A foreign land? Very well. We shall deal with Kovir as we would any foreign province.

Redania, along with Kaedwen and Temeria – incited by Rufus – applied against Kovir a retaliatory tax and ruthless right of storage. A merchant from Kovir, heading southward, had to, whether he liked it or not, put all his goods on sale in one of Redania's cities and sell it or return home. That same constraint faced a merchant from the distant South, when making for Kovir.

Redania demanded heavy duty on goods which Kovir shipped by sea, even if they were not calling at Redanian or Temerian ports. Koviran ships, naturally, didn't want to pay – and only those who didn't manage to escape paid. The game of cat and mouse begun on

the sea quickly led to an incident. A Redanian patrol craft tried to arrest a Koviran merchant, two Koviran frigates appeared, the patrol craft went up in flames. There were casualties.

The line had been overstepped. Radovid decided to discipline his disobedient vassal. A four-thousand strong Redanian army crossed the River Braa, and an expeditionary force from Kaedwen invaded Caingorn.

After a week, the two thousand surviving Redanians crossed the Braa the other way, and the poorly-equipped survivors of the Kaedwenian corps trudged home across the passes of the Kestrel Mountains. This had revealed a further purpose which the northern gold served. Kovir's permanent army consisted of twenty-five thousand professionals seasoned by combat – and banditry – as well as mercenaries drafted from the far corners of the world, unreservedly loyal to the Koviran crown for their exceptionally generous pay and a pension guaranteed by contract. Prepared for any risk for the exceptionally generous bonuses paid out after every victorious battle. Further, these wealthy soldiers were led in battle by experienced, able – and now extremely wealthy – commanders whom Rufus and King Benda of Kaedwen knew very well; they were the same ones who not long before had served in their armies, but had unexpectedly retired and gone abroad.

Rufus was no fool and could learn from his mistakes. He quelled his swaggering remaining generals, who were demanding a crusade, ignored the merchants calling for a starvation blockade, and mollified Benda of Kaedwen, who was greedy for blood and revenge for the extermination of his elite unit. Rufus initiated negotiations unrestrained by the prospect of humiliation, by the bitter pill he had to swallow; Kovir agreed to talks, but on their territory, in Lan Exeter. He had to eat humble pie.

They sailed to Lan Exeter like petitioners, thought Dijkstra, wrapping himself in his cloak. *Like humble supplicants. Quite like me today.*

The Redanian squadron sailed into the Gulf of Praxeda and headed towards the Koviran coast. From the deck of the flagship *Alata*, Radovid, Benda of Kaedwen – and the hierarch of Novigrad accompanying them in the role of mediator – observed in astonishment the breakwaters extending into the sea, above which rose the walls and sturdy bastions of the fortress guarding access to the city of Pont Vanis. And sailing north from Pont Vanis, towards

the mouth of the River Targo, the kings saw port alongside port, shipyard beside shipyard, harbour by harbour. They saw a forest of masts and the blinding white of sails. Kovir, it turned out, was prepared for blockades, embargos and duty wars. Kovir was clearly ready to dominate the seas.

Alata sailed into the broad mouth of the Targo and dropped anchor in the stony jaws of the outport. But – to the kings' astonishment – one more trip by water awaited them. The city of Lan Exeter didn't have streets, but canals. The Great Canal, leading from the harbour straight to the royal residence, was the main artery and axis of the metropolis. The kings transferred to galleys decorated in scarlet and gold garlands and a coat of arms on which Rufus and Benda recognised in amazement the Redanian eagle and the Kaedwenian unicorn.

As they travelled along the Great Canal, the kings and their retinues looked around and kept silent. Actually, it ought to be said they were rendered speechless. They'd been wrong to think they knew what wealth and splendour were, that they couldn't be astonished by manifestations of affluence or any display of luxury. They went down the Great Canal, passing the impressive Admiralty building and the Merchants' Guild. They floated alongside promenades packed with colourful and finely attired crowds. They travelled between avenues of magnificent aristocratic residences and merchants' townhouses, reflecting in the canal's water a spectrum of splendidly embellished, but exceptionally narrow, façades. In Lan Exeter tax was paid on a house's frontage; the wider the frontage, the higher the tax.

On the steps leading down to the canal of Ensenada Palace, the royal winter residence, the only building with a wide frontage, was already waiting for them a welcoming committee and the royal couple: Gedovius, the king of Kovir, and his wife, Gemma. The couple welcomed the new arrivals courteously, politely . . . and uncharacteristically. Dear uncle, Gedovius greeted Radovid. Darling grandfather, Gemma smiled to Benda. Gedovius was a Troydenid, after all. Gemma, however, it turned out was descended from the rebellious Aideen, in whose veins flowed the blood of the kings of Ard Carraigh, who had fled from Kaedwen.

The proven consanguinity improved the mood and evoked affection, but didn't help in the negotiations. By and large what followed were not negotiations. The 'children' briefly stated their demands. Their 'grandfathers' heard them out. And then signed a

document, which posterity called the First Exeter Treaty. To distinguish it from those entered into later. The First Treaty also bears a name in keeping with the first words of its preamble: *Mare Liberum Apertum*.

The sea is free and open. Trade is free. Profit is sacred. Love the trade and profit of your neighbour like your own. To hinder someone's trading and profiting is to break the laws of nature. And Kovir is no one's vassal. It's a sovereign, autonomous – and neutral – kingdom.

It didn't look as if Gedovius and Gemma wanted – even, say, in the name of politeness – to make a single concession, even the slightest, nothing that would have rescued Radovid and Benda's honour. Nonetheless, they did. They agreed for Radovid – during his lifetime – to use in official documents the title of King of Kovir and Poviss, and Benda – during his lifetime – the title of King of Caingorn and Malleore.

Of course, with the proviso *de non preiudicando*.

Gedovius and Gemma reigned for twenty-five years; the royal branch of the Troydenids ended with their son, Gerard. Esteril Thyssen ascended to the Koviran throne. And founded the House of Thyssen.

The kings of Kovir were soon after bound by blood ties to all the other dynasties of the world, and they all steadfastly abided by the Exeter Treaties. They never interfered with their neighbours' affairs. They never raised the issue of foreign succession, though often historical turbulence meant that the king or prince of Kovir had all possible grounds to judge himself the rightful successor to the throne of Redania, Aedirn, Kaedwen, Cidaris or even Verden or Rivia. The mighty Kovir didn't attempt territorial annexations or conquests, nor did it send gunboats armed with catapults and ballistae into foreign waters. It never seized the privilege of ruling the waves. *Mare Liberum Apertum*; a sea free and open for trade was sufficient for Kovir. Kovir believed in the sanctity of trade and profit.

And in absolute, unswerving neutrality.

Dijkstra put up the beaver collar of his cloak, protecting his nape from the wind and the lashing rain. He looked around, shaken from his contemplations. The water in the Great Canal looked black. In the drizzle and fog, even the Admiralty building – the boast of Lan Exeter – looked like a barracks. Even the merchants'

townhouses had lost their usual sumptuousness – and their narrow frontages seemed narrower than normal. *Perhaps they are sodding narrower*, thought Dijkstra. *If King Esterad has raised the tax, the sly householders may have narrowed their houses*.

'Has the weather been so plague-stricken for long, Your Excellency?' he asked, just to interrupt the annoying silence.

'Since the middle of September, Count,' answered the ambassador. 'Since the full moon. It looks as though winter will come early. It has already snowed in Talgar.'

'I thought,' said Dijkstra, 'the snow never melted in Talgar.'

The ambassador glanced at him, as if to make sure it was a joke and not ignorance.

'In Talgar –' now he showed off his wit '– the winter begins in September, and ends in May. The remaining seasons are spring and autumn. There's also the summer . . . it usually falls on the first Tuesday after the August new moon. And lasts until Wednesday morning.'

Dijkstra didn't laugh.

'But even there,' the ambassador turned gloomy, 'snow at the end of October is a sensation.'

The ambassador – like most of Redania's aristocracy – couldn't stand Dijkstra. He considered the need to receive and entertain the arch-spy as a personal affront, and the fact that the Regency Council had charged Dijkstra and not him with negotiations with Kovir as a mortal insult. It sickened him that he, de Ruyter of the most celebrated branch of the de Ruyter family, Grafs for nine generations, should have to address a churl and upstart as 'Count'. But as an experienced diplomat he concealed his resentment masterfully.

The oars rose and fell rhythmically, and the boat glided swiftly along the canal. They had just passed the bijou – but extremely tasteful – palace of Culture and Art.

'Do we sail to Ensenada?'

'Yes, Count,' confirmed the ambassador. 'The minister of foreign affairs stressed emphatically that he wished to see you immediately on arrival, which is why I'm taking you directly to Ensenada. In the evening I shall send a boat to the palace, for I would like to entertain you over supper—'

‘Your Excellency will deign to forgive me,’ Dijkstra interrupted, ‘but my duties won’t allow me to take you up on it. I have a prodigious amount of matters to deal with and little time, so I must manage them at the cost of pleasure. We shall sup another day. In happier, more peaceful times.’

The ambassador bowed and furtively sighed with relief.

*

He entered Ensenada, naturally, by a rear entrance. For which he was very glad. An impressive but damned long staircase of white marble led straight from the Great Canal to the main entrance of the royal winter residence, beneath a magnificent frontage supported on slender columns. The stairs leading to one of the numerous rear entrances were incomparably less spectacular, but far easier to negotiate. In spite of that, Dijkstra, as he walked, bit his lip and swore softly under his breath, so that the major-domo, lackeys and guardsmen escorting him wouldn’t hear.

More stairs and more climbing awaited him inside the palace. Dijkstra cursed again *sotto voce*. Probably the damp, cold and uncomfortable position in the boat was why his leg, with its smashed and magically healed ankle, had begun to make itself known with a dull, nagging pain. And a nasty memory. Dijkstra ground his teeth. He knew that the Witcher – the man responsible for his suffering – had also had his bones broken. He had profound hopes that they also pained the Witcher and wished in his heart of hearts that it would pain him as long and as severely as possible.

Dusk had already fallen outside and Ensenada’s corridors were dark. The route Dijkstra was taking behind a silent major-domo was, nonetheless, lit by a sparse row of lackeys with candlesticks. And outside the doors of the chamber to which the major-domo was leading him stood guardsmen with halberds, so erect it seemed spare halberds had been stuck up their backsides. The lackeys with candles stood more densely there, so the luminance was blinding. Dijkstra was somewhat astonished by the pomp with which he was being received.

He entered the chamber and immediately stopped being astonished. He bowed low.

‘Greetings to you, Dijkstra,’ said Esterad Thyssen, King of

Kovir, Poviss, Narok, Velhad and Talgar. ‘Don’t stand by the door, come closer. Put etiquette aside, it’s an unofficial audience.’

‘Your Majesty.’

Esterad’s wife, Queen Zuleyka, responded to Dijkstra’s reverential bow with a slightly absent-minded nod, not interrupting her crocheting for a moment.

There wasn’t a soul in the chamber apart from the royal couple.

‘Precisely.’ Esterad had noticed his glance. ‘Just the two of us will chat. I beg your pardon, just the three of us. For something tells me it’ll be better this way.’

Dijkstra sat down on the scissors chair indicated, opposite Esterad. The king was wearing a crimson ermine-trimmed cape and a matching velvet chapeau. Like all the men of the Thyssen clan he was tall, powerfully built and devilishly handsome. He always looked robust and healthy, like a sailor just returned from the sea; one could almost smell the seawater and cold, salt wind coming from him. As with all the Thyssens it was difficult to determine his exact age. Judging by his hair, skin and hands – the features which most clearly express one’s age – Esterad might have passed for forty-five. Dijkstra knew the king was fifty-six.

‘Zuleyka.’ The king leaned over towards his wife. ‘Look at him. If you didn’t know he was a spy, would you give credence to it?’

Queen Zuleyka was short, quite stout and pleasantly plain. She dressed in quite a typical way for women of her looks, which was based on selecting elements of attire so that no one would guess she wasn’t her own grandmother. Zuleyka achieved this effect by wearing loose-fitting gowns, dull of cut and grey-brown of tone. On her head she wore a bonnet inherited from her ancestors. She didn’t use any makeup and didn’t wear any jewellery.

‘The Good Book,’ she spoke in a quiet and sweet little voice, ‘teaches us circumspection in judging our neighbours. For one day they will judge us, too. Let’s hope not on the basis of appearance.’

Esterad Thyssen favoured his wife with a warm look. It was widely known that he loved her boundlessly, with a love which for twenty-nine years of marriage hadn’t dimmed a jot. On the contrary, as the years passed it blazed brighter and hotter. Esterad, it was claimed, had never betrayed Zuleyka. Dijkstra couldn’t really believe in anything so unlikely, but himself had tried three times to

plant on – or virtually place under – the king stunning female agents, candidates for favourites, superb sources of information. Nothing had come of it.

'I like to speak bluntly,' said the king, 'therefore I shall reveal at once, Dijkstra, why I've decided to talk to you personally. There are several reasons. Firstly, I know you won't shrink from bribery. I'm certain, by and large, of my ministers, but why put them to the test, lead them into temptation? What kind of bribe did you intend to offer the minister of foreign affairs?'

'A thousand Novigradian crowns,' the spy responded without batting an eyelid. 'Were he to haggle, I'd have gone up to a thousand five hundred.'

'And that's why I like you,' Esterad Thyssen said after moment's silence. 'You're a dreadful whoreson. You remind me of my youth. I look at you and see myself at your age.'

Dijkstra thanked him with a bow. He was just eight years younger than the king. He was convinced that Esterad was well aware of it.

'You're a dreadful whoreson,' the king repeated, growing serious. 'But a respectable and decent one. And that's a rarity in these rotten times.'

Dijkstra bowed once more.

'You see,' Esterad continued, 'in every country one may encounter people who are blind fanatics for the idea of social order. People committed to an idea, prepared to do anything for it. Including crime, for to them the aim justifies the means and changes the meaning of concepts. They don't murder, they rescue order. They don't torture, they don't blackmail: they safeguard the national interest and fight for order. For such people, the life of an individual – should that individual violate the dogma of the established order – is not worth a farthing or a shrug. People like that don't acknowledge the fact that the society they serve is made up of individuals. People like that are availed of the so-called "broad" view . . . and such a view is the most certain way of not noticing other people.'

'Nicodemus de Boot,' Dijkstra blurted out.

'Close, but wide of the mark.' The king of Kovir bared his alabaster-white teeth. 'It was Vysogota of Corvo. A lesser known, but also able, ethicist and philosopher. Read him. I recommend it.

Perhaps one of his books has survived in Redania. Perhaps you didn't burn them all? Come, come, let's get to the point. You, Dijkstra, are also unscrupulous in your use of intrigue, bribery, blackmail and torture. You don't bat an eyelid when condemning someone to death or ordering an assassination. That fact you do it for the kingdom you faithfully serve does not excuse you or make you any more pleasant in my eyes. Not in the slightest. Be aware of that.'

The spy nodded as a sign that he was.

'You are, though,' Esterad continued, 'as it's been said before, a whoreson of upright character. And that's why I like and respect you, why I've granted you a private audience. For you, Dijkstra, having had a million opportunities, have never done anything for private gain or stolen so much as a ha'penny from the state coffers. Not even a farthing. Zuleyka, look! Is he blushing, or am I deceived?'

The queen raised her head from her crocheting.

'Their righteousness shall be known from their modesty.' She quoted a passage from the Good Book, although she must have seen that not even a trace of a blush had appeared on the spy's features.

'Very well,' Esterad said. 'To business. Time to move to state affairs. He, Zuleyka, crossed the sea motivated by his patriotic duty. Redania, his fatherland, is threatened. Chaos rages there, following the tragic death of King Vizimir. Redania is now governed by a band of aristocratic idiots, calling themselves the Regency Council. That band, my Zuleyka, will do nothing for Redania. In the face of danger it will either bolt or begin obsequiously to grovel before the pearl-trimmed slippers of the Nilfgaardian Emperor. That band despises Dijkstra, for he's a spy, a murderer, an upstart and a boor. But Dijkstra crossed the sea to save his country. Demonstrating who really cares about Redania.'

Esterad Thyssen fell silent, exhaled loudly, wearied by his speech, and adjusted his crimson chapeau, which had slipped down slightly over his nose.

'Well, Dijkstra,' he continued. 'What ails your kingdom? Aside from a shortage of money, naturally?'

'Aside from a shortage of money,' the spy's face was inscrutable, 'all are well, thank you.'

'Aha,' the king nodded. His chapeau once more slipped down

over his nose and had to be adjusted again. ‘Aha. I comprehend.’

‘I comprehend,’ he continued. ‘And I applaud the idea. When one has money, one may purchase medicaments for every affliction. The crux is to have the money. Which you do not. If you did, you wouldn’t be here. Do I understand correctly?’

‘Impeccably.’

‘And how much do you need, I wonder?’

‘Not much. A million bizants.’

‘Not much?’ Esterad Thyssen grasped his chapeau in both hands in an exaggerated gesture. ‘You call that not much? Oh, my!’

‘But for Your Royal Highness,’ the spy mumbled, ‘such a sum is a trifle—’

‘A trifle?’ The king released his chapeau and raised his hands towards the ceiling. ‘Oh, my! A million bizants is a trifle. Do you hear, Zuleyka, what he’s saying? And do you know, Dijkstra, that to have a million and not to have a million, is two million together? I understand, I comprehend, that you and Philippa Eilhart are looking desperately and feverishly for an idea to defend yourselves against Nilfgaard, but what do you want? Do you plan to buy the whole of Nilfgaard?’

Dijkstra did not reply. Zuleyka crocheted on. For a moment Esterad pretended to be admiring the nude nymphs on the ceiling.

‘Come along.’ He suddenly rose and nodded to the spy. They walked over to a huge painting portraying King Gedovius sitting astride a grey horse, pointing out something which wasn’t included on the canvas to the army with his sceptre, probably indicating the right direction. Esterad fished a tiny, gilded wand from his pocket, tapped the frame of the picture with it, and murmured a spell in hushed tones. Gedovius and his grey horse vanished, and a relief map of the known world appeared. The king touched a silver button in the corner of the map with his wand and magically transformed the scale, narrowing the visible sweep of the world to the Yaruga Valley and the Four Kingdoms.

‘The blue is Nilfgaard,’ he explained. ‘The red is you. What are you gawping at? Look here!’

Dijkstra tore his gaze away from the other paintings – chiefly nudes and seascapes. He wondered which was the magical camouflage for another notorious map of Esterad’s: the one which

depicted Kovir's military and trade intelligence service, an entire network of bribed informers and blackmailed individuals, agents, operational contacts, saboteurs, hired killers, moles and active resident spies. He knew such a map existed; he had been trying unsuccessfully for many years to gain access to it.

'The red is you,' Esterad Thyssen repeated. 'Looks pretty hopeless, doesn't it?'

Yup, pretty hopeless, Dijkstra admitted to himself. Lately he had been continuously looking at strategic maps, but now, on Esterad's relief map, the situation seemed even worse. The blue squares formed themselves into the shape of terrible dragon's jaws, liable at any moment to snatch and crush the small, miserable red squares in its great teeth.

Esterad Thyssen looked around for something that might serve as a pointer for the map, finally drawing a decorative rapier from the nearest panoply.

'Nilfgaard,' he began his lecture, pointing appropriately with the rapier, 'has attacked Lyria and Aedirn, declaring an assault on the border fort Glevitzingen as a *casus belli*. I'm not going to investigate who really attacked Glevitzingen wearing which disguise. It's also senseless to speculate how many days or hours Emhyr's armed operation occurred before the analogical undertakings by Aedirn and Temeria. I shall leave that to the historians. I'm more interested in the situation today and what it will be tomorrow. At this very moment Nilfgaard is in Dol Angra and Aedirn, shielded by a buffer in the shape of the elven dominium in Dol Blathanna, bordering with that part of Aedirn which King Henselt of Kaedwen, speaking vividly, tore from Emhyr's teeth and himself devoured.'

Dijkstra made no comment.

'I shall also leave a moral judgement of King Henselt's campaign to the historians,' Esterad continued. 'But a single glance at the map is sufficient to see that by annexing the Northern Marches Henselt barred Emhyr's way to the Pontar Valley. He secured Temeria's flank. And yours, the Redanians. You ought to thank him.'

'I did,' Dijkstra muttered. 'But quietly. King Demawend of Aedirn is our guest in Tretogor. And Demawend has quite a precise moral judgement of Henselt's deed. He customarily expresses it in blunt and ringing words.'

‘I can imagine,’ the King of Kovir nodded. ‘Let’s leave it for now, and glance at the South, at the River Yaruga. Attacking in Dol Angra, Emhyr simultaneously secured his flank by concluding a separatist treaty with Foltest of Temeria. But immediately after the end of the military operations in Aedirn the emperor broke the pact without further ado and struck Brugge and Sodden. Through his cowardly negotiations Foltest gained two weeks of peace. Sixteen days to be precise. And it’s the twenty-sixth of October today.’

‘It is.’

‘Thus the situation on the twenty-sixth of October is as follows. Brugge and Sodden occupied. The strongholds of Razvan and Mayena fallen. Temeria’s army defeated in the Battle of Maribor and repulsed northwards. Maribor besieged. This morning it was still holding out. But it’s already late evening, Dijkstra.’

‘Maribor will hold out. The Nilfgaardians didn’t manage to seal it off.’

‘True. They advanced too far, they overextended their supply lines, they’re imprudently exposing their flanks. They will call off the siege before the winter, withdrawing towards the Yaruga, shortening the front. But what will happen in the spring, Dijkstra? What will happen when the grass peeps out from under the snow? Come closer. Look at the map.’

Dijkstra looked.

‘Look at the map,’ the king repeated. ‘And I shall tell you what Emhyr var Emreis will do in the spring.’

*

‘They will begin an offensive on an unparalleled scale,’ announced Carthia van Canten, adjusting her golden curls in front of the looking glass. ‘Oh, I know that information isn’t sensational in itself. Old women enliven their laundry at every town well with stories about the spring offensive.’

Assire var Anahid was unusually tetchy and impatient today, but nonetheless managed not to ask why, in that case, she was bothering her with such unsensational information. But she knew Cantarella. And if Cantarella started talking about something she had her reasons. And she usually finished her statements with

conclusions.

'I know a little more than the hoipolloi, however,' Cantarella continued. 'Vattier told me everything, about the entire council with the emperor. And in addition brought me a whole briefcase of maps. When he fell asleep I examined them . . . Shall I go on?'

'But of course, my dear.' Assire squinted.

'The thrust of the main strike is, of course, Temeria. The border of the River Pontar, along the line Novigrad-Vizima-Ellander. A force of the Central Army, under the command of Menno Coehoorn, will strike. A force of the Eastern Army will secure the flank, striking the Pontar Valley and Kaedwen from Aedirn . . . '

'Kaedwen?' Assire raised an eyebrow. 'Is that the end of the fragile friendship struck up during the sharing of spoils?'

'Kaedwen is threatening the right flank.' Carthia van Canten pouted slightly with her full lips. Her doll-like face was in striking contrast to the strategic grasp she was demonstrating. 'The strike is of a preventive character. Assigned units of a group from the Eastern Army are to bind King Henselt's army, to remove any thoughts of helping Temeria.

'The Verden special operations group will strike in the west,' the blonde woman continued, 'with the task of capturing Cidaris and tightly sealing off the blockade of Novigrad, Gors Velen and Vizima. For the General Staff is taking into account the necessity of besieging those three strongholds.'

'You didn't name the two armies' commanders.'

'The Eastern Group, Ardal aep Dahy.' Cantarella smiled slightly. 'The Verden Group, Joachim de Wett.'

Assire raised her eyebrows.

'How interesting,' she said. 'Two princes, offended by the removal of their daughters from Emhyr's matrimonial plans. Our emperor is either very naive, or very cunning.'

'If Emhyr knows anything about a plot by the princes,' said Cantarella, 'it's not from Vattier. Vattier told him nothing.'

'Go on.'

'The offensive will be on an unprecedented scale. Taken together, including front line units, reserves, auxiliary and rear

services, over three hundred thousand men will be taking part in the operation. And elves, naturally.'

'Scheduled start date?'

'Not yet set. Supplies are a key issue. Supplies means clear roads, and no one can predict when the winter will finish.'

'What else did Vattier speak of?'

'He was complaining, poor thing.' Cantarella flashed her little teeth. 'Complaining that the emperor had abused and reprimanded him again. Publically. The reason again was the mysterious disappearance of Stefan Skellen and his entire unit. Emhyr publically called Vattier a clot, said he was a head of a department which, rather than making people disappear without trace, are surprised by such disappearances. He constructed on the subject a malicious equivoque which Vattier, sadly, wasn't able to repeat exactly. Then the emperor asked Vattier in jest if his failure meant some other secret organisation had been set up, kept confidential even from him. Our imperator is sharp. He's close to the target.'

'He is,' Assire murmured. 'What else, Carthia?'

'The agent Vattier had in Skellen's unit – who also vanished – was called Neratin Ceka. Vattier must have thought very highly of him, because he's extremely dejected over his disappearance.'

I, thought Assire, *am also left dejected by the disappearance of Jediah Mekesser. But I, unlike Vattier de Rideaux, will find out what happened*.

'And Rience? Has Vattier met him again?'

'No. He didn't mention it.'

They were both briefly silent. The cat in Assire's lap purred loudly.

'Madam Assire.'

'Yes, Carthia?'

'Will I have to play the role of the foolish lover much longer? I'd like to return to my studies, devote myself to scholarly work—'

'Soon,' Assire interrupted. 'Just a little longer. Hold on, my child.'

Cantarella sighed.

They finished their conversation and bade each other farewell.

Assire var Anahid shooed the cat from the armchair and reread the letter from Fringilla Vigo, who was residing in Toussaint. She fell into pensive mood, for the letter had troubled her. It bore some message between the lines which Assire sensed, but couldn't grasp. It was after midnight when Assire var Anahid, the Nilfgaardian sorceress, started up the megascope and established telecommunication with Montecalvo Castle in Redania.

Philippa Eilhart was in a skimpy nightdress with very thin straps, and had lipstick traces on her cheek and cleavage. Assire made an immense effort of will to suppress a grimace of distaste. *Never, ever, will I be capable of understanding it*, she thought. *And I don't want to understand it.*

'May we talk freely?'

Philippa made a sweeping hand movement, encircling herself in a sphere of discretion.

'We can now.'

'I have information,' Assire began dryly. 'It isn't sensational in and of itself, even old women at wells are talking about it. Nonetheless . . . '

*

'The whole of Redania,' said Esterad Thyssen, looking at his map, 'can at this moment field thirty-five thousand frontline troops, of whom four thousand are heavy armoured cavalry. Reckoning roughly, of course.'

Dijkstra nodded. The arithmetic was absolutely precise.

'Demawend and Meve had a similar army. Emhyr annihilated it in twenty-six days. The same thing will happen to the armies of Redania and Temeria if you don't reinforce them. I support your idea, Dijkstra, yours and Philippa Eilhart's. You're in need of troops. You require valorous, well-drilled and well-equipped cavalry. You need the kind of cavalry that costs around a million bizants.'

The spy nodded, confirming that this calculation couldn't be faulted either.

'As you no doubt know,' the king continued dryly, 'Kovir has always been, is, and will be neutral. We are bound by a treaty with

the Nilfgaardian Empire, signed by my grandfather, Esteril Thyssen, and the imperator Fergus var Emreis. The letter of that treaty does not permit Kovir to support the enemies of Nilfgaard with military aid. Nor with money for troops.'

'When Emhyr var Emreis throttles Temeria and Redania,' coughed Dijkstra, 'he'll look to the North. Emhyr won't be satisfied. It may turn out that your treaty won't be worth a hill of beans. A moment ago the talk was of Foltest of Temeria, who managed – by negotiations – to buy himself a mere sixteen days of peace with Nilfgaard—'

'Oh, my dear,' Esterad snapped. 'One cannot argue like that. Treaties are like marriage: they aren't entered in to with the thought of betrayal, and once they're concluded one shouldn't be suspicious. And if that doesn't suit somebody, they shouldn't get married. Because you can't become a cuckold without being a husband, but you'll admit that fear of wearing the horns is a pitiful and quite ridiculous justification for enforced celibacy. And cuckolds aren't a subject for discussion in a marriage. As long as one doesn't wear horns, that subject isn't mentioned, and if one's already wearing them, then there's nothing to say. And since we're talking about horns, how is the husband of the fair Marie, the Marquess de Mercey, the Redanian Minister of Finances?'

'Your Majesty,' Dijkstra bowed stiffly, 'has enviable informants.'

'Indeed I do,' the king conceded. 'You'd be astonished how many and how enviable. But you, too, can't be ashamed of your own. Those you have at my courts, here and in Pont Vanis. Oh, I'll wager each of them deserves top marks.'

Dijkstra didn't even blink.

'Emhyr var Emreis,' Esterad continued, looking at the nymphs on the ceiling, 'also has a few good and well placed agents. Which is why I repeat: Kovir's raison d'état is neutrality and the principle of *pacta sunt servanda*. Kovir doesn't break treaties. Not even in anticipation of the other side breaking a contract.'

'May I observe,' Dijkstra said, 'that Redania isn't urging Kovir to break pacts. Redania is by no means seeking an alliance or military aid against Nilfgaard. Redania wishes . . . to borrow a small sum, which we shall return—'

'I can just see you returning it,' the king interrupted. 'But these

are academic deliberations, for I shan't loan you a farthing. And don't ply me with duplicitous casuistry, Dijkstra, it suits you like a bib suits a wolf. Do you have any other, serious, intelligent and apposite arguments?'

'I do not.'

'You were lucky,' Esterad Thyssen said after moment's silence, 'that you became a spy. You'd never have made a career in commerce.'

*

The length and breadth of the world, all royal couples had separate bed chambers. The kings – with extremely varying frequency – visited the queens' bed chambers, and it also happened that queens paid unexpected visits to the kings' bed chambers. Afterwards the spouses returned to their own chambers and beds.

The royal couple of Kovir were an exception in this respect too. Esterad Thyssen and Zuleyka always slept together – in one bed chamber, on an immense bed with an immense canopy.

Before falling asleep, Zuleyka – after putting on her spectacles, in which she was ashamed to appear before her subjects – customarily read her Good Book. Esterad Thyssen usually talked.

That night was no different. Esterad put on his nightcap and picked up his sceptre. He liked to hold his sceptre and play with it; he didn't do it officially for he feared his subjects would accuse him of being pretentious.

'You know, Zuleyka,' he said, 'lately I've been having queer dreams. I've dreamed of that witch, my mother, I don't know how many times. She stands over me and repeats: "I have a wife for Tankred, I have a wife for Tankred". And she shows me a pretty, but very young girl. And do you know, Zuleyka, who that girl is? It's Ciri, Calanthe's granddaughter. Do you remember Calanthe, Zuleyka?'

'I do, my husband.'

'Ciri,' Esterad went on, playing with the sceptre, 'is the one Emhyr var Emreis reputedly wants to marry. A bizarre marriage, astonishing . . . How, damn it, ought she to be a wife for Tankred?'

‘Tankred –’ Zuleyka’s voice faintly altered, as it did whenever she spoke of her son ‘– could do with a wife. Perhaps he would settle down . . . ’

‘Perhaps,’ Esterad sighed. ‘Though I doubt it, but perhaps. In any case, matrimony is some sort of chance. Hmmm . . . Ciri . . . Ha! Kovir and Cintra. The Yaruga estuary! Doesn’t sound at all bad, not at all bad. An alliance would be fine . . . A nice little coalition . . . Well, but if Emhyr has his eye on the filly . . . But why is she appearing in my dreams? And why the hell am I dreaming that sort of nonsense? At the Equinox, do you recall, when I woke you. . . Brrr, what a nightmare that was, I’m glad I can’t remember the details . . . Hmmm . . . Perhaps we ought to summon an astrologer? A soothsayer? A medium?’

‘Madam Sheala de Tancarville is in Lan Exeter.’

‘No.’ The king grimaced. ‘I don’t want that witch. Too clever. A second Philippa Eilhart is springing up under my nose! Power appeals too much to these clever women, one should not encourage them with favours and familiarity.’

‘You’re right, as ever, my husband.’

‘Hmfff . . . But those dreams . . . ’

‘The Good Book –’ Zuleyka turned over a few leaves ‘– says that when a man falls asleep, the gods open his ears and speak to him. Whereas the prophet Lebioda teaches that when gazing on a dream, one either sees great wisdom or great foolishness. The art is in recognising it.’

‘A marriage of Tankred with Emhyr’s betrothed is not exactly great wisdom,’ Esterad sighed. ‘But while we’re on the subject of wisdom, I would be immensely pleased if it came to me during my slumbers. It concerns the case with which Dijkstra came. It concerns a most trying case. For you see, my dear beloved Zuleyka, good sense permits us not to rejoice with Nilfgaard pushing northwards hard and liable any day to seize Novigrad, for from Novigrad everything – including our neutrality – looks different than from the distant South. Thus it would be good if Redania and Temeria were to hold back Nilfgaard’s advance, in order to push the invader back across the Yaruga. But would it be good, were it done using our money? Are you listening to me, my most beloved wife?’

‘I am, husband.’

‘And what do you think?’

‘All wisdom is contained in the Good Book.’

‘But does your Good Book say what to do if some Dijkstra shows up and demands a million from you?’

‘The Book,’ Zuleyka blinked from over her spectacles, ‘says nothing about base mammon. But in one passage it says: “to give is a greater happiness than to receive, and supporting a pauper with alms is noble”. It is said: “give away all, and it shall make your soul noble”.’

‘And makes the purse and breadbasket empty,’ Esterad Thyssen muttered. ‘Zuleyka, is any wisdom to be found in the Book concerning business apart from passages about noble free distribution and alms-giving? What does the Book, for instance, say about equivalent exchange?’

The queen straightened her spectacles and began to quickly turn over the pages of the incunabulum.

‘Measure for measure,’ she read.

Esterad was silent for a long while.

‘And perhaps,’ he finally drawled, ‘something more?’

Zuleyka returned to turning the pages of the Book.

‘I have found,’ she suddenly announced, ‘something amongst the wisdom of the prophet Lebioda. Should I read it?’

‘If you would.’

‘The prophet Lebioda: “in sooth, support the pauper with alms. But rather than give the pauper an entire watermelon, give him half a watermelon, for a pauper is liable to lose his wits from happiness”.’

‘Half a watermelon.’ Esterad Thyssen bristled. ‘You mean half a million bizants? And do you know, Zuleyka, that to have a half a million and not to have half a million is a whole million together?’

‘You didn’t let me finish,’ Zuleyka scolded her husband with a harsh look over her spectacles. ‘The prophet goes on: “better even is to give the pauper quarter of a watermelon. And it is even better to cause that some else give the pauper a watermelon. For in sooth, I tell you there will always be someone who has a watermelon and is inclined to share it with the pauper, if not out of nobleness, then out of calculation or on some other pretext”.’

‘Ha!’ The King of Kovir thumped his sceptre down on the

bedside table. ‘In sooth, the prophet Lebioda was shrewd! Instead of giving, cause someone else to give? That appeals to me, those are in sooth flowing words! Study the wisdom of that prophet, my darling Zuleyka. I’m certain you will discover among it something that permits me to solve the problem of Redania and the army that Redania wishes to raise using my money.’

Zuleyka leafed through the book for a long time before she finally began to read.

‘“A pupil of the prophet Lebioda once spake to him: ‘teach me, master, how I am to act. For my neighbour is desirous of my favourite dog. If I give him my pet, my heart will break from sorrow. If, though, I do not give it, I shall be downhearted, for I shall pain my neighbour through my refusal. What to do?’ ‘Do you have,’ asked the prophet, ‘something you love less than your pet dog?’ ‘I have, master,’ the pupil replied, ‘an impish cat, a tiresome pest. And I love him not at all.’ And thus spake the prophet Lebioda: ‘Take that impish cat, that tiresome pest, and give it to your neighbour. Then you will know happiness. You will be rid of the cat, and will delight your neighbour. For most often it is so, that our neighbour does not desire a gift, but to be given’.”’

Esterad was silent for some time and his brow was knitted.

‘Zuleyka?’ he finally asked. ‘Was that really the same prophet?’

‘“Take that impish cat—”’

‘I heard it the first time!’ the king yelled, but immediately restrained himself.

‘Forgive me, most beloved. The point is I don’t understand what cats have to do with . . .’

He fell silent. And pondered deeply.

*

After eighty-five years, when the situation had changed enough to allow talk about certain issues and persons, Guiscard Vermuellen, Duke of Creyden, grandson of Esterad Thyssen and son of his oldest daughter, Gaudemunda, spoke. Duke Guiscard was then a venerable old man, but he clearly remembered the events he had witnessed. It was Duke Guiscard who revealed where the million bizants came from, the million with which Redania equipped its cavalry for the

war against Nilfgaard. That million didn't come – as had been thought – from Kovir's treasury, but from the hierarch of Novigrad. Esterad Thyssen, Guiscard disclosed, obtained the Novigradian money from his shares in the maritime trade companies being set up. The paradox was that those companies were set up with the active cooperation of Nilfgaardian merchants. Thus it appeared that Nilfgaard itself – to some degree – had financed the fielding of the Redanian army.

'Grandpappa,' Guiscard Vermuellen recalled, 'said something about watermelons, smiling roguishly. He said somebody always wants to give to a pauper, even if out of calculation. He also said that since Nilfgaard itself was contributing to increasing the strength and military capabilities of the Redanian Army, they couldn't blame others for doing the same.

'Later though,' the old man went on, 'grandpappa summoned my father, who was at that time the chief of intelligence, and the minister of internal affairs. When they learned what orders they were to execute, they fell into a panic. They were concerned about releasing more than three thousand people from prisons, internment camps and exile. House arrest was to be withdrawn from more than a hundred.

'No, it didn't only apply to bandits, common criminals and hired mercenaries. The pardons were mostly for dissidents. Among the pardoned were henchmen of the deposed King Rhyd and people of the usurper Idi, their virulent partisans. And not only those who had supported in word: most were in prison for sabotage, assassination attempts and armed revolts. The minister of internal affairs was horrified and papa extremely worried.

'While grandpappa,' the duke went on, 'was laughing as though it were a first-rate joke. And then he continued – I remember every word: "It's a great pity, gentlemen, that you don't read the Good Book before going to sleep. If you did, you would understand the ideas of your monarch. As it is, you'll be carrying out orders without understanding them. But don't worry, your monarch knows what he's doing. Now go and release all my impish cats, those tiresome pests."

'That's just what he said: impish cats, pests. And he meant – which no one then could have known – subsequent heroes, commanders covered in glory and fame. Those "cats" of grandpappa's became the celebrated condottieri: Adam "Adieu"

Pangratt, Lorenzo Molla, Juan “Frontino” Guttierez . . . And Julia Abatemarco, who became famous in Redania as “Pretty Kitty” . . . You, youngsters, won’t remember it, but when I was a boy, when we played at war, every lad wanted to be “Adieu” Pangratt, and every girl Julia “Pretty Kitty” . . . But to grandpappa they were mischievous cats.

‘Later though,’ mumbled Guiscard Vermuellen, ‘grandpappa took me by the hand and led me out onto the terrace, where grandmamma Zuleyka was feeding the seagulls. Grandpappa said to her . . . Said . . . ’

The old man slowly and with great effort tried to recall the words, which, eighty-five years ago, King Esterad Thyssen had said to his wife, Queen Zuleyka, on the terrace of Ensenada Palace, towering over the Great Canal.

‘Do you know, my most beloved wife, that I have spotted one more piece of wisdom among the words of the prophet Lebioda? One that shows me yet another benefit of giving Redania those mischievous cats? Cats, my Zuleyka, come home. Cats always come home. Well, and when my cats return, when they bring their pay, their spoils, their riches . . . I shall tax them!’

*

When King Esterad Thyssen spoke to Dijkstra for the last time, it was in private, without even Zuleyka. Admittedly, a more or less ten-year-old boy was playing on the floor of the gigantic chamber, but he didn’t count, and furthermore was so busy with his lead soldiers that he paid no attention to the two men talking.

‘That is Guiscard,’ Esterad explained, nodding towards the boy. ‘My grandson, the son of Gaudemunda and that ne’er-do-well, Prince Vermuellen. But that little boy is Kovir’s only hope, should Tankred Thyssen turn out to be . . . Should anything happen to Tankred . . . ’

Dijkstra was aware of Kovir’s problem. And Esterad’s personal problem. He knew that something had already happened to Tankred. The lad, if he had any makings of a king, would only be a bad one.

‘Your matter,’ Esterad said, ‘is already by and large sorted out.

You may now start to ponder on the most effective way of using the million bizants which will soon end up in the Redanian coffers.'

He bent down and surreptitiously picked up one of Guiscard's brightly painted lead soldiers, a cavalryman with a raised broadsword.

'Take that and conceal it well. Whoever shows you another such identical soldier will be my emissary, even if he doesn't look like it, even though you have no faith that he is my man or is aware of the issue of our million. Anyone else will be an agent provocateur.'

'Redania,' Dijkstra bowed, 'will not forget this, Your Majesty. I, however, speaking for myself, would like to assure you of my personal gratitude.'

'Do not do so. Give me that thousand with which you hoped to gain my minister's favour. Why, isn't the king's favour deserving of a bribe?'

'Your Royal Highness is stooping . . . '

'We are, we are. Hand over the money, Dijkstra. To have a thousand and not to have a thousand—'

'. . . adds up to two thousand. I know.'

*

In a distant wing of Ensenada, in a chamber of much more modest size, the sorceress Sheala de Tancarville listened to the account of Queen Zuleyka with concentration and earnestness.

'Excellent,' she nodded. 'Excellent, Your Royal Highness.'

'I did everything as instructed, Lady Sheala.'

'Thank you for doing so. And I assure you one more time; we were acting in a good cause. For the good of the country. And dynasty.'

Queen Zuleyka coughed softly and her voice changed a little.

'And . . . And Tankred, Lady Sheala?

'I gave my word,' Sheala de Tancarville said coldly. 'I gave my word that I would reciprocate for the help with help. Your Royal

Highness may sleep serenely.'

'I desire that greatly,' Zuleyka sighed. 'Greatly. While we're on the subject of sleep . . . The king begins to suspect something. Those dreams are amazing him, and when something amazes him he grows suspicious.'

'I shall, then, stop sending the king dreams for some time,' the sorceress promised. 'Returning, however, to Your Majesty's dream, I repeat, he can be confident. Prince Tankred will bid farewell to that bad company. He will not linger at the Baron of Surcratasse's castle. Nor at Lady de Lisemore's residence. Nor at the Redanian ambassador's wife's.'

'He will no longer visit those personages? Never?'

'Those personages,' Sheala de Tancarville's dark eyes lit up with a strange glint, 'will no longer dare to trifle with Prince Tankred, for they shall be made aware of the consequences. I vouch for what I say. I vouch for the fact that Prince Tankred will take up his studies again and be a diligent scholar, a serious and level-headed young man. He shall also stop chasing skirts. He shall lose his ardour . . . until the moment we introduce to him Cirilla, Princess of Cintra.'

'Oh, if only I could believe that!' Zuleyka wrung her hands and raised her eyes. 'If only I could believe that!'

'It is sometimes difficult,' Sheala de Tancarville smiled, unexpectedly even for herself, 'to believe in the power of magic, Your Royal Highness. And actually, so should it be.'

*

Philippa Eilhart adjusted the gossamer-thin strap of her sheer nightdress and wiped the rest of the lipstick smudges from her cleavage. *Such a smart woman*, thought Sheala de Tancarville with slight distaste, *and she can't keep her hormones in check*.

'May we talk?'

Philippa surrounded herself with a sphere of discretion.

'We can now.'

'Everything has been sorted out in Kovir. Positively.'

‘Thank you. Has Dijkstra set sail?’

‘Not yet.’

‘Why does he delay?’

‘He conducts long conversations with Esterad Thyssen.’ Sheala de Tancarville grimaced. ‘They’ve taken an uncommon liking for each other, the king and the spy.’

*

‘Do you know the jokes about our weather, Dijkstra? That there are only two seasons in Kovir—’

‘Winter and August. I do.’

‘And do you know how to tell if summer has reached Kovir?’

‘No. How?’

‘The rain becomes a little warmer.’

‘Ha ha.’

‘Joking aside,’ Esterad Thyssen said gravely, ‘it worries me somewhat that the winters come earlier and earlier and last longer and longer. It was prophesied. You’ve read, I presume, Ithlinne’s prophecy? It’s said there that decades of unending winter will come. Some claim it’s some kind of allegory, but I’m a little afraid. In Kovir we once had four summers of cold, rainy weather and poor harvests. Were it not for the tremendous import of food from Nilfgaard, people would have begun to die of starvation in droves. Can you imagine?’

‘To be honest, I can’t.’

‘Well I can. The cooling climate may starve us all to death. Famine is a foe that is bloody hard to fight.’

The spy nodded, lost in thought.

‘Dijkstra?’

‘Your Majesty?’

‘Is there peace inside the country now?’

‘I wouldn’t say so. But I’m doing my best.’

‘I know, everyone’s talking about it. Of the traitors on

Thanedd, only Vilgefortz remains alive.'

'After the death of Yennefer, yes. Did you know, O king, that Yennefer met her death? She perished on the last day of August, in mysterious circumstances, over the infamous Sedna Trench, between the Isles of Skellige and Cape Peixe de Mar.'

'Yennefer of Vengerberg,' Esterad said slowly, 'was not a traitor. She was not an accomplice of Vilgefortz. If you wish I shall supply proof.'

'I do not,' Dykstra responded after moment's silence. 'Or perhaps I will, but not right now. Now she's more convenient to me as a traitor.'

'I understand. Don't trust sorceresses, Dijkstra. Philippa in particular.'

'I've never trusted her. But we must co-operate. Without us Redania would plunge into chaos and perish.'

'That is true. But if I may advise you, loosen your grip a little. You know of what I speak. Scaffolds and torture chambers throughout the land, atrocities perpetrated against elves . . . And that dreadful fort, Drakenborg. I know you do it out of patriotism. But you are building yourself an evil legend. In it you're a werewolf, lapping up innocent blood.'

'Someone has to do it.'

'And someone has to bear the consequences. I know you endeavour to be just, but you can't avoid mistakes, can you, for they can't be avoided. Neither can you remain clean when you're slopping around in blood. I know you've never harmed anybody for self-interest, but who will believe that? Who'll want to believe that? The day that fate turns, they'll attribute the murder of innocent people to you, and worse, claim you profited from it. And lying sticks to a fellow like tar.'

'I know.'

'They won't give you a chance to defend yourself. People like you aren't given chances. They'll tar you . . . but later. After the fact. Beware, Dijkstra.'

'I shall. They won't get me.'

'They got your king, Vizimir. With a dagger plunged up to the guard in his flank, I heard . . . '

‘It’s easier to stab a king than a spy. They won’t get me. They’ll never get me.’

‘And they ought not to. Do you know why, Dijkstra? For there ought to be some sort of fucking justice in this world.’

The day was to come when they would recall that conversation. Both of them. The king and the spy. Dijkstra recalled Esterad’s words in Tretogor, as he listened closely to the steps of the assassins approaching from all directions, along all the corridors of the castle. Esterad recalled Dijkstra’s words on the splendid marble staircase leading from Ensenada to the Great Canal.

*

‘He could have fought back.’ The misty, unseeing eyes of Guiscard Vermuellen gazed into the abyss of his recollections. ‘There were only three assassins, and grandpappa was a powerful man. He could have fought, defended himself, until the guards arrived. He could have simply fled. But grandmama Zuleyka was there. Grandpappa shielded and protected Zuleyka. Only Zuleyka. He didn’t care about himself. When help finally arrived, Zuleyka wasn’t even grazed. Esterad had been stabbed more than twenty times. He died three hours later, without regaining consciousness.’

*

‘Have you ever read the Good Book, Dijkstra?’

‘No, Your Majesty. But I know what is written in it.’

‘I, can you believe it, opened it at random yesterday. And I came across this sentence: “On the way to eternity everyone will tread their own stairway, shouldering their own burden”. What do you think about that?’

‘Time I went, King Esterad. Time to shoulder my burden.’

‘Farewell, O Spy.’

‘Farewell, O King.’

We trekked perhaps four hundred furlongs southwards from the ancient and far-famed city of Assengard, to a land called Centloch. When one looks on that land from the hills, one sees numerous lakes arranged, artificially, in manifold dispositions. Our guide, the elf Avallac'h, ordered us to seek among those dispositions one calling to mind a cloverleaf. And, in truth, we espied one such. Moreover, it came out that there were not three but four lakes, for one, somewhat elongated, stretching from south to north, is, as it were, the stem of the leaf. That lake, known as Tarn Mira, is ringed by a black forest. Meanwhile, the mysterious Tower of the Swallow, in the elven tongue Tor Zireael, was said to rise up at its northern margin. At first, nonetheless, we saw nothing save fog. I was readying myself to ask the elf Avallac'h about the tower, when he gestured me to be silent and spoke these words: 'Await and hope. Hope shall return with the light and a good omen. Gaze at the endless waters; there you shall discern the envoys of good tidings.'

Buyvid Backhuysen,

Peregrinations along Magic Trails and Places.

The book is humbug from beginning to end. The ruins by Tarn Mira Lake have been examined many and oft. They are not magical; contrary to the enunciations of B. Backhuysen they cannot thus be the remains of the legendary Tower of the Swallow.

Ars Magica, XIV edition

CHAPTER NINE

‘They’re coming! They’re coming!’

Yennefer held her wet, windswept hair in both hands and stopped by the railing of the steps, getting out of the way of the women running to the wharf. Pushed by a west wind, a breaker crashed against the shore and white plumes of foam kept gushing from clefts in the rocks.

‘They’re coming! They’re coming!’

Almost the entire archipelago could be seen from the upper terraces of Kaer Trolde citadel, Ard Skellig’s main stronghold. Directly ahead, beyond the strait, lay An Skellig, its southern part low and flat, its hidden northern side precipitous and scored by fjords. Far away to the left, tall, green, mountainous Spikeroog, its peaks shrouded in cloud, broke up the waves with the sharp fangs of its reefs. To the right Undvik island’s steep cliffs could be seen, teeming with gulls, petrels, cormorants and gannets. From behind Undvik emerged the forested cone of Hindarsfjall, the archipelago’s smallest island. If, though, you were to climb to the very top of one of Kaer Trolde’s towers and look southwards, you would see the solitary island of Faroe far from the others, jutting from the water like the back of a huge fish washed up at low tide.

Yennefer went down to the lower terrace, stopping by a group of women whose pride and social status prevented them from rushing pell-mell to the quayside to jostle with the excited rabble. Down below, beneath them, lay the harbour town, black and shapeless like some great marine crustacean spat out by the waves.

Longship after longship sailed out of the strait between An Skellig and Spikeroog. Their sails blazed white and red in the sun and brass bosses shone on the shields suspended from their sides.

‘Ringhorn is coming first,’ said one of the women. ‘Followed by *Fenris* . . .’

‘*Trigla*,’ an excited speaker caught sight of another. ‘*Drac* follows . . . *Havfrue’s* behind them. . .’

‘*Anghira* . . . *Tamara* . . . *Daria* . . . No, it’s *Scorpena* . . . *Daria’s* not there. *Daria’s* not there . . .’

A young, heavily pregnant woman with a thick, fair plait, cradling her belly, groaned softly, paled and fainted, collapsing on the flags of the terrace like a curtain torn from its rings. Yennefer leaped forward at once, dropping to one knee, placed her fingers on the woman's abdomen and shouted a spell to suppress the spasms and contractions, powerfully and securely binding the placenta – which was in danger of detaching – to the womb. Just to be certain, she cast another soothing and protective spell on the baby, whose kicks she could feel under her palm. She brought the woman around by slapping her face, in order not to waste magical energy.

'Take her away. Carefully.'

'Foolish girl . . .' said one of the older women. 'A close thing . . .'

'Hysterical . . . Her Nils may still be alive, he may be on another longship . . .'

'Thank you for your help, madam witch.'

'Take her away,' Yennefer repeated, getting to her feet. Then she stifled a curse on discovering her dress had burst at the seams when she'd knelt down.

She went down to an even lower terrace. The longships were pulling into the quay one after another and the warriors going ashore. Heavily-armed, bearded berserkers from Skellige. Bandages shone white on many of them and many had to be helped to walk by their comrades. Some had to be carried.

The women of Skellige, crowded on the quayside, were looking out for their men, whooping and crying for joy if they were fortunate. If not, they fainted. Or walked away, slowly, quietly, without a word of complaint. Occasionally they looked back, hoping that the white and red of *Daria*'s sails would glint in the sound.

There was no sign of *Daria*.

Yennefer caught sight of the ruddy mane of Crach an Craite, the yarl of Skellige, one of the last to disembark from *Ringhorn*'s deck, towering above the other heads. The yarl was yelling orders, giving instructions, checking, taking care of things. Two women with their eyes fixed on him – one fair and the other dark – were weeping. With joy. The yarl, finally certain he had seen to and made sure of everything, walked over to the women, embraced them both in a bear hug and kissed them. And then raised his head

and saw Yennefer. His eyes blazed and his weather-beaten face hardened like the stone of a reef, like a brass shield boss.

He knows, thought the sorceress. *News spreads quickly. Even while still on board ship the yarl found out about my being caught in a net in the sound beyond Spikeroog. He knew he'd find me in Kaer Trolde.*

Magic or carrier pigeons?

He walked unhurriedly towards her. He smelled of the sea, of salt, tar and exhaustion. She looked into his bright eyes and immediately the war cries of the berserkers, the banging of shields and the clanging of swords and battle-axes resounded in her ears. The screaming of men being killed. The screaming of men jumping into the sea from the burning *Daria*.

'Yennefer of Vengerberg.'

'Crach an Craite, Yarl of Skellige.' She bowed slightly before him.

He didn't return the bow. *Not good*, she thought.

He immediately saw the bruise, a souvenir of a blow with an oar. His face hardened again and his lips twitched, revealing his teeth for a second.

'Whoever struck you will answer for it.'

'No one struck me. I tripped on the stairs.'

He considered her intently and then shrugged.

'If you don't want to tell tales that's your business. I have no time to launch an inquiry. Now listen. Carefully, because these will be the only words I shall utter to you.'

'Very well.'

'Tomorrow you will be put on a longship and shipped to Novigrad. You will be handed over to the town authorities there and afterwards to the Temerian or Redanian authorities; whichever comes forward first. And I know that both desire you just as ardently.'

'Is that everything?'

'Almost. Just one more clarification, which you, in truth, deserve. Skellige has quite often given refuge to people being hunted by the law. There is no shortage of opportunities and

occasions on the Isles to atone for one's guilt through hard work, fortitude, sacrifice and blood. But not in your case, Yennefer. I shall not give you refuge. If you counted on it, then you miscalculated. I detest people like you. I detest people who stir up trouble in order to gain power, who are driven by self-interest, who plot with the enemy and betray those to whom they owe not only obedience but also gratitude. I detest you, Yennefer. At the very moment you and your rebel comrades began inciting the rebellion on Thanedd at the instigation of Nilfgaard, my longships were fighting in Attre; my boys were coming to the aid of the insurrectionists there. Three hundred of my boys squared up to two thousand Black Cloaks! Valour and fidelity must rewarded, just as wickedness and treachery must be punished! How am I to reward those who fell? With cenotaphs? With inscriptions carved into obelisks? No! I shall reward and honour the fallen differently. Your blood, Yennefer, will trickle between the planks of the scaffold. In exchange for their blood, which soaked into the dunes of Attre.'

'I'm not guilty. I didn't participate in Vilgefortz's plot.'

'You will present proof of that to the judges. I will not judge you.'

'You already have. You've even pronounced sentence.'

'Enough talk! I've spoken: tomorrow at dawn you'll sail in manacles to Novigrad to stand before the royal court. To receive a just punishment. And now, give me your word you won't try to use magic.'

'And if I don't?'

'Marquard, our sorcerer, died on Thanedd; we no longer have a mage who could get you under control. But know this – you will be under the permanent observation of Skellige's finest bowmen. If you so much as move a hand suspiciously, you'll be shot.'

'Very well,' she nodded. 'Then I give my word.'

'Splendid. Thank you. Farewell, Yennefer. I shall not be escorting you tomorrow.'

'Crach.'

He turned on his heel.

'Yes.'

'I don't have the slightest intention of boarding a ship to Novigrad. I don't have the time to prove my innocence to Dijkstra. I

can't risk discovering they've already fabricated proof of my guilt. I can't risk dying of a sudden cerebral haemorrhage or committing suicide in my cell in some spectacular way soon after my arrest. I can't waste time or take such a risk. Nor may I explain to you why it is so risky for me. I shan't sail to Novigrad.'

He gazed long at her.

'You won't sail,' he restated. 'What permits you to think like that? Is it that we once shared love's delights? Don't count on that, Yennefer. Let bygones be bygones.'

'I know, and I'm not counting on it. I shan't sail to Novigrad, yarl, because I must go and help someone I vowed never to leave alone and helpless. And you, Crach an Craite, Yarl of Skellige, will help me in my undertaking. Because you took a similar vow. Ten years ago. Right here on the wharf, where we stand. To the same person. To Ciri, the granddaughter of Calanthe. The lion cub of Cintra. I, Yennefer of Vengerberg, regard Ciri as my daughter. Which is why I demand on her behalf that you keep your vow. Keep it, Crach an Craite, Yarl of Skellige.'

*

'Really?' Crach an Craite made sure once again. 'You won't even try them? None of these dainties?'

'Really.'

The yarl did not insist, but took a lobster from the dish, laid it on a board and split it lengthwise with a powerful – though extremely accurate – blow with a cleaver. After sprinkling it liberally with lemon juice and garlic sauce, he began eating the flesh straight from the shell. With his fingers.

Yennefer ate in a dignified manner, using a silver knife and fork – but it was a mutton chop with spinach, specially prepared for her by the astonished and probably slightly offended cook. Because the sorceress didn't want oysters, or mussels, or salmon marinated in its own juice, or gurnard and cockle soup, or stewed monkfish tail, or roast swordfish, or fried moray eel, or octopus, or crab, or lobster, or sea urchin. Or – especially – fresh seaweed. She associated everything that even faintly smelled of the sea with Fringilla Vigo and Philippa Eilhart, with the insanely dangerous

teleportation, the fall into the sea, the sea water she had swallowed, and the net which had been thrown over her – to which, incidentally, had been stuck seaweed and algae identical to that on the dish. Seaweed and algae, smashed against her head and shoulders along with the excruciatingly painful blows from a pine oar.

'So then,' Crach resumed the conversation, sucking the flesh from the legs of the lobster after cracking open the joints, 'I've decided to put my faith in you, Yennefer. I'm not doing it for you, though, be aware of that. Bloedgeas, the blood oath I gave Calanthe, does indeed tie my hands. So if your intention to go to Ciri's aid is genuine and heartfelt, and I presume it is, I have no choice: I must help you with your scheme . . .'

'Thank you. But rid yourself of that pompous tone, please. I repeat: I didn't take part in the plot on Thanedd. Believe me.'

'Is it really so important what I believe?' he flared up. 'You ought rather to begin with the kings, with Dijkstra, whose agents are tracking you the length and breadth of the world. With Philippa Eilhart and the sorcerers loyal to the kings. From whom, as you yourself admitted, you fled here, to Skellige. You ought to present *them* with proof—'

'I have no proof,' she interrupted, angrily stabbing her fork into a Brussels sprout the offended cook had boiled to go with the mutton chop. 'But if I had, they wouldn't let me present it. I can't explain it to you; I'm forbidden from speaking. Take my word for it, Crach. Please.'

'I said—'

'I know,' she interrupted. 'You pledged your help. Thank you. But you still don't believe in my innocence. Believe me.'

Crach threw aside the sucked-out lobster's shell and drew a bowl of mussels closer. He rummaged around, rattling them, taking out the bigger ones.

'Very well,' he finally said, wiping his hands on the tablecloth. 'I believe you. Because I want to believe. But I shall not give you refuge or protection. I cannot. You may, though, leave Skellige whenever you wish and make for wherever you wish. I'd advise haste. You came here, so to speak, on the wings of magic. Others may follow you. They can also work magic.'

'I'm not looking for a refuge or a safe hideaway, yarl. I must go

and rescue Ciri.'

'Ciri,' he repeated, lost in thought. 'The lion cub . . . She was a queer child.'

'Was?'

'Oh,' he flared up again. 'I expressed myself badly. Was – because she's no longer a child. That's all I meant. That's all. Cirilla, the Lion Cub of Cintra . . . she spent her summers and winters on Skellige. She was often mischievous! She was a Young Devil, not a Lion Cub . . . Damn it, I said "was" a second time . . . Yennefer, rumours find their way here from the mainland . . . Some say Ciri's in Nilfgaard—'

'She's not in Nilfgaard.'

'Others that the girl is dead.'

Yennefer said nothing, biting her lip.

'But I reject the second rumour,' the yarl said firmly. 'Ciri's alive. I'm certain. There've been no signs . . . She's alive!'

Yennefer raised her eyebrows, but didn't ask any questions. They were silent for a long time, listening intently to the roar of the waves crashing against the rocks of Ard Skellig.

'Yennefer,' Crach said after another moment's silence. 'Yet more tidings have reached us from the continent. I know that your Witcher – who hid in Brokilon after the affray on Thanedd – set off from there with the aim of reaching Nilfgaard and freeing Ciri.'

'I repeat, Ciri is not in Nilfgaard. I know not what *my* Witcher – as you chose to describe him – is planning. But he . . . Crach, it's no secret that I . . . am fond of him. But I know he won't rescue Ciri. He won't achieve anything. I know him. He'll become entangled in something, get lost, start philosophising and feeling sorrow for himself. Then he'll vent his rage, hacking whatever and whoever he can to pieces with his sword. Afterwards, to atone for it, he'll carry out some noble, but senseless feat. Then finally he'll be killed, foolishly, senselessly, probably by a stab in the back—'

'They say,' Crach quickly interjected, alarmed by the sorceress's ominously changing, strangely trembling voice. 'They say Ciri is bound to him by destiny. I saw it myself, back in Cintra, during Pavetta's betrothal—'

'Destiny,' Yennefer interrupted sharply, 'can be interpreted in many, many different ways. Anyway, let's not waste time on

digressions. I repeat; I don't know what Geralt's plans are or even whether he has any. I mean to get down to work myself. Using my own methods. And actively, Crach, actively. I'm not accustomed to sitting and weeping, holding my head in both hands. I act!'

The yarl raised his eyebrows, but said nothing.

'I shall take action,' the sorceress repeated. 'I've already devised a plan. And you, Crach, will assist me with it, in accordance with your vow.'

'I'm ready,' he announced firmly. 'For anything. The longships are moored in the harbour. Give the order, Yennefer.'

She couldn't stifle a snort of laughter.

'Always the same. No, Crach, no demonstrations of bravery and manliness. It won't be necessary to sail to Nilfgaard and plunge a battle axe into the lock of the City of the Golden Towers. I need less spectacular, but more tangible help . . . What's the state of your treasury?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Yarl Crach an Craite. The help I need is expressible in cash.'

*

It began the next day, at dawn. A frantic commotion broke out in the chambers put at Yennefer's disposal, which seneschal Guthlaf – who had been assigned to the sorceress – was having great difficulty controlling. Yennefer was sitting at a table, almost not raising her head from various papers. She was counting, totting up columns and doing calculations, which were immediately rushed to the treasury and the island branch of Cianfanellis' bank. She was making drawings and charts which immediately ended up in the hands of craftsmen: alchemists, goldsmiths, glaziers and jewellers.

Everything went smoothly for a while and then the problems began.

*

'I'm sorry, my lady,' seneschal Guthlaf said slowly. 'But if there isn't

any, there isn't any. We gave you everything we had. We can't make magic or do miracles! And I'll take the liberty of observing that what's lying before you, madam, are diamonds with a combined value of—'

'What do I care about their combined value?' she snorted. 'I need one, but a suitably large one. How large, master jeweller?'

The lapidary looked again at the drawing.

'In order to make that cut and those facets? A minimum of thirty carats.'

'There's no such stone,' Guthlaf stated categorically, 'on the whole of Skellige.'

'That's not true,' the jeweller contradicted. 'There is.'

*

'How do you imagine this playing out, Yennefer?' Crach an Craite frowned. 'I'm to send armed men to storm and then plunder the temple? I'm to threaten the priestesses with my wrath if they won't give up the diamond? It's out of the question. I'm not especially religious, but a temple's a temple, and priestesses are priestesses. I can only ask politely. Hint at how much it matters to me and how great my gratitude will be. But it will still only be a request. A humble supplication.'

'That may be denied?'

'Indeed. But there's no harm in trying. What are we risking? Let's sail to Hindarsfjall together and present the supplication. I'll give the priestesses to understand what's needed. But then everything will be in your hands. Negotiate. Present your arguments. Try bribery. Pique their ambition. Appeal to higher reasons. Despair, weep, sob, beg for mercy . . . Call on all the sea devils. Must I teach you, Yennefer?'

'It'll all be for nothing, Crach. A sorceress will never reach agreement with priestesses. Certain differences of our . . . outlook are too marked. And when it comes to permitting a sorceress to use a "sacred" relict or artefact . . . No, we'd better forget it. There's no chance . . .'

'What do you actually need that diamond for?'

‘To build a “window”. I mean a telecommunicational megascope. I have to talk to several people.’

‘Magically? At a distance?’

‘If it was enough to climb to the top of Kaer Trolde and shout loudly, I wouldn’t be bothering you.’

*

The gulls and petrels circling above the water clamoured. The red-beaked oystercatchers nesting on the steep rocks and reefs of Hindarsfjall squealed shrilly, and yellow-headed gannets screeched hoarsely and gaggled. The glistening green eyes of black-crested cormorants watched attentively as the launch sailed past.

‘That large rock suspended above the water,’ pointed out Crach an Craite, leaning on the rail, ‘is Kaer Hemdall, Hemdall’s Watchtower. Hemdall is our mythical hero. Legend has it that with the coming of Tedd Deireadh, the Time of the End, the Time of White Frost and the Wolfish Blizzard, Hemdall will face the evil powers from the land of Morhögg: the phantoms, demons and spectres of Chaos. He will stand on the Rainbow Bridge and blow his horn to signal that it is time to take up arms and fall in to battle array. For Ragh nar Roog, the Last Battle, which will decide if night is to fall, or dawn to break.’

The launch skipped nimbly over the waves, entering the calmer waters of the bay between Hemdall’s Watchtower and another rock of similarly fantastic contours.

‘That smaller rock is Kambi,’ the yarl explained. ‘In our myths the name Kambi is borne by a magical golden cock, whose crowing will warn Hemdall of the approach of Naglfar, the hellish longboat carrying the army of Darkness, the demons and phantoms of Morhögg. Naglfar is built from corpses’ fingernails. You wouldn’t believe it, Yennefer, but there are still people on Skellige who cut the nails of the dead before burial, so as not to supply the spectres of Morhögg with building materials.’

‘I would. I know the power of legend.’

The fjord protected them a little from the wind and the sail fluttered.

‘Sound the horn,’ Crach ordered his crew. ‘We’re reaching the

shore. We ought to inform the pious ladies that we're paying them a visit.'

*

The building – located at the head of a long, stone staircase – looked like a gigantic hedgehog, so overgrown was it by moss, ivy and bushes. Yennefer observed that not just bushes, but even small trees, were growing on the roof.

'This is the temple,' Crach confirmed. 'The grove surrounding it is called Hindar and is also a place of worship. It's here that people gather the sacred mistletoe, and on Skellige, as you know, people garnish and decorate everything with it, from a newborn's cradle to a grave . . . Have a care, the steps are slippery . . . The moss, ha-ha, is almost choking religion . . . Let me take your arm . . . As ever, that same perfume . . . Yenna . . .'

'Crach. Please. Let bygones be bygones.'

'I beg your pardon. Let's go on.'

Several silent young priestesses were waiting outside the temple. The yarl greeted them courteously and expressed a wish to talk to their superior, whom he called Modron Sigrdrifa. They went inside, to a space lit by shafts of light shining from stained-glass windows set high up. One of them was shining on the altar.

'By a hundred sea devils,' Crach an Craite muttered. 'I'd forgotten how large Brisingamen was. I haven't been here since I was a child . . . You could probably buy all the shipyards in Cidaris with it. Along with the labourers and the annual output.'

The yarl was exaggerating. But not by much.

A statue of Modron Freyja, the Great Mother, in her typical maternal aspect – a woman in flowing robes revealing her advanced state of pregnancy, which the sculptor had accented inordinately – towered above the modest marble altar, above figures of cats and falcons, above a stone basin for votive offerings. She stood with bowed head and facial features hidden by a scarf. Over the goddess' arms, which were folded on her chest, was a diamond, one element of a gold necklace. The diamond was tinged slightly blue, like the clearest water. It was large.

A hundred and fifty carats, or so.

‘It wouldn’t even need cutting,’ Yennefer whispered. ‘It’s a rosette, exactly what I need. Facets perfect for diffracting light . . .’

‘That means we’re lucky.’

‘I doubt it. The priestesses will soon appear, and I, being a heathen, will be sworn at and ejected.’

‘Are you exaggerating?’

‘Not in the slightest.’

‘Welcome, yarl, to the temple of the Mother. And I welcome you too, O honourable Yennefer of Vengerberg.’

Crach an Craite bowed.

‘Greetings, esteemed mother Sigrdrifa.’

The priestess was tall, almost as tall as Crach – which meant she was a head taller than Yennefer. She had fair hair and pale eyes, and an oval, none too pretty and none too feminine, face.

I’ve seen her somewhere before, thought Yennefer. *Not so long ago. Where?*

‘On the steps of Kaer Trolde, leading to the harbour,’ the priestess recalled with a smile. ‘When the longboats were coming in from the sound. I stood over you as you helped a pregnant woman who was about to miscarry. On your knees, worrying not at all about your very costly camlet dress. I saw it. And I shall never more pay heed to tales of cold-hearted and calculated sorceresses.’

Yennefer coughed softly and lowered her head in a bow.

‘You are standing before the altar of the Mother, Yennefer. May her grace fall on you.’

‘Esteemed mother, I . . . I wish humbly to ask you . . .’

‘Say nothing. Yarl, you are no doubt very busy. Leave us alone, here, on Hindarsfjall. We will manage to come to an agreement. We are women. It is unimportant what we are engaged in, or who we are: we always serve she who is the Virgin, the Mother and the Crone. Kneel beside me, Yennefer. Lower your head before the Mother.’

*

‘Take Brisingamen from the goddess’ neck?’ Sigrdrifa repeated, and there was more disbelief than righteous indignation in her voice. ‘No, Yennefer. It is quite impossible. The point is not even that I would not dare . . . Even if I did, Brisingamen cannot be removed. The necklace has no clasp. It is permanently bonded to the statue.’

Yennefer stayed silent for a long while, calmly eyeing up the priestess.

‘Had I known,’ she said coldly, ‘I would have set sail at once for Ard Skellig with the yarl. No, no, by no means do I regard the time spent talking to you as wasted. But I have very little of it. Very little indeed. Your kindness and warmth beguiled me somewhat, I confess—’

‘I am well-disposed towards you,’ Sigrdrifa interrupted unemotionally. ‘I also support your plans, with all my heart. I knew Ciri, I liked the child, and her fate moves me. I admire you for the determination with which you hope to go to the girl’s rescue. I shall grant your every wish. But not Brisingamen, Yennefer. Not Brisingamen. Do not ask for that.’

‘Sigrdrifa, in order to go to Ciri’s rescue, I urgently need some information. Without it I’ll be helpless. I can only acquire the knowledge I need through telecommunication. In order to communicate at a distance, I must construct a magical artefact – a megascope – using magic.’

‘A device something like your notorious crystal balls?’

‘Considerably more complex. Crystal balls only permit telecommunication with another correlated crystal ball. Even the local dwarven bank has a crystal ball for talking to another at headquarters. A megascope has somewhat greater capabilities . . . But why theorise? Without the diamond nothing will come of it anyhow. Well, I shall say farewell . . .’

‘Don’t hurry so.’

Sigrdrifa stood up and passed through the nave, stopping before the altar and the statue of Modron Freyja.

‘The goddess,’ she said, ‘is also the patron of soothsayers. Clairvoyants. Telepaths. As symbolised by her sacred animals: the cat, which sees and hears, itself unseen, and the falcon, which sees from above. And by the jewel of the goddess: Brisingamen, the necklace of clairvoyance. Why build some looking and listening device, Yennefer? Wouldn’t it be simpler to ask the goddess for

help?'

Yennefer stopped herself from swearing at the last moment. After all, it was a place of worship.

'The time for evening prayers is approaching,' Sigrdrifa continued. 'I shall devote myself to meditation along with the other priestesses. I shall ask the goddess for help for Ciri. For Ciri, who was here many times, in this temple, and looked at Brisingamen around the neck of the Great Mother many times. Sacrifice one more hour or two of your precious time, Yennefer. Stay here, with us, for the time of worship. Support me as I pray. With your thoughts and presence.'

'Sigrdrifa . . .'

'Please. Do it for me. And for Ciri.'

*

The jewel Brisingamen. On the goddess' neck.

She stifled a yawn. *Had there only been some singing*, she thought, *some incantations, some mystery . . . Some mystic folklore . . . It would have been less boring, she wouldn't be feeling so drowsy. But they were simply kneeling, with bowed heads. Motionless, soundless.*

But they're capable, when they want to, of using the Power, at times just as well as we sorceresses. It's still a mystery how they do it. Without any preparations, any learning, any studies . . . Just prayer and meditation. Divination? Some kind of autohypnosis? That's what Tissaia de Vries claims . . . They absorb energy unconsciously, in a trance, and they acquire the ability to transform it into something like our spells. They transform energy, treating it as a gift and favour of the godhead. Faith gives them strength.

Why have we sorceresses never succeeded with anything like that?

Ought I to try? Using the atmosphere and aura of this place? I could enter a trance myself, couldn't I? If only by gazing at the diamond . . . Brisingamen . . . Intensively thinking about how marvellously it would function in my megascope . . .

Brisingamen . . . shining like the morning star, there, in the gloom, in the smoke of incense and smouldering candles . . .

'Yennefer.'

She jerked her head up.

It was dark in the temple. It smelled strongly of smoke.

‘Did I fall asleep? Forgive me . . .’

‘There’s nothing to forgive. Come with me.’

Outside, the night sky burned with a twinkling luminosity that changed like the colours in a kaleidoscope. The northern lights? Yennefer rubbed her eyes in amazement. The aurora borealis? In August?

‘How much are you capable of sacrificing, Yennefer?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Are you prepared to sacrifice yourself? Your priceless magic?’

‘Sigrdrifa,’ she said with anger, ‘don’t try your sublime tricks on me. I’m ninety-four years old. But treat that, please, as a confessional secret. I’m only confiding in you so you’ll understand I can’t be treated like a child.’

‘You didn’t answer my question.’

‘And I don’t mean to. For it’s the mysticism I don’t accept. I fell asleep during your worship. It wearied and bored me. Because I don’t believe in your goddess.’

Sigrdrifa turned away and Yennefer took a very deep breath in spite of herself.

‘Your disbelief is not very flattering to me,’ said a woman with eyes filled with molten gold. ‘But does your disbelief change anything?’

All Yennefer could do was to breathe out.

‘The time will come,’ said the golden-eyed woman, ‘when absolutely no one, including children, will believe in sorceresses. I tell you that with deliberate spite. By way of revenge. Let us leave.’

‘No . . .’ Yennefer finally managed. ‘No! I won’t go anywhere. Enough of this! It’s an enthrallment or hypnosis. An illusion! A trance! I have developed defence mechanisms . . . I can dispel all this with one charm, just like that! Dammit . . .’

The golden-eyed woman came closer. The diamond in her necklace burned like the morning star.

‘Your speech is slowly ceasing to serve as communication,’ she

said. ‘It is becoming art for art’s sake. The more incomprehensible it is, the more profound and wise it is considered. In sooth, I preferred you when you could only say “Ugh” and “Ooh”. Come.’

‘This is an illusion, a trance . . . I won’t go anywhere!’

‘I don’t want to force you. It would be a disgrace. For you’re an intelligent and proud girl, you have character.’

A plain. A sea of grass. A moor. A boulder, jutting from the heather like the back of a crouching predator.

‘You desired my jewel, Yennefer. I cannot give it to you without first making sure of a few things. I want to check what is deep inside you. Therefore I have brought you here, to this place of Power and Might from time immemorial. Your priceless magic is apparently everywhere. Apparently it’s sufficient to merely hold out one’s hand. Are you afraid to hold it out?’

Yennefer couldn’t utter a sound from her tight throat.

‘Are, then, Chaos, art and learning,’ said the woman, whose name could not be uttered, ‘according to you, the Powers capable of changing the world? A curse, a blessing and progress? And aren’t they by any chance Faith? Love? Sacrifice?

‘Do you hear? The cock Kambi is crowing. The waves are breaking against the shore, waves pushed by Naglfar’s prow. The horn of Hemdall sounds as he stands facing his enemies on the rainbow-coloured arch of Bifrost. The White Frost is nigh, a gale and a blizzard are nigh . . . The earth trembles from the writhing movements of the Serpent . . .

‘The wolf devours the sun. The moon turns black. There is only coldness and darkness. Hatred, vengeance and blood . . .

‘Whose side will you be on, Yennefer? Will you be on the east or the west side of Bifrost? Will you be with Hemdall or against him?

‘The cock Kambi is crowing.

‘Decide, Yennefer. Choose. Only for this reason were you restored to life: that you might make a choice at the right moment.

‘Light or Darkness?’

‘Good and Evil, Light and Darkness, Order and Chaos? They are but symbols; in reality no such polarity exists! Brightness and Gloom are in each of us, a little of one and a little of the other. This

conversation is pointless. Pointless. I will not come over to mysticism. To you and Sigrdrifa, the Wolf is devouring the Sun. To me it's an eclipse. And may it remain that way.'

Remain? What?

She felt her head spinning, felt some horrendous force twisting her arms, wrenching the joints in her shoulders and elbows, racking her vertebrae as though she were being tortured. She screamed in pain, thrashed around and opened her eyes. No, it wasn't a dream. It couldn't be a dream. She was on a tree, hanging arms akimbo from the boughs of a gigantic ash. High above her a falcon circled. Below her, on the ground, in the gloom, she heard the hiss of snakes, the rustling of scales rubbing against each other.

Something moved beside her. A squirrel ran across her tautened and aching shoulders.

'Are you ready?' asked the squirrel. 'Are you ready to offer your sacrifice? What are you prepared to sacrifice?'

'I have nothing!' The pain blinded and paralysed her. 'And even if I had, I don't believe in such a sacrifice! I don't want to suffer for millions! I don't want to suffer at all! For no one and in no one's stead!'

'No one wants to suffer. But yet it is our lot. And some suffer more. Not necessarily by choice. The point is not the bearing of suffering. The point is how it is borne.'

*

Janka! Dear Janka!

Take this hunchbacked monstrosity from me! I don't want to look at it!

She's your daughter as much as she is mine.

Indeed? The children I have sired are normal.

How dare you . . . How dare you suggest . . .

It was in your elven family that there were witches. It was you that aborted your first pregnancy. It was because of that. You have tainted elven blood and a tainted womb, woman. That's why you give birth to monsters.

It is an ill-fated child . . . Such was the will of the gods! She's your daughter as much as she is mine! What was I to do? Smother her? Not tie the birth cord? What am I to do now? Take her to the forest and leave her? What do you want from me, by the Gods?

Daddy! Mummy!

Get away, you freak.

How dare you! How dare you strike a child! Stop! Where are you going? Where? To her, are you? To her!

Yes, woman. I'm a man. I'm free to sate my lust where and when I want, as is my natural right. And I loathe you. You and the fruit of your degenerate womb. Don't wait with supper. I won't be back tonight.

Mummy . . .

Why are you weeping?

Why are you beating me and pushing me away? I was good, wasn't I?

*

Mummy! Dear Mummy!

*

'Are you capable of forgiveness?'

'I forgave long ago.'

'Having first satisfied your lust for vengeance.'

'Yes.'

'Do you regret it?'

'No.'

*

Pain, searing pain in her mutilated hands and fingers.

‘Yes, I’m guilty. Is that what you want to hear? A confession and remorse? You want to hear Yennefer of Vengerberg grovel and abase herself? No, I won’t give you that pleasure. I admit my guilt and await my punishment. But you will not hear my remorse!’

The pain reached the limits of what a person can withstand.

‘You blame me for the betrayed, the deceived, the abused, you blame me for those who died – because of me – from their own hand, from my hand . . . For once having raised a hand against myself? You can see I had my reasons! And I regret nothing! Even if I could turn back time . . . I regret nothing!’

The falcon alighted on her shoulder.

The Tower of the Swallow. The Tower of the Swallow. Hurry to the Tower of the Swallow.

O Daughter.

*

The cock Kambi crows.

*

Ciri on a black mare, at a gallop, her ashen hair tousled by the wind. Blood sprays from her face, a vivid, intense red. The black mare soars like a bird, smoothly gliding over the top rail of a high gate. Ciri sways in the saddle, but doesn’t fall off . . .

Ciri amidst the night, amidst a stony, sandy wilderness, with a raised arm. A glowing ball explodes from her hand . . . A unicorn churning up gravel with its hoof . . . Many unicorns . . . Fire . . . Fire . . .

Geralt on a bridge. In combat. Amidst fire. A flame reflected in his sword blade.

Fringilla Vigo, her green eyes wide open in sexual ecstasy, her close-cropped head on an open book, on the frontispiece . . . Part of the title is visible: *Remarks on Inevitable Death* . . .

Geralt’s eyes reflected in Fringilla’s.

A chasm. Smoke. Steps leading downwards. Steps that must be descended. Something is ending. Tedd Deireadh, the Time of the End, is nigh . . .

Darkness. Dampness. The dreadful cold of stone walls. The cold of iron on wrists, on ankles. Pain pulsing in mutilated hands, shooting down crushed fingers . . .

Ciri takes her by the hand. A long, dark corridor, stone columns, perhaps statues . . . Darkness. In it, whispers soft as the soughing of the wind.

A door. Endless doors with gigantic, heavy leaves open before them without a murmur. And finally, in the impenetrable darkness, a door which does not open by itself. Which it is forbidden to open.

If you are afraid, turn back.

It is forbidden to open this door. You know that.

I do.

But yet you are leading me there.

If you are afraid, turn back. There is still time to turn back. It is not yet too late.

And you?

For me it is.

The cock Kambi is crowing.

Tedd Deireadh has come.

The aurora borealis.

Dawn.

*

‘Yennefer. Wake up.’

She jerked her head up. She glanced down at her hands. She had both of them. Intact.

‘Sigrdrifa? I fell asleep . . .’

‘Come.’

‘Where to?’ she whispered. ‘Where to this time?’

‘I beg your pardon? I don’t understand you. Come. You must see it. Something has happened . . . Something strange. None of us knows how to explain it. But I can guess. Grace . . . The goddess has bestowed her grace on you, Yennefer.’

‘What do you mean, Sigrdrifa?’

‘Look.’

She looked. And sighed aloud.

Brisingamen, the sacred jewel of Modron Freyja, was no longer hanging around the goddess’s neck. It was lying at her feet.

*

‘Did I hear that correctly?’ Crach an Craite asked. ‘You’re moving to Hindarsfjall with your magical workshop? The priestesses will make the sacred diamond available to you? They’ll let you use it in your infernal machine?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, well. Yennefer, have you perhaps had a conversion? What happened on the island?’

‘Never you mind. I’m returning to the temple and that’s that.’

‘And the financial resources you asked for? Will they still be necessary?’

‘I’d say so.’

‘Seneschal Guthlaf will carry out each of your relevant instructions. But Yennefer, issue them quickly. Make haste. I’ve received fresh tidings.’

‘Dammit, I was afraid of that. Do they know where I am?’

‘No, not yet. I was warned, though, that you may appear on Skellige and was ordered to imprison you immediately. I was also ordered to take prisoners on my expeditions and extract information from them, even if it was only scraps concerning you and your sojourn in Nilfgaard or in the provinces. Yennefer, hurry. If they tracked you and caught you here, on Skellige, I would find myself in a somewhat difficult situation.’

‘I’ll do everything in my power. Including whatever it takes to

avoid compromising you. Don't worry.'

Crach grinned.

'I said *somewhat*. I'm not afraid of them. Not of kings, nor of sorcerers. They can't do anything to me, because they need me. And I was bound to help you by a feudal oath. Yes, yes, you heard right. I'm still formally a vassal of the Cintran crown. And Cirilla has formal rights to that crown. By representing Cirilla, by being her sole guardian, you have the formal right to give me orders, demand obedience and servitudes.'

'Casuistic sophistries.'

'Well certainly,' he snorted. 'I will shout as much myself, in a booming voice, if in spite of everything it turns out Emhyr var Emreis really has forced the girl to marry. Also if – by the help of some legal loopholes and flourishes – Ciri has been deprived of the right to the throne and someone else has been named as a substitute heir, including that lummox Vissegerd. Then I'll announce my obedience and declare my feudal oath forthwith.'

'But if,' Yennefer squinted, 'in spite of everything, it turns out that Ciri is dead?'

'She's alive,' Crach said firmly. 'I know that for certain.'

'How?'

'You won't want to give it credence.'

'Try me.'

'The blood of the queens of Cintra,' Crach began, 'is uncannily bound to the sea. When one of the women of that blood dies the sea falls into sheer madness. It's said that Ard Skellig bewails the daughters of Riannon. For the storm is so strong then that the waves striking from the west squeeze through crevices and caverns to the east side and suddenly salt brooks gush from the rock. And the entire island shudders. Simple folk say "See how Ard Skellig sobs. Someone has died again. Riannon's blood has died. The Elder Blood".'

Yennefer was silent.

'It's not a fairy tale,' Crach continued. 'I've seen it for myself, with my own eyes. Three times. Following the death of Adalia the Soothsayer, following the death of Calanthe . . . And following the death of Pavetta, Ciri's mother.'

‘Pavetta,’ Yennefer observed, ‘actually perished during a storm, so it’s hard to speak—’

‘Pavetta,’ Crach interrupted, still deep in thought, ‘did not perish during a storm. The storm began after her death. The sea reacted as it always does to the death of one of the Cintran bloodline. I’ve investigated that matter long enough. And am certain of what I know.’

‘Meaning what?’

‘The ship Pavetta and Duny were sailing on vanished over the infamous Sedna Abyss. It wasn’t the first ship to vanish there. You no doubt know that.’

‘Fairy tales. Ships meet with disasters, it’s a natural thing—’

‘On Skellige,’ he interrupted quite firmly, ‘we know enough about ships and sailing to be able to distinguish between natural and unnatural disasters. Ships go down unnaturally over the Sedna Abyss. And not accidentally. That includes the ship Pavetta and Duny were sailing on.’

‘I’m not arguing.’ The sorceress sighed. ‘Anyway, does that have any meaning to us? After almost fifteen years?’

‘It does to me.’ The yarl pursed his lips. ‘I shall unravel the case. It’s only a matter of time. I’ll find out. . . I’ll find an explanation. I’ll find an explanation to all the enigmas. Including the one from the slaughter of Cintra . . .’

‘What enigma would that be?’

‘When the Nilfgaardians invaded Cintra,’ he muttered, looking her in the eyes, ‘Calanthe ordered Ciri spirited out of the town. But the town was already aflame, Black Cloaks were everywhere, the chances of getting out of the siege were faint. The queen was advised against such a risky business, and it was suggested that Ciri formally capitulate before the hetmans of Nilfgaard, thus saving her life and the Cintran state. In the blazing streets she would surely and senselessly have died at the hands of the soldierly mob. But the Lioness . . . Do you know what, according to eye witnesses, she said?’

‘No.’

‘“It would be better for the girl’s blood to flow over the cobbles of Cintra than for it to be defiled.” Defiled by what?’

‘Marriage to Emperor Emhyr. A filthy Nilfgaardian. Yarl, it’s

late. I begin tomorrow at dawn . . . I shall inform you of my progress.'

'I'm counting on it. Goodnight, Yenna . . . Hmmm . . .'

'What, Crach?'

'You wouldn't by any chance, hmmm, fancy . . .'

'No, yarl. Let bygones be bygones. Goodnight.'

*

'Well, well.' Crach an Craite received his guest with a tilt of his head. 'Triss Merigold in person. What a stunning dress. And the fur . . . chinchilla, isn't it? I would ask what brings you to Skellige . . . If I didn't know. But I do.'

'Wonderful,' Triss smiled seductively and neatened her gorgeous chestnut hair. 'It's wonderful that you know, yarl. It will save us the introduction and the preliminary explanations, and allow us to get to business right away.'

'What business?' Crach crossed his arms on his chest and glared at the sorceress. 'What ought to precede introductions, what explanations are you counting on? Who do you represent, Triss? In whose name have you come here? King Foltest, whom you served, released you from service with banishment. Although you weren't at fault, he banished you from Temeria. Philippa Eilhart, I've heard, who, along with Dijkstra, is presently ruling de facto in Redania, has taken you under her wing. I see that you're repaying for the asylum as well as you can. You don't even flinch at assuming the role of secret agent in order to track down your old friend.'

'You wrong me, yarl.'

'I humbly beg your pardon. If I'm in error. Am I?'

They were silent for a long while, eyeing each other up mistrustfully. Triss finally snorted, swore and stamped a high heel.

'Oh, to hell with it! Let's stop leading each other by the nose! What difference does it make now, who's serving whom, who's siding with whom, who's keeping faith with whom and with what motives? Yennefer's dead. It's still not known where or in whose grasp Ciri is . . . What's the point of playing at secrets? I didn't sail here as a spy, Crach. I came on my own initiative, as a private

individual. Driven by concern for Ciri.'

'Everyone is concerned about Ciri. Lucky girl.'

Triss's eyes flashed.

'I wouldn't sneer at that. Particularly in your place.'

'I beg your pardon.'

They said nothing, looking out of the window at the red sun setting beyond the wooded peaks of Spikeroog.

'Triss Merigold.'

'Yes, O yarl.'

'I invite you to supper. Ah, the cook told me to ask if all sorceresses disdain finely cooked seafood?'

*

Triss did not disdain seafood. On the contrary, she ate twice as much as she had intended and now began to worry about her waistline – about the twenty-two inches she was so proud of. She decided to ease her digestion with some white wine, the celebrated Est Est of Toussaint. Like Crach, she drank from a horn.

'And so,' she took up the conversation, 'Yennefer showed up here on the nineteenth of August, falling spectacularly from the sky into some fishing nets. You, as a faithful vassal of Cintra, granted her asylum. Helped her to build a megascope . . . With whom and about what she talked, you of course don't know.'

Crach an Craite drank deeply from the horn and suppressed a burp.

'I don't know,' he smiled craftily. 'Of course I don't know. How could I, a poor and simple sailor, know anything about the doings of mighty sorceresses?'

*

Sigrdrifa, the priestess of Modron Freyja, let her head drop low, as though Crach an Craite's question had burdened her with a thousand-pound weight.

‘She trusted me, yarl,’ she muttered barely audibly. ‘She didn’t demand of me the swearing of an oath of silence, but she naturally cared about discretion. I really don’t know whether—’

‘Modron Sigrdrifa,’ Crach an Craite interrupted gravely, ‘I’m not asking you to act as an informer. Like you, I support Yennefer, like you I desire to find and rescue Ciri. Why, I took Bloedgeas, a blood oath! Whereas regarding Yennefer, concern for her motivates me. She’s an extremely proud woman. Even when taking a very great risk, she doesn’t stoop to making requests. Therefore it will be necessary – I can’t rule it out – to come to her aid unasked. In order to do that I need information.’

Sigrdrifa cleared her throat. She wore an uneasy expression. And when she began to speak, her voice slightly quavered.

‘She built that machine of hers . . . In essence it’s not a machine at all, because there’s no mechanism, just two looking glasses, a black velvet curtain, a box, two lenses, four lamps, well and Brisingamen, of course . . . When she utters the spell, the light from the two lamps falls—’

‘Let’s leave out the details. Who did she communicate with?’

‘She spoke to several persons. With sorcerers . . . Yarl, I didn’t hear everything, but what I heard . . . Among them are truly wicked people. None wanted to help disinterestedly . . . They demanded money . . . They all demanded money . . .’

‘I know,’ Crach muttered. ‘The bank informed me of the money orders she issued. A pretty, oh, a pretty penny my oath is costing me! But money comes and goes. What I spent on Yennefer and Ciri, I shall make good in the Nilfgaardian provinces. But go on, O mother Sigrdrifa.’

‘Yennefer,’ the priestess lowered her head, ‘blackmailed some of them. She gave them to understand she was in possession of compromising information and in the event of cooperation being declined she would reveal it to the whole world . . . Yarl . . . She’s a clever and essentially good woman . . . But she doesn’t have any scruples. She is ruthless. And merciless.’

‘Indeed, as I know. But I don’t want to know the details of the blackmail, and I advise you to forget about them as quickly as you can. It’s dangerous knowledge. Outsiders shouldn’t meddle with fire like that.’

‘I know, yarl. I owe you obedience . . . And I believe that your

ends justify your means. No one shall learn anything from me. Neither a friend in a convivial chat, nor a foe torturing me.'

'Good, Modron Sigrdrifa. Very good . . . What did Yennefer's questions concern, do you recall?'

'I didn't always overhear nor understand everything, yarl. They were using jargon that was difficult to grasp . . . There was often talk of a Vilgefortz . . .'

'Of course.' Crach audibly ground his teeth. The priestess glanced at him fearfully.

'They also spoke a lot about elves and about Knowing Ones,' she continued. 'And about magical portals. There was also mention of the Sedna Abyss . . . But mainly, it seems to me, it concerned towers.'

'Towers?'

'Yes. Two. The Tower of the Gull and the Tower of the Swallow.'

*

'As I supposed,' Triss said, 'Yennefer began by obtaining the secret report of Radcliffe's commission, which investigated the case of the events on Thanedd. I don't know what news of this affair has reached you here, on Skellige . . . Have you heard of the teleporter in the Tower of the Seagull? And about Radcliffe's commission?'

Crach an Craite glanced suspiciously at the sorceress.

'Neither politics nor culture reach the islands,' he grimaced. 'We're backward.'

'The Radcliffe commission –' Triss did not deign to pay attention either to his tone, nor his expression '– examined in detail teleportational trails leading from Thanedd. The portal on the island, Tor Lara, while it existed, negated all teleportational magic within a considerable radius. But, as you certainly know, the Tower of the Gull exploded and disintegrated, making teleportation possible. Most of the participants in the events on Thanedd got off the island using portals they opened.'

'As a matter of fact –' the yarl smiled '– you, for example, flew straight to Brokilon. With the Witcher on your back.'

‘Well, I never.’ Triss looked him in the eye. ‘Politics don’t reach here, culture doesn’t reach here, but rumours do. But let’s leave that for now, we’ll return to the work of the Radcliffe commission. The commission’s task was to determine precisely who teleported from Thanedd and whence. They used so-called synopses – spells capable of reconstructing an image of past events – and then collated the uncovered teleportational tracks with the directions they led to, as a result ascribing them to the specific individuals who had opened the portals. They were successful in practically all cases. Save one. One teleportational trail led nowhere. To be precise, into the sea. To the Sedna Abyss.’

‘Someone,’ the yarl guessed at once, ‘teleported onto a ship waiting in a previously agreed location. I just wonder why they went so far . . . And to such a notorious place. Well, but if a battle axe is hovering over your neck . . .’

‘Exactly. The commission also thought of that. And voiced the following conclusion: it was Vilgefortz, who having captured Ciri and having his other escape route cut off, took advantage of a reserve exit – he teleported with the girl to the Sedna Abyss, onto a Nilfgaardian ship waiting there. That, according to the commission, explains the fact that Ciri was presented at the imperial court in Loc Grim on the tenth of July, barely ten days after the events on Thanedd.’

‘Well, yes.’ the yarl squinted. ‘That would explain a lot. On condition, naturally, that the commission wasn’t mistaken.’

‘Indeed.’ The sorceress withstood his gaze and even afforded herself a mocking smirk. ‘Naturally, a double – and not the real Ciri – could just as easily have been presented in Loc Grim. That may also explain a lot. It doesn’t, though, explain one occurrence that the Radcliffe commission established. So bizarre that in the report’s first version it was passed over as too improbable. In the report’s second – and strictly confidential – version that occurrence was nonetheless presented. As a hypothesis.’

‘I’ve been all ears for some time, Triss.’

‘The commission’s hypothesis reads: the teleporter in the Tower of the Gull was active, was functioning. Someone passed through it and the energy of the passage was so powerful the teleporter exploded and was destroyed.’

‘Yennefer,’ Triss continued a moment later, ‘must have found out about it. What the Radcliffe commission uncovered. What was

included in the confidential report. That is, there's a chance . . . the slightest chance . . . that Ciri managed to pass safely through the Tor Lara portal. That she eluded Nilfgaard and Vilgefortz . . .'

'Where is she then?'

'I'd like to know that too.'

*

It was dreadfully dark; the moon, hidden behind banks of cloud, gave no light at all. But in comparison to the previous nights there was almost no wind and for that reason it was not so cold. The dugout only rocked gently on the slightly rippling water. It smelled like a swamp. Of decaying weed. And eel slime.

Somewhere by the bank a beaver slapped its tail on the water, startling both of them. Ciri was certain that Vysogota had been dozing and the beaver had woken him.

'Go on with the story,' she said, wiping her nose with a clean part of her sleeve not yet covered in slime. 'Don't sleep. When you doze off my eyelids droop too. Then the current will take us and we'll wake up on the sea! Go on about those teleporters!'

'When you escaped from Thanedd,' the hermit continued, 'you passed through the portal of the Tower of the Gull, Tor Lara. And Geoffrey Monck, probably the greatest authority in the field of teleportation, the author of the work entitled *The Magic of the Elder Folk*, which is the opus magnum of knowledge about elven teleporters, writes that the Tor Lara portal leads to the Tower of the Swallow, Tor Zireael—'

'The teleport from Thanedd was warped,' Ciri interrupted. 'Perhaps, long ago, before it broke, it led to some swallow or other. But now it leads to a desert. That's what we call a chaotic portal. I learned about it.'

'I – just imagine – did too,' the old man snorted. 'I recall much of that wisdom. Which is why your story amazes me so much . . . Some parts of it. Particularly the ones that concern teleportation . . .'

'Could you speak more plainly?'

'I could, Ciri. I could. But now it's high time we hauled in the

net. It sure to be full of eels. Ready?'

'Ready.' Ciri spat on her hands and took hold of the gaff. Vysogota grasped the cord speeding past in the water.

'Let's haul it in. One, two . . . three! And into the boat! Grab them, Ciri, grab them! Into the basket before they escape!'

*

It was the second night they had rowed the dugout to the river's boggy tributary, set nets and traps for the eels heading in great numbers towards the sea. They returned to the cottage well after midnight, smeared in slime from head to toe, wet and tired as hell.

But they didn't go to bed at once. The haul earmarked for barter had to be put in crates and sealed securely – should the eels find the smallest crack there wouldn't be a single one left the next morning. After the work was done Vysogota skinned two or three fat eels, chopped them into steaks, coated them in flour and fried them in a huge frying pan. Then they ate and talked.

'You see, Ciri, one thing still nags at me. I can't forget that right after your recovery we couldn't agree about the dates, even though the wound on your cheek constituted the most precise of possible calendars. The cut couldn't have been more than ten hours old, while you insisted that they'd wounded you four days earlier. Though I was certain it came down to a simple mistake, I couldn't stop thinking about it. I kept asking myself the question: what happened to those four lost days?'

'So? What do you think happened to them?'

'I don't know.'

'That's marvellous.'

The cat made a long leap and the mouse it pinned with its claws squeaked shrilly. The tomcat unhurriedly bit through its neck, disembowelled it and began to eat it with relish. Ciri watched it impassively.

'The Tower of the Gull teleporter,' Vysogota began again, 'leads to the Tower of the Swallow. And the Tower of the Swallow —'

The cat ate the entire mouse, leaving the tail for dessert.

‘The Tor Lara teleporter,’ said Ciri, yawning widely, ‘is warped and leads to a desert. I’ve probably told you that a hundred times.’

‘That’s not the point, I’m talking about something else. That there’s a connection between the two teleporters. The Tar Lara portal was warped, I agree. But there is also the Tor Zireael teleporter. If you could reach the Tower of the Swallow, you could teleport back to the Isle of Thanedd. You would be far from the danger threatening you, out of reach of your enemies.’

‘Ah! That would suit me. There’s just one little snag. I have no idea where the Tower of the Swallow is.’

‘Perhaps I’ll find a remedy for that. Do you know, Ciri, what university studies give a person?’

‘No. What?’

‘The ability to make use of sources.’

*

‘I knew I’d find it,’ Vysogota said proudly. ‘I searched and searched and . . . Oh, bugger . . .’

The armful of heavy tomes slipped through his fingers; grimoires tumbled onto the threshing floor, leaves fell from their decayed bindings and were strewn around haphazardly.

‘What have you found?’ Ciri kneeled beside him, and helped him gather up the scattered pages.

‘The Tower of the Swallow!’ The hermit drove away the tomcat, which had impudently settled on one of the leaves. ‘Tor Zireael. Help me.’

‘How dusty it is! And sticky! Vysogota? What’s this? Here, in this picture? That man hanging from a tree?’

‘This?’ Vysogota examined the loose leaf. ‘A scene from the legend of Hemdall. The hero Hemdall hung from the Ash of the Worlds for nine days and nights to gain knowledge and power through sacrifice and pain.’

‘I’ve dreamed of something like that several times.’ Ciri wiped her forehead. ‘A man hanging from a tree . . .’

‘The engraving fell out of this book, here. If you like, you can

read more later. But now the more important thing is . . . Ah, I have it at last. *Peregrinations along Trails and Magical Places* by Buyvid Backhuysen, a book regarded by some as an apocryphal work . . .'

'You mean it's poppycock?'

'Something like that. But there were also those who valued the book . . . Here, listen . . . A pox on it, how dark it is . . .'

'There's enough light, you're going blind from old age,' said Ciri, with the detached cruelty befitting her age. 'Hand it over, *I'll* read it. Where from?'

'From here.' He pointed with a bony finger. 'Read it aloud.'

*

'That old Buyvid wrote in weird language. I think Assengard was some castle or other, if I'm not mistaken. But what's this land: Centloch? I've never heard of any such place. And what's trefoil?'

'Clover. And I'll tell you about Assengard and the Hundred Lakes when you finish reading.'

*

'For the life of me, barely had the elf Avallac'h uttered those words, than did hurry out from beneath the lake's waters those meagre black birds that had sheltered from the frost the whole winter at the bottom of the depths. For the swallow, as learned men know, does not fly south for the winter in the manner of other birds and return in the spring, but binds itself with its claws in great swarms and sinks to the bottom of the waters, there to spend the whole winter season, and only in the spring does it fly out *de profundis* from beneath the waters. Howbeit, that bird is not only the symbol of spring and hope, but also the model of unblemished purity, since it never alights on the ground nor with earthly dirt and filth have any commerce.

'Let us, though, return to our lake: you would have said that the circling avians dispersed the fog with their wings, for *tandem* a marvellous, occult tower unexpectedly emerged from the vapour, and we sighed in awe with one voice, because it seemed to be a

tower woven from mist, having fog as its *fundamentum*, and its top was crowned with the gleam of the aurora, an enchanted *aurora borealis*. Indeed, that tower must have been erected using powerful occult arts, beyond human ken.

'The elf Avallac'h marked our awe and spake: "This is Tor Zireael, the Tower of the Swallow. This is the Gate of Worlds and the Threshold of Time. Feast your eyes on this sight, man, for not to everyone nor always is it given."

'But when asked if we might approach and from proximity gaze on the Tower or *propria manu* touch it, Avallac'h laughed. "Tor Zireael," he spake, "is for you a reverie, and reveries may not be touched. And a good thing it is," he added, "for the Tower serves only the few Chosen, for whom the Threshold of Time is a gate of hope and rebirth. But for the profane it is the portal of nightmare."

'Barely had he uttered those words than the fog fell once more and denied our eyes that enchanted prospect . . .'

*

'The land of a Hundred Lakes, once called Centloch,' Vysogota explained, 'is called Mil Tracta today. It's a very vast lake land bisected by the River Yelena in the northern part of Metinna, close to the border with Nazair and Mag Turga. Buyvid Backhuysen writes that they walked towards the lake from the North, from Assengard . . . Today Assengard is no more, only ruins remain and the nearest town is Neunreuth. Buyvid counted four hundred furlongs from Assengard. Various furlongs have been used, but we'll accept the most popular reckoning, according to which four hundred and twenty furlongs gives around fifty miles. South of Assengard, which is about three hundred and fifty miles from us here in Pereplut. In other words, there are more or less three hundred miles between you and the Tower of the Swallow. Ciri. That's some two weeks riding on your Kelpie. In the spring, of course. Not now, when the frosts may be upon us in a day or two.'

'Assengard – which I was reading about – is a ruin today,' Ciri murmured, wrinkling her nose pensively. 'But I've seen the elven town of Shaerrawedd in Kaedwen with my own eyes – I've been there. People prised out and pillaged everything, they only left bare stone. I bet only stones remain of your Tower of the Swallow. The

larger ones, because the smaller ones have probably been stolen. If there was a portal there as well—'

'Tor Zireael was magical. Not visible to everybody. And teleporters are never visible.'

'True,' she admitted and pondered. 'The one on Thanedd wasn't. It suddenly appeared on a bare wall . . . Actually it appeared just in time, because that mage who was chasing me was close by . . . I could hear him . . . And then the portal materialised as though I'd summoned it.'

'I'm certain,' Vysogota said softly, 'that if you reached Tor Zireael, that teleporter would also appear to you. Even in the ruins, amidst the bare stones. I'm certain you'd manage to find and activate it. And it – I'm certain – would obey your order. For I think, Ciri, that you are the chosen one.'

*

'Your hair, Triss, is like fire in the candlelight. And your eyes are like lapis lazuli. Your lips are like coral—'

'Stop that, Crach. Are you drunk, or what? Pour me some more wine. And talk.'

'What about, exactly?'

'Come off it! About how Yennefer decided to sail to the Sedna Abyss.'

*

'How goes it? Tell me, Yennefer.'

'First of all, you answer my question: who are the two women I invariably encounter when I come to you? And who always give me looks usually reserved for cat shit on the carpet? Who are they?'

'Are you interested in their formal and legal – or actual – status?'

'The latter.'

'In that case, they're my wives.'

‘I understand. Explain to them – when you get the chance – that bygones are bygones.’

‘I have. But women are women. Never mind. Speak, Yennefer. I’m interested in how your work is progressing.’

‘Unfortunately,’ the sorceress bit her lip, ‘there’s scant progress. And time’s running out.’

‘It is,’ the yarl nodded. ‘And constantly supplying new sensations. I received news from the continent, it ought to interest you. It comes from Vissegerd’s corps. You know, I hope, who Vissegerd is?’

‘The general from Cintra?’

‘The marshal. He commands a corps made up of Cintran emigrants and volunteers within the Temerian Army. Enough volunteers from the islands serve there for me to have first-hand news.’

‘And what do you have?’

‘You arrived here in Skellige on the nineteenth of August, two days after the full moon. The same day, the nineteenth, I mean, Vissegerd’s corps picked up a group of fugitives during fighting by the Ina. Among them were Geralt and that troubadour friend of his —’

‘Dandelion?’

‘Quite. Vissegerd accused both of spying, imprisoned and perhaps meant to execute them, but the two prisoners ran away and sent some Nilfgaardians – with whom they were reputedly in league – after Vissegerd.’

‘Nonsense.’

‘I thought so too. But I can’t get it out of my head that the Witcher, in spite of what you think, is perhaps carrying out some cunning plan. Wanting to rescue Ciri, he’s worming his way into Nilfgaard’s good graces . . .’

‘Ciri’s not in Nilfgaard. And Geralt isn’t carrying out any plans. Planning isn’t his strong point. Let’s leave it. What’s important is that it’s already the twenty-sixth of August, and I still know too little. Too little to undertake anything . . . Unless I was to . . .’

She fell silent, staring out of the window, playing with the obsidian star fastened to a black velvet ribbon.

‘Were to what?’ Crach an Craite burst out.

‘Rather than mocking Geralt, to try using his methods.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘One could try sacrifice, yarl. Apparently readiness to make sacrifices can pay off, produce favourable results . . . If only in the form of the grace of the goddess. Who likes and esteems people who sacrifice themselves and suffer for a cause.’

‘I still don’t understand,’ he said, wrinkling his brow. ‘But I don’t like what you’re saying, Yennefer.’

‘I know. Neither do I. But still, I’ve gone too far . . . The tiger may already have heard the kid’s bleating . . .’

*

‘That’s what I was afraid of,’ Triss whispered. ‘That’s precisely what I was afraid of.’

‘Which means I understood correctly.’ The muscles of Crach an Craite’s jaw worked vigorously. ‘Yennefer knew someone would eavesdrop on the conversations she was conducting using that infernal machine. Or that one of her interlocutors would basely betray her . . .’

‘Or the one and the other.’

‘She knew.’ Crach ground his teeth. ‘But carried on regardless. Because it was meant to be bait? Did she intend to be bait herself? Did she pretend to know more than she did in order to provoke the enemy? And she sailed to the Sedna Abyss . . .’

‘Throwing down the challenge. Provoking. She was taking an awful risk, Crach.’

‘I know. She didn’t want to expose any of us to danger . . . Apart from volunteers. So she asked for two longships . . .’

*

‘I have the two longships you asked for. *Alkyone* and *Tamara*. And their crews, naturally. *Alkyone* will be commanded by Guthlaf, son

of Sven. He asked for the honour, as he's taken a liking to you, Yennefer. *Tamara* will be commanded by Asa Thjazi, a captain in whom I have absolute faith. Aha, I almost forgot. My son, Hjalmar Wrymouth will also be in *Tamara*'s crew.'

'Your son? How old is he?'

'Nineteen.'

'You started early.'

'That's the pot calling the kettle black. Hjalmar asked to be added to the crew for personal reasons. I couldn't turn him down.'

'For personal reasons?'

'You really don't know that story?'

'No. Tell me.'

Crach an Craite drank from the horn and laughed at his recollections.

'Youngsters from Ard Skellig,' he began, 'love playing on skates during the winter, they can't wait for the icy weather. The first of them go out on the ice when the lake is barely ice-bound, so thin it wouldn't support adults. Races are the favourite sport, naturally. To gather speed and hurtle, as fast as they can, from one side of the lake to the other. Other boys compete at the so-called "salmon leap". They have to jump, in their skates, over lakeside rocks sticking up from the ice like sharks' teeth. Like salmon leaping up waterfalls. You choose a suitably long row of rocks like that, take a run-up . . . Ha, I jumped like that when I was a scrawny kid . . .'

Crach an Craite fell into a reverie and smiled slightly.

'Of course,' he continued, 'whoever jumps the longest row of rocks wins the competition and then struts around like a peacock. In my day, Yennefer, that honour often fell to your humble servant and present interlocutor, ha! During the time that interests us most, my son, Hjalmar, was the champion. He jumped over stones that none of the other boys dared to. And paraded around with his nose in the air, challenging anyone to try and defeat him. And the challenge was taken up. By Ciri, daughter of Pavetta of Cintra. Not even an islander, though she thought of herself as one, since she'd spent more time here than there.'

'Even after Pavetta's accident? I thought Calanthe had forbidden her from coming here?'

‘You know about that?’ He glanced at her keenly. ‘Indeed, yes, you know a great deal, Yennefer . . . A great deal. Calanthe’s rage and ban didn’t last more than six months and then Ciri began to spend her summers and winters here again . . . She skated like a demon, but to compete at the salmon leap with the lads? And challenge Hjalmar? It was unbelievable!’

‘She leaped,’ the sorceress guessed.

‘Yes, she did. The little Cintran half-devil leaped. A real Lion Cub from the Lioness’s blood. And Hjalmar – so as not to expose himself to ridicule – had to risk a jump over an even longer row of stones. Which he did. He broke a leg, broke an arm, broke four ribs and smashed his face up. He’ll have a scar for the rest of his life. Hjalmar Wrymouth! And his famous betrothed! Ha!’

‘Betrothed?’

‘Didn’t you know about that? You know so much, but not that? She visited him when he was lying in bed recovering after his famous leap. She read to him, told him stories, held his little hand . . . And when someone entered the chamber, they both blushed like poppies. Well, finally Hjalmar informed me they were betrothed. I almost had an attack of apoplexy. I’ll teach you, you rascal, I’ll give you a betrothal, but with a rawhide whip! And I was a bit anxious, for I’d seen that the Lion Cub was hot-headed, that everything about her was reckless, for she was a daredevil, not to say a little maniac . . . Fortunately Hjalmar was covered in splints and bandages, so they couldn’t do anything stupid . . .’

‘How old were they then?’

‘He was fifteen, she almost fifteen.’

‘I think your fears were a little exaggerated.’

‘Perhaps a little. But Calanthe, whom I had to inform about everything, by no means made light of the matter. I knew she had marriage plans regarding Ciri, I think it concerned the young Tankred Thyssen of Kovir, and perhaps the Redanian, Radovid. I can’t be certain. But rumours might have harmed the marriage plans, even rumours about innocent kisses or half-innocent caresses. Calanthe took Ciri back to Cintra without a moment’s delay. The girl kicked up a row, yelled and sobbed, but nothing helped. There was no arguing with the Lioness of Cintra. Afterwards, Hjalmar lay for two days with his face turned to the wall and didn’t say a word to anyone . . . As soon as he had recovered, he planned to steal a

skiff and sail to Cintra by himself. For that he was strapped, and he put it behind him. But later . . .'

Crach an Craite went silent, fell into a reverie.

'Later the summer came, then the autumn, and the entire Nilfgaardian might struck Cintra's southern wall, through the Marnadal Stairs. And Hjalmar found another opportunity to become a man. In Marnadal, at the Battle of Cintra and later at the Battle of Sodden, he faced the Black Cloaks valiantly. Later, too, when the longships sailed for the Nilfgaardian coasts, Hjalmar avenged his make-believe betrothed with sword in hand, even though people thought she was dead by then. I didn't believe it, because those phenomena I told you about didn't occur . . . Well, and now, when Hjalmar learned of the possible rescue expedition, he volunteered.'

'Thanks for the story, Crach. It was restful for me to listen. I could forget about . . . my cares.'

'When do you set off, Yennefer?'

'In the coming days. Perhaps even tomorrow. It remains to me to perform one more, final telecommunication.'

*

Crach an Craite's eyes were like a hawk's. They bored deeply, to the very core.

'You don't by any chance know, Triss Merigold, who Yennefer spoke to that last time before disassembling the infernal machine? On the night of the twenty-seventh of August? With whom? Or about what?'

Triss hid her eyes behind her eyelashes.

*

The beam of light diffracted by the diamond animated the surface of the looking glass with a flash. Yennefer extended both hands and intoned a spell. The blinding reflection transformed into a swirl of fog and an image quickly began to emerge from it. The image of a chamber whose walls were draped with a colourful tapestry.

A movement in the window. And an anxious voice.

‘Who is it? Who’s there?’

‘It’s me, Triss.’

‘Yennefer? Is that you? O Gods! How . . . Where are you?’

‘It isn’t important where I am. Don’t block, for the image is flickering. And take away the candlestick, it’s blinding me.’

‘I’ve done it. Of course.’

Though the hour was late, Triss Merigold was not in a negligee, or in working clothes. She was wearing an evening gown. As usual, buttoned all the way up to the neck.

‘May we talk freely?’

‘Of course.’

‘Are you alone?’

‘Yes.’

‘You’re lying.’

‘Yennefer . . .’

‘Don’t trick me, girl. I know that expression, I’ve seen more than enough of it. You had one like that when you started sleeping with Geralt behind my back. You put on the identical innocent-whorish little mask then that I see on your face now. And it means the same now as it did then!’

Triss blushed. And beside her in the window appeared Philippa Eilhart, dressed in a dark-blue men’s doublet with silver embroidery.

‘Bravo,’ she said. ‘Sharp as usual, acute as usual. As usual difficult to comprehend and fathom. I’m glad to see you in good health, Yennefer. I’m glad that the crazy teleportation from Montecalvo didn’t end tragically.’

‘Let’s assume you are indeed glad.’ Yennefer grimaced. ‘Although that’s a most bold assumption. But we’ll leave it. Who betrayed me?’

‘Is it important?’ Philippa shrugged. ‘You’ve now been communicating for four days with traitors. With traitors to whom venality and treachery are second nature. And traitors whom you have forced to betray others in turn. One of them has betrayed you.

That's the usual course of events. Don't tell me you didn't expect it.'

'Of course I did,' Yennefer snorted. 'I proved that by contacting you. I didn't have to, did I?'

'You didn't. Which means you stand to gain from it.'

'Bravo. Sharp as usual, acute as usual. I'm contacting you to assure you that the secret of your lodge is safe with me. I won't betray you.'

Philippa looked at her from beneath lowered eyelashes.

'If you expected,' she said finally, 'to buy yourself time, peace and safety with that declaration, you miscalculated. Let's not kid ourselves, Yennefer. By fleeing Montecalvo you made a choice, you threw in your lot with one side of the barricade. Whoever's not with the lodge is against it. Now you're trying to beat us to Ciri, and the motives driving you are counter to ours. You're acting against us. You don't want to allow us to use Ciri to serve our political ends. Know then, that we shall do everything to prevent you using the girl to serve your own sentimental ones.'

'So it's war, then?'

'Competition,' Philippa smiled venomously, 'Only competition, Yennefer.'

'Fair and honourable?'

'You must be joking.'

'Naturally. Nonetheless, I'd like to present one matter honestly and unambiguously. Banking, of course, on gaining something from it.'

'By all means.'

'In the course of the next few days – perhaps even tomorrow – events will occur whose outcome I'm unable to predict. It may turn out that our competition and rivalry will suddenly cease to have any meaning. For a simple reason. There won't be a rival any longer.'

Philippa Eilhart narrowed her eyes, which were accented with light blue eye shadow.

'I understand.'

'Ensure then, that I posthumously regain my reputation and good name. That I won't be thought of as a traitor and an

accomplice of Vilgefortz. I ask that of the lodge. I ask you personally.'

Philippa was briefly silent.

'I decline your request,' she said finally. 'I'm sorry, but your rehabilitation is not in the interests of the lodge. Should you die, you die a traitor. To Ciri you shall be a traitor and a criminal, for then it will be easier to manipulate the maid.'

'Before you undertake anything that may prove fatal,' Triss suddenly said, 'leave us something . . .'

'A will?'

'Something that will allow us . . . to continue . . . to follow in your footsteps. And find Ciri. Surely it's in Ciri's interests, after all! It's about her life! Yennefer, Dijkstra has found . . . some tracks. If it's Vilgefortz who has Ciri, a terrible death awaits the girl.'

'Be quiet, Triss,' Philippa Eilhart barked sharply. 'There won't be any bargaining or horse-trading here.'

'I'll leave you directions,' Yennefer said slowly. 'I'll leave you information about what I've found out, and what I've undertaken. I'll leave a trail you'll be able to follow. But not for nothing. If you don't want to rehabilitate me in the world's eyes, then to hell with you and the world. But at least rehabilitate me in the eyes of one witcher—'

'No,' Philippa retorted almost immediately. 'That isn't in the interests of the lodge either. You shall remain a traitor and a dishonourable sorceress to your Witcher, too. It isn't in the lodge's interests to stir up trouble, looking for revenge, and if they have contempt for you, they won't want revenge. Besides, he's probably dead. Or will die any day.'

'Information,' Yennefer said hollowly, 'in exchange for his life. Save him, Philippa.'

'No, Yennefer.'

'For it isn't in the interests of the lodge.' Purple fire flashed in the sorceress's eyes. 'Did you hear, Triss? This is your lodge. This is its true countenance, these its true concerns. What do you say to that? You were the maid's mentor, almost an older sister, as you yourself said. And Geralt . . .'

'Don't beguile Triss with romance, Yennefer.' Now Philippa's eyes blazed in turn. 'We'll find the maid and rescue her without

your help. And if you succeed, thanks a million, you'll help us, you'll save us the bother. You'll snatch her from Vilgefortz's hands, we'll snatch her from yours. And Geralt? Who is Geralt?'

'Did you hear, Triss?'

'Forgive me,' Triss Merigold said hollowly. 'Forgive me, Yennefer.'

'Oh, no, Triss. Never.'

*

Triss looked at the floor. Crach an Craite's eyes were like a hawk's.

'The day after the last secret communication,' the yarl of the Isles of Skellige said, 'one you, Triss Merigold, know nothing about, Yennefer left Skellige, setting a course for the Sedna Abyss. When asked why exactly she was heading there, she looked me in the eye and replied that she intended to find out how natural disasters differ from unnatural ones. She set off with two longships, *Tamara* and *Alkyone*, with crews made up entirely of volunteers. That was the twenty-eighth of August, two weeks ago. I haven't seen her since.'

'When did you find out—?'

'Five days later,' he interrupted quite bluntly. 'Three days after the September new moon.'

*

Captain Asa Thjazi, who was sitting behind the yarl, was anxious. He licked his lips, shifted around on the bench, and wrung his hands so hard the knuckles cracked.

The red sun, finally emerging from the clouds covering the sky, sank slowly over Spikeroog. 'Speak, Asa,' Crach an Craite ordered.

Asa Thjazi cleared his throat noisily.

'We were making good way,' he began, 'the wind behind us, we were doing a good twelve knots. Then on the night of the twenty-ninth we espied the lighthouse at Peixe de Mar. We struck

out a little westwards, so as not to chance on any Nilfgaardians . . . And at dawn, one day before the September new moon, we reached the region of the Sedna Abyss. Then the sorceress summoned myself and Guthlaf . . .'

*

'I need volunteers,' Yennefer said. 'Only volunteers. No more than is necessary to steer a longship for a short time. I don't know how many men are needed for that, I'm not an expert. But please don't leave even one more man on *Alkyone* than is absolutely necessary. And I repeat – only volunteers. What I plan to do . . . is very dangerous. More so than a sea battle.'

'I understand,' the old seneschal nodded. 'And I volunteer first. I, Guthlaf, son of Sven, request that honour, madam.'

Yennefer looked him long in the eyes.

'Very well,' she said. 'And I, too, am honoured.'

*

'I also volunteered,' said Asa Thjazi. 'But Guthlaf disagreed. Someone, he said, must keep command on *Tamara*. Consequently, fifteen men volunteered. Including Hjalmar, yarl.'

Crach an Craite raised his eyebrows.

*

'How many are needed, Guthlaf?' the sorceress repeated. 'How many are essential? Please reckon it exactly.'

The seneschal was silent for some time as he added up.

'Eight of us can cope,' he said finally. 'If it's not for long . . . Why, but everyone here is a volunteer, no one's being forced—'

'Select eight from that fifteen,' she interrupted sharply. 'Choose them yourself. And order those selected to transfer to *Alkyone*. The rest are staying on *Tamara*. Aha, I shall choose one of those who

stays. Hjalmar!'

'No, madam! You can't do that to me! I volunteered and will be at your side! I want to be—'

'Be silent! You're staying on *Tamara*! That's an order! One more word and I'll have you tied to the mast!'

*

'Go on, Asa.'

'The witch, Guthlaf and those eight volunteers boarded *Alkyone* and sailed for the Abyss. We, on *Tamara*, hung back according to our orders, but not too far away. But some devilry began with the weather, which had been wonderfully favourable till then. Aye, I speak truly that it was devilry, for the power was sinister, yarl . . . May I be keelhauled if I lie . . .'

'Go on.'

'Where we were, I mean *Tamara*, the sea was calm. Though the wind whistled some and clouds darkened the horizon so day almost became night. But where *Alkyone* was all hell suddenly broke loose. Hell indeed . . .'

*

Alkyone's sail suddenly fluttered so violently that they heard the flapping in spite of the distance separating the longships. The sky turned black and the clouds swirled. The sea, which seemed completely calm around *Tamara*, churned up and foamed white by *Alkyone's* sides. Someone suddenly yelled, someone chimed in, and a moment later everybody was yelling.

A cone of black clouds was striking *Alkyone*, making it bob on the waves like a cork. The ship twisted, spun, its bow and stern rising and falling into the waves. At times the longship almost completely vanished from sight. At times they could only see the striped sail.

'It's magic!' bawled someone behind Asa's back. 'It's devil magic!'

The whirlpool spun *Alkyone* around faster and faster. Shields torn from the sides by centrifugal force whirred in the air like discs, and splintered oars flew in all directions.

'Reef the sail!' yelled Asa Thjazi. 'To the oars! Row, boys! To the rescue!'

But it was already too late.

The sky above *Alkyone* turned black, and the blackness suddenly exploded in zigzags of lightning which entwined the longship like a medusa's tentacles. The clouds, swirling in fantastic shapes, writhed up into a horrendous funnel. The longship spun around with incredible speed. The mast snapped like a match, the torn sail dashed over the breakers like a huge albatross.

'Row, men!'

Over their own yells, over the all-deafening roar of the elements, they nonetheless heard the cries of the men from *Alkyone*. Cries so extraordinary they made their hair stand on end. And these were old sea dogs, bloodied berserkers, mariners who had seen and heard many things.

They dropped the oars, aware of their impotence. They were dumbfounded, they even stopped yelling.

Alkyone, still whirling, slowly rose above the waves. And rose higher and higher. They saw the keel, dripping water, covered in shellfish and algae. They saw a black shape, a figure falling into the sea. Then a second. And a third.

'They're jumping!' Asa Thjazi roared. 'Row, men, don't stop! With all your might! We must row to their aid!'

Alkyone was now a good hundred cubits above the boiling surface of the water. It continued to whirl, an immense spindle dripping with water, entwined in a cobweb of lightning, being dragged into the swirling clouds by an unseen force.

Suddenly an ear-splitting explosion rent the air. Although fifteen pairs of oars were pushing *Tamara* forwards, she suddenly leaped up and flew backwards, as if rammed. The deck flew from under Thjazi's feet. He fell over, banging his forehead on the side.

He couldn't stand up by himself, he had to be lifted to his feet. He was dazed; he twisted and shook his head, staggering and mumbling incoherently. The screams of the crew seemed muffled. He went over to the side, tottering like a drunkard and clung on to

the rail.

The wind had dropped and the sea was calm. But the sky was still black from the billowing clouds.

There wasn't a single trace of *Alkyone*.

*

'Not even a trace was left, yarl. Well, tiny pieces of rigging, some rags . . . Nothing more.'

Asa Thjazi interrupted his tale, watching the sun vanishing beyond Spikeroog's wooded peaks. Crach an Craite, lost in thought, didn't hurry him.

'We know not,' Asa Thjazi finally continued, 'how many managed to jump before *Alkyone* was sucked into that devilish cloud. But no matter how many jumped, none survived. And we, though we spared neither time nor strength, fished out but two bodies. Two bodies, borne on the water. Only two.'

'Was the sorceress,' the yarl asked in an altered voice, 'not among them?'

'No.'

Crach an Craite was silent a long while. The sun was completely hidden behind Spikeroog.

'Old Guthlaf, son of Sven is lost,' Asa Thjazi spoke again. 'The crabs on the bottom of the Abyss have surely ate him till the last little bone . . . And the witch is certainly lost . . . Yarl, folk are beginning to talk . . . That it's all her fault. And punishment for her crimes . . .'

'Foolish nonsense!'

'She's perished,' Asa muttered, 'in the Sedna Abyss. In the same place as Pavetta and Duny did back then . . . It was an accident . . .'

'It was no accident,' Crach an Craite said with conviction. 'It was certainly no accident then. And nor was it now.'

It is proper for a hapless one to suffer. His pain and humiliation result from the laws of nature, and to carry out the aims of nature both the existence of the suffering one is necessary, as is that of those who, causing him suffering, enjoy their successes. That very truth ought to stifle the pang of conscience in the heart of a tyrant or malefactor. He must not bridle himself, he ought to commit all the deeds that arise in his imagination, since it is the voice of nature which suggests them. If the secret inspirations of nature lead us to evil it is evidently essential to nature.

Donatien Alphonse Francois de Sade

CHAPTER TEN

The clank and thud of the cell door first opening and then closing awoke the younger of the two Scarra sisters. The elder was sitting at a table, busy scraping dried porridge from the bottom of a tin bowl.

'Well, how was it in court, Kenna?'

Without a word Joanna Selborne, also known as Kenna, sat down on her plank bed with her elbows resting on her knees and her forehead on her hands.

The younger Scarra yawned, belched and farted loudly. Kohut, crouching on the opposite bed, muttered something indistinct and turned his head away. He was furious at Kenna, the sisters and the whole world.

In normal gaols the inmates were still traditionally separated according to sex. In military citadels it was different. Emperor Fergus var Emreis – confirming women's equality in the imperial army by special decree – had already ruled that if it was to be emancipation, then let it *be* emancipation. Equality ought to be complete and outright, without any exceptions or special privileges for either sex. Since then, inmates had been serving time in mixed cells in the strongholds and citadels.

'Well?' the older Scarra repeated. 'Are they letting you out?'

'Like hell they are,' said Kenna bitterly, head still resting on her hands. 'I'll be lucky if they don't hang me. Sod it! I told the truth, hid nothing, well, you know, almost nothing. But when those whoresons started grilling me, first they made a fool out of me in front of everyone, then it turned out I wasn't a credible person but a criminal element, and right at the end they brought out my complicity in a plot aimed at subversion with the aim of an insurrection.'

'Subversion,' the older Scarra nodded, as though she understood exactly what it was about. 'Aaah, if it's subversion . . . Then you're in the shit, Kenna.'

'As if I didn't know that.'

The younger Scarra stretched, yawned like a leopard, widely and noisily, jumped down from the upper bunk, vigorously kicked

away Kohut's stool which was blocking her way and spat on the floor beside it. Kohut growled, but didn't dare do anything more.

Kohut was mortally offended by Kenna. But was afraid of the sisters.

When Kenna had been assigned to the cell three days earlier, it soon turned out that Kohut – if he tolerated the emancipation and equality of women at all – had his own views on the subject. He had thrown a blanket over Kenna's upper half in the middle of the night and intended to avail himself of the lower half, which he certainly would have done but for the fact that he had happened upon a telepathic. Kenna penetrated his brain so deeply that Kohut howled like a werewolf and cavorted around the cell as though bitten by a tarantula. Then, out of pure vindictiveness, Kenna telepathically forced him to go down on all fours and bang his head rhythmically against the metal-plated cell door. When the warders – alarmed by the dreadful thumping – opened the door, Kohut butted one of them, for which he received five lashes with a metal-tipped truncheon and as many kicks. Summing up, Kohut didn't get the gratification he'd been hoping for. And took offence at Kenna. He didn't even dare to take his revenge, because the next day the Scarra sisters joined them in the cell. The fair sex thus formed the majority, and furthermore it soon turned out that the sisters' views on equality were similar to Kohut's, if completely the other way around concerning the roles ascribed to the sexes. The younger Scarra looked at the man lasciviously and made explicit comments, while the older cackled and rubbed her hands together. As a result, Kohut slept with a stool with which he planned to defend his honour. Nonetheless, his chances and prospects were meagre; both Scarras had served on the front line and were veterans of numerous battles, so would not have been daunted by the stool. Had they'd wanted to rape him they would have, even if the man had been armed with a battle axe. Kenna, though, was certain the sisters were only joking. Well, almost certain.

The Scarra sisters were in the slammer for assaulting an officer, while in the case of Kohut – who had served as a quartermaster – an investigation was ongoing into a notorious, major scandal regarding the theft of army bows, which was creating ever-widening ripples.

'In the shit, Kenna,' the older Scarra repeated. 'You've got yourself in a fine pickle. Or rather they got you into it. How come you never bloody caught on it was a political game?'

‘Humph.’

Scarra glanced at her, not quite knowing how to interpret her monosyllabic response. Kenna looked away.

I’m not going to tell you something I kept quiet about in front of the judges, am I? she thought. *That I knew what kind of game I was getting tangled up in. Or when and how I found out.*

‘You’ve landed yourself in a sorry mess,’ said the younger Scarra solemnly. She was the much more dull-witted one, who – Kenna was certain – understood nothing of what it was about.

‘And what finally happened with that Cintran princess?’ The older Scarra kept probing. ‘I mean you finally nabbed her, didn’t you?’

‘We did. If you could call it that. What’s the date today?’

‘September the twenty-second. It’s the Equinox tomorrow.’

‘Ah. Well, that’s a queer coincidence. Tomorrow, it’ll be a year to the day since those events . . . A year already . . .’

Kenna stretched out on her pallet, hands clasped behind her head. The sisters remained silent, hoping it had been an introduction to a story.

Nothing doing, sisters dear, thought Kenna, looking at the obscene drawings and even more obscene comments scrawled on the planks of the upper bunk. There won’t be any story. It’s not even that that bastard Kohut smells like a bloody nark. I just don’t feel like talking about it. I don’t feel like remembering it.

What happened a year ago. After Bonhart gave us the slip in Claremont.

We’d arrived there two days too late, she recalled, the trail had already gone cold. No one knew where the bounty hunter had gone. No one apart from the merchant Houvenaghel, that is. But Houvenaghel didn’t want to talk to Skellen, or even have him in the house. He communicated through his servants that he had no time and wouldn’t grant them an audience. Tawny Owl was cross and indignant, but what could he do? It was Ebbing, he didn’t have the necessary jurisdiction. And we could do nothing about Houvenaghel any other way – I mean *our* way – for he had a private army down in Claremont, and we couldn’t exactly declare war . . .

Boreas Mun sniffed around, Dacre Silifant and Ola Harsheim tried bribery, Til Echrade elven magic, I used telepathy and listened

to his thoughts, but it wasn't much use. All we learned was that Bonhart had left the town through the southern gate. But before he left . . .

In Claremont there was a tiny little temple with larches, by the southern gate and the small market place. Before leaving Claremont, Bonhart had cruelly beaten Falka with a knout in the square in front of the temple. Before everybody's eyes, including the temple priests'. He yelled that he'd prove to her who her lord and master was. That he was flogging her with a knout as he wished, and if he so wished he'd flog her to death, because no one would stand up for her, no one would come to her aid. Neither people nor gods.

The younger Scarra was looking out of the window, hanging onto the grating. The older one was eating porridge from the bowl. Kohut took the stool, lay down and covered himself with a blanket.

The bell in the guardhouse tolled, the guards on the walls yelled out their presence . . .

Kenna turned her face to the wall.

We met several days later, she thought. Me and Bonhart. Face to face. I looked into his inhuman, fish-like eyes, thinking only of one thing – how he'd beaten the girl. And I looked into his thoughts . . . For a moment. And it was like sticking my head into a dug-up grave . . .

That was at the Equinox.

And the day before, the twenty-second of September, I'd realised that an invisible spy had wormed his way among us.

*

Stefan Skellen, the imperial coroner, listened without interrupting. But Kenna saw his face changing.

'Again, Selborne,' he drawled. 'Say it again, for I don't believe my own ears.'

'Cautiously, my lord coroner,' she murmured. 'Pretend to be angry . . . That I've come to you with a request and you won't grant it . . . For the sake of appearances, I mean. I'm not mistaken, I'm certain. An unseen guest has been hanging around us for two days.

An invisible spy.'

Tawny Owl, to give him his due, was clever and understood at once.

'No, Selborne, I refuse,' he said loudly, but without over-dramatizing his tone or expression. 'Discipline applies to everyone. There are no exceptions.'

'Please, at least listen, lord coroner,' Kenna didn't have Tawny Owl's talent, failed to avoid awkwardness, but in the scene being played out awkwardness and embarrassment by the petitioner were permissible. 'Please at least see fit as to listen.'

'Speak, Selborne. But be brief and to the point!'

'He's been spying on us for two days,' she muttered, pretending she was humbly presenting her argument. 'Since Claremont. He has to ride behind us secretively, and when we're camped he approaches unseen, moves around among people, and listens.'

'He listens, the sodding spy.' Skellen didn't have to pretend to be stern and angry; the fury was trembling in his voice. 'How did you uncover him?'

'Yesterday, when you were giving Lord Silifant his orders outside the tavern, the tomcat sleeping on the bench hissed and flattened its ears. It seemed suspicious to me, because there wasn't anyone on that side . . . And then I picked up something, a thought, kind of, an unfamiliar thought and will. When there are familiar, ordinary thoughts all around, an unfamiliar thought like that, lord coroner, is as if someone were shouting . . . I started taking heed, intensely, I doubled my efforts and now I can sense him.'

'Can you always sense him?'

'No. Not always. He has some kind of magical protection. I only sense him from very close, and even then not every time. So I have to be vigilant, because I never know if he's not hiding nearby.'

'Just don't scare him away,' Tawny Owl muttered. 'Don't scare him away . . . I want him alive, Selborne. What do you suggest?'

'We'll give him the pancake treatment.'

'The pancake treatment?'

'Quiet, lord coroner.'

'But . . . Oh, never mind. Very well. I'm giving you a free hand.'

‘Tomorrow, make sure we stop and billet in some village or other. I’ll sort out the rest. And now for the sake of appearances give me a dressing-down and I’ll go away.’

‘I can’t really.’ He smiled at her with his eyes and winked slightly, immediately assuming the overbearing air of a stern commander. ‘For I’m pleased with you, Miss Selborne.’

He said “miss”. Miss Selborne. As though to an officer.

He winked again.

‘No!’ he said and brandished an arm, playing his role splendidly. ‘Request denied! Dismissed!’

‘Yes sir.’

*

The next day, in the late afternoon, Skellen ordered his soldiers to make camp in a village by the River Lete. The village was prosperous, ringed by a palisade, and they rode in through a fine gate of freshly cut pine palings. The name of the village was Unicorn and it took its name from its small stone temple, inside which there was a straw effigy of a unicorn.

I remember, Kenna recalled, how we laughed at that straw idol, and the village headman gravely explained that the sacred unicorn which looked after the village had many years before been made of gold, then silver, then copper; there were several versions in bone and several in hardwood. But all of them had been stolen. People came from far away to rob or steal it. Things had only been peaceful since the unicorn had been made of straw. We set up camp in the village. As agreed, Skellen occupied the headman’s hall.

Less than an hour later we’d given the spy the pancake treatment. In classic, textbook fashion.

*

‘Please come closer,’ Tawny Owl ordered loudly. ‘Please come closer and take a look at this document . . . Hold on? Is everybody here? So I won’t have to explain twice.’

Ola Harsheim, who had just taken a sip of cream somewhat watered down with sour milk from a milking pail, licked the creamy moustache from his lips, put down the vessel, looked around and counted. Dacre Silifant, Bert Brigden, Neratin Ceka, Til Echrade, Joanna Selborne . . .

'Dufficey's not here.'

'Summon him.'

'Kriel! Duffi Kriel! To the commander for the briefing! To receive important orders! At the double!'

Dufficey Kriel ran into the hall, out of breath.

'Everybody's here, lord coroner,' Ola Harsheim reported.

'Leave the window open. We could expire from the smell of garlic in here. Open the door, too, make a draught.'

Brigden and Kriel obediently opened the window and the door. Kenna, meanwhile, thought once again that Tawny Owl would make a really splendid actor.

'Please step this way, gentlemen. I've received this document from the emperor, confidential and of extraordinary gravity. Your attention, please . . .'

'Now!' yelled Kenna, sending a powerful directional impulse, whose effect on the senses was similar to being struck by lightning.

Ola Harsheim and Dacre Silifant picked up the milk pail and simultaneously flung the cream in the direction Kenna was indicating. Til Echrade vigorously emptied a flour barrel which had been hidden under the table. A creamy, floury shape – amorphous at first – appeared on the floor of the chamber. But Bert Brigden was alert. Correctly judging where the pancake's head might be, he whacked it as hard as he could with a cast-iron frying pan.

Then everybody threw themselves at the spy who was plastered all over with cream and flour, tore the hat of invisibility from his head and seized his arms and legs. After upturning the table, they tied the captive's limbs to the legs. They pulled off his boots and footwraps and stuffed one of them into his mouth which was open and ready to shout.

In order to crown their work, Dufficey Kriel kicked the captive hard in the ribs, and the others took pleasure in watching the spy's eyes bulge out of their sockets.

‘Magnificent work,’ commented Tawny Owl, who hadn’t moved during the entire, brief, incident but had stood with his arms crossed on his chest.

‘Bravo. Congratulations. Above all to you, Miss Selborne.’

Bloody hell, thought Kenna. *If it carries on like this I really am liable to end up an officer.*

‘Mr Brigden,’ Stefan Skellen said coldly, standing over the prisoner spread out between the table legs, ‘put the irons in the coals, please. Mr Echrade, please make sure no children are hanging around outside.’

He leaned over and looked into the bound man’s eyes.

‘You haven’t shown your face for ages, Rience,’ he said. ‘I was beginning to think some misfortune had befallen you.’

*

The bell in the guardhouse – the signal for the changing of the guard – struck. The Scarra sisters snored euphoniously. Kohut, hugging the stool, smacked his lips in his sleep.

He played the hero, Kenna recalled, pretending to be brave, that foolhardy Rience. The sorcerer Rience, given the pancake treatment and tied to the legs of a table with his bare feet sticking up. He was playing the hero, but wasn’t fooling anybody; least of all me. Tawny Owl warned us he was a sorcerer, so I scrambled his thoughts to stop him casting spells or sending for magical help. And read his thoughts while I was about it. He was blocking my way in, but when he caught a whiff of the smoke from the coal of the brazier where the irons were heating up, his magical protection and blockades burst along all their seams like old britches, and I was able to read him freely. His thoughts didn’t differ from those of other people I’ve read in like situations. The thoughts of people who are about to be tortured. Chaotic, trembling thoughts; full of fear and despair. Cold, slimy, wet, foul-smelling thoughts. Like a corpse’s entrails.

In spite of that, when the gag was removed, the sorcerer Rience tried to play the hero.

*

‘Well, well, Skellen! You’ve caught me, you win! Congratulations. A deep bow to your technique, expertise and professionalism. Splendidly trained operatives; truly, it’s enviable. And now please release me from this unseemly position.’

Tawny Owl drew up a chair and straddled it, resting his clasped fingers and chin on the backrest. He looked down at the captive. And said nothing.

‘Have me released, Skellen,’ Rience repeated. ‘And then order your subordinates to leave. What I have to say is meant for your ears only.’

‘Mr Brigden,’ Tawny Owl said, without turning his head. ‘What colour are the irons?’

‘A bit longer, sir.’

‘Miss Selborne?’

‘I’m having difficulty reading him now,’ Kenna shrugged. ‘He’s too afraid, the fear’s drowning out all other thoughts. And there are lots of those thoughts. Including a few he’s trying to hide. Behind magical screens. But it’s not hard, I can—’

‘That won’t be necessary. We’ll try the classic method: a red-hot iron.’

‘Bloody hell!’ the spy howled. ‘Skellen! You surely don’t mean —’

Tawny Owl leaned over, his face a little changed.

‘First, it’s *Mister* Skellen,’ he hissed. ‘Second, yes, absolutely, I plan to order your soles scorched, Rience. I shall do it with the utmost satisfaction. For I shall treat it as an expression of historical justice. I’ll wager you don’t understand.’

Rience remained silent, so Skellen continued.

‘You see, Rience, I advised Vattier de Rideaux to scorch your heels back then, seven years ago, when you were fawning to the imperial intelligence service like a cur, begging for mercy and the privilege to be a traitor and a double agent. I repeated that advice four years ago, when you shamelessly kissed Emhyr’s arse, mediating in contacts with Vilgefortz. When, during the hunt for the Cintran wench, you were promoted from a humble little

turncoat to being virtually first resident spy. I wagered Vattier that when burned you'd say who you serve . . . No, I've got that wrong. That you'd name everyone you serve. And everyone you betray. And then, I said, you'll see, you'll be astonished, Vattier, how many points on the two lists correspond. But, well, Vattier de Rideaux didn't listen to me. And now surely regrets it. But nothing's lost. I'll only toast you a little, and when I know what I want to know, I shall leave you to Vattier's disposal. And he'll flay you, slowly, one piece at a time.'

Tawny Owl removed a handkerchief and a vial of perfume from his pocket. He sprinkled the perfume liberally on the handkerchief and pressed it to his nose. The perfume smelled pleasant, but nonetheless Kenna felt like vomiting.

'The iron, Mr Brigden.'

'I'm tracking you on Vilgefortz's orders!' Rience roared. 'It concerns the girl! By tracking your troop I hoped to get ahead of you, reach that bounty hunter before you did! I was going to try to negotiate the wench away from him! From him, not from you! Because you want to kill her, and Vilgefortz needs her alive! What else do you want to know? I'll tell you! I'll tell you everything!'

'Whoa, there!' Tawny Owl called. 'Not so fast! Why, a fellow's head could ache from such a racket and mass of information. Can you imagine, gentlemen, what will happen when we burn him? He'll scream us to death!'

Kriel and Silifant cackled raucously. Kenna and Neratin Ceka didn't join in the merriment. Neither did Bert Brigden, who had just then removed the iron from the coals and was examining it critically. The iron was so hot it seemed to be transparent, as though it wasn't iron, but a glass tube full of molten fire.

Rience saw it and shrieked.

'I know how to find the bounty hunter and the girl!' he yelled. 'I know! I'll tell you!'

'I'm certain of that.'

Kenna, still trying to read his thoughts, grimaced, picking up a wave of desperate, impotent fury. Something snapped in Rience's brain, yet another partition. He'll say something out of fear, thought Kenna, something he meant to keep until the end, as a trump card, an ace, which would have beaten all the other aces in a last, deciding hand for the highest stakes. Now he'll discard that ace, out

of a banal, revolting fear of pain.

Suddenly something popped in her head, she felt heat in her temples and then sudden cold.

And she knew. She knew Rience's hidden thought.

By the Gods, she thought. What a pickle I'm in . . .

'I'll talk!' howled the sorcerer, reddening and staring goggled-eyed in the coroner's face. 'I'll tell you something genuinely important, Skellen! Vattier de Rideaux . . .'

Kenna suddenly heard another thought, belonging to someone else. She saw Neratin Ceka with a hand on his dagger moving towards the door.

Boots pounded and Boreas Mun rushed into the headman's hall.

'My lord coroner! Quickly, sir! You'll never believe who's here!'

Skellen gestured to Brigden, who was bending over towards the spy's heels with the iron, to stop.

'You ought to play the lottery, Rience,' he said, looking out of the window. 'I've never met anyone in my life with such luck.'

Through the window they could see a crowd and two people on horseback in the midst of it. Kenna knew at once who it was. She knew who the bony giant was, with the pale fishlike eyes, riding a powerful bay.

And who the ashen-haired girl on the splendid black mare was. With hands bound and a collar around her neck. And a bruise on her swollen cheek.

*

Vysogota returned to his cottage in a foul mood, dejected, taciturn – even angry. The reason was a conversation with a peasant, who had rowed over in a dugout canoe to collect some pelts. Perhaps for the last time before the spring, said the peasant. The weather's getting worse by the day. The rain and wind are so bad I'm afraid to venture onto the water. Ice on the puddles in the morning, blizzards are nigh, and after that frosts. The river will rise and flood at any

time, then it's away with the dugout and out with the sleigh. But even a sleigh's no use on Pereplut, naught but bogs far as the eye can see . . .

The peasant was right. Towards the evening it became overcast and white flakes fell from the dark blue sky. A stiff, easterly wind flattened the dry reeds, whipping up white crests over the surface of the wetland. It had become piercingly, bitterly cold.

The day after tomorrow, thought Vysogota, is the feast of Samhain. According to the elven calendar it'll be the New Year in three days. According to the human calendar we'll have to wait another two months.

Kelpie, Ciri's black mare, stamped and snorted in the barn.

When he entered the cottage, he found Ciri rummaging around in his chests. He let her; even encouraged her. Firstly, it was quite a new activity – after riding Kelpie and leafing through books. Secondly, there were plenty of his daughters' things in the chests, and the girl needed warm clothing. Several changes of clothing, for in the cold and damp it took many days before the laundry finally dried.

Ciri was selecting, trying on, putting aside and discarding various items of clothing. Vysogota was sitting at the table. He ate two boiled potatoes and a chicken wing. In silence.

'Good workmanship.' She showed him some objects he hadn't seen in years and had even forgotten he had. 'Did these also belong to your daughter? Was it a hobby of hers?'

'Yes, she loved it. She couldn't wait for the winter.'

'Can I take them?'

'Take what you want,' he shrugged. 'They're of no use to me. If they'll come in handy and if the boots fit . . . But are you packing, Ciri? Are you preparing to go?'

She fixed her eyes on the pile of clothing.

'Yes, Vysogota,' she said after a brief silence. 'I've decided. Because you see . . . There's no time to lose.'

'Your dreams.'

'Yes,' she admitted, a moment later. 'I saw very unpleasant things in my dreams. I'm not certain if they've taken place, or are yet to happen. I have no idea if I can prevent it . . . But I must go.

You see, once I felt aggrieved that the people closest to me didn't come to my aid. Left me at the mercy of fate . . . But now I think they're the ones that need my help. I have to go.'

'Winter's coming.'

'That's precisely why I must go. If I stay I'll be stuck here until spring . . . until the spring I'll be fretting in idleness and uncertainty, plagued by nightmares. I have to go, right now, to try to find the Tower of the Swallow. That teleporter. You worked out it'll take me a fortnight to reach the lake. I'd be there before the November full moon . . .'

'You can't leave your hideout now,' he said with effort. 'Not now. They'll capture you. Ciri . . . Your pursuers . . . they are very close. You cannot now—'

She threw a blouse down onto the floor and sprang up.

'You've learned something,' she said sharply. 'From the peasant who took the pelts. Tell me.'

'Ciri—'

'Tell me, please!'

He told her. He was later to regret it.

*

'The devil must have sent them, good sir hermit,' mumbled the peasant, breaking off from counting the pelts. 'Must of been the devil. They've been galloping through the forests since the Equinox, searching for some maid. Frightening folk, yelling and threatening, but always riding on, never tarrying long enough to do too much harm. But now they've thought up summat new: in some villages and settlements they've left some, what were it . . . Sent trees. They ain't no trees, good sir, sent or otherwise, just simply three or four good-for-nothing scoundrels, naught but trouble. They say they're going to lie in wait the whole winter, to see if the maid they're hunting doesn't creep out of some hidey-hole and venture into the village. Then that tree's s'pposed to nab 'er.'

'Are they in your village too?'

The peasant's face darkened and he ground his teeth.

‘Not in our village. We was lucky. But in Dun Dare, half a day from us, there’s four. They’re quartered in the inn. Scoundrels, good sir hermit, damned scoundrels, rogues. They took their pleasure with the village wenches, and when the menfolk stood up to them, they killed them, good sir, without mercy. Killed them dead . . .’

‘They killed people?’

‘Two. The headman and one other. And is there a punishment for such ne’er-do-wells, good sir? And is there a law? There’s no punishment or law! A carter who came to Dun Dare with his wife and daughter, he said that years ago there used to be witchers in the world, so they say . . . They dealt with every kind of villainy. We ought to send a witcher to Dun Dare, he’d give those rascals short shrift . . .’

‘Witchers killed monsters, not people.’

‘They’re knaves, good sir hermit, not people, naught but knaves from hell. A witcher’s what needed for them, no more, no less . . . Well, time I were going, good sir hermit . . . Ooo, winter’s coming! Soon it’ll be away with the dugout and out with the sleigh . . . And what them knaves from Dun Dare need, good sir, is a witcher . . .’

*

‘Oh, that’s right,’ Ciri repeated through clenched teeth. ‘Oh, absolutely right. A witcher what’s they need . . . Or a witcher girl. Four, is it? In Dun Dare, are they? And where is bloody Dun Dare? Upstream? Would I get there across the tussocks?’

‘By the Gods, Ciri,’ Vysogota said in terror. ‘You can’t seriously be thinking—’

‘Don’t swear by the gods, if you don’t believe in them. And I know you don’t.’

‘Let’s leave my views out of this! Ciri, what infernal ideas are you hatching? How can you even—’

‘Now you leave *my* convictions alone, Vysogota. I know what I have to do! I’m a witcher!’

‘You’re an unstable young person!’ he exploded. ‘You’re a child who’s been through traumatic experiences; a damaged child on the

verge of a nervous breakdown. And more than that, you're sick with a craving for revenge! Blinded by a lust for retribution! Don't you understand that?'

'I understand it better than you!' she yelled. 'Because you have no idea what it means to be hurt! You have no idea about revenge, for no one has ever truly wronged you!'

She rushed out of the cottage. A bitterly cold draught briefly blew through the hallway and the main room before she slammed the door shut. Soon after he heard neighing and the pounding of hooves.

Agitated, he banged the plate down onto the table. Let her go, he thought angrily, let her shake off the anger. It wasn't as if he was afraid for her, she'd ridden often enough among the bogs, by day and night; she knew the paths, causeways, tussocks and meadows. If, though, she did get lost, she'd only have to let go of the reins – her black Kelpie knew the way home to the goat's barn.

Some time after, when it was already very dark, he went out and hung the lantern on a post. He stood by the fence and listened out for the clatter of hooves or the splash of water. But the wind and the rustling of the reeds muffled all sound. The lantern on the post swayed crazily until it finally went out.

And then he heard it. From far away. No, not from the direction Ciri had ridden towards. But on the other side. From the bogs. A savage, inhuman, long-drawn-out, plaintive cry. A howl.

A moment of silence.

And again. A beann'shie.

An elven phantom. The harbinger of death.

Vysogota trembled, from cold and from fear. He quickly headed back towards the cottage, muttering and humming under his breath, so as not to hear it, not to hear it at all, because he must not hear it.

Kelpie emerged from the darkness before he managed to relight the lantern.

'Go into the cottage,' Ciri said, gently and softly. 'And don't leave. It's a foul night.'

*

They bickered again over supper.

‘You seem to know a great deal about the problems of good and evil!’

‘Because I do! And not from scholarly books, either!’

‘No, of course. You know it all from experience. From practice. For you’ve acquired plenty of experience in your long sixteen years of life.’

‘I’ve gained enough. Quite enough!’

‘Congratulations. My learned friend.’

‘You can sneer,’ she clenched her teeth, ‘without having any idea how much evil you’ve done to the world, you aged scholars, you theoreticians with your books, with your centuries-old experience of reading moral treatises so diligently you didn’t even have time to look out of the window to see what the world was really like. You philosophers, artificially shoring up artificial philosophies in order to earn salaries at universities. And since not a soul would pay you for the ugly truth about the world, you invented ethics and morality; nice, optimistic sciences. Except they’re fallacious and deceitful!’

‘There’s nothing more deceitful than a half-baked judgement, miss! Than a hasty and incautious conclusion!’

‘You didn’t find a remedy for evil! But I, a callow witcher, have! An infallible remedy!’

He didn’t respond, but his face must have betrayed him, because Ciri leaped up from the table.

‘Do you think I’m talking nonsense? Making wild claims?’

‘I think,’ he calmly replied, ‘you’re speaking in anger. I think you’re planning your revenge in anger. And I strongly urge you to calm down.’

‘I am calm. And revenge? Answer me: why not? Why should I eschew revenge? In the name of what? Higher reasons? And what’s higher than an order of things where evil deeds are punished? To you, O philosopher and ethicist, revenge is an improper deed, reprehensible, unethical and ultimately unlawful. And I ask: where is the punishment for evil? Who should attest it, adjudge it and inflict it? The gods you don’t believe in? The great demiurge-creator

you've decided to replace the Gods with? Or perhaps the law? Perhaps Nilfgaardian justice, imperial judgements, prefects? You naive old man!'

'And so it's an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth? Blood for blood? And for that blood, more blood? A sea of blood? Do you want to drown the world in blood? O naive, damaged girl! Is that how you mean to fight evil, little witcher?'

'Yes. Just like that! For I know what Evil fears. Not your ethics, Vysogota, not sermons, not moral treatises about a worthy life. Evil fears pain, impairment, suffering, death, the end! When wounded, Evil howls with pain like a dog! It rolls around on the floor and squeals, watching the blood spurt from its veins and arteries, seeing its bones stick out of stumps, seeing its guts crawl from its belly, sensing that with the cold, death is approaching. Then and only then does Evil's hair stand on end and Evil finally yell: "Mercy! I repent of my sins! I'll be good and decent now, I swear! Just save me, staunch the blood, don't let me perish ignominiously!"

'Yes, O hermit. That's how you fight Evil! If Evil wants to do you harm, inflict pain on you – anticipate it, ideally when Evil isn't expecting it. If, though, you didn't manage to anticipate Evil, if you were harmed by Evil, then pay it back! Catch it, ideally when it has forgotten, when it feels safe. Pay it back twofold. Threefold. An eye for an eye? No! Both eyes for an eye! A tooth for a tooth? No! All its teeth for a tooth! Pay Evil back! Make it howl with pain, so its eyeballs burst from its howling. And then, looking down at the floor, you may confidently say: what's lying there won't harm anybody any longer, it won't threaten anyone. For how can it threaten anyone without any eyes? If it has no hands? How can it do any harm when its guts are trailing over the sand, and the gore is soaking into it?'

'And you,' the hermit said slowly, 'stand with your bloodied sword in hand, and look at the blood soaking into the sand. And you have the audacity to think that the age-old dilemma has been solved, the philosophers' dream has been attained. You think the nature of Evil has been transformed?'

'I do,' she said defiantly. 'Because what's lying on the ground with blood gushing from it is no longer Evil. Perhaps it isn't yet Good, but it certainly isn't Evil anymore!'

'They say,' Vysogota said slowly, 'that nature abhors a vacuum. Whatever is lying on the ground, bleeding profusely, whatever died

from your sword, is no longer Evil. What is it then? Have you ever thought about that?'

'No. I'm a witcher! When they were teaching me, I swore I would act against Evil. Always. And without thinking . . .

'Because when you start thinking,' she added hollowly, 'killing stops making sense. Revenge stops making sense. And you can't let that happen.'

He shook his head, but she gestured to him to stop arguing.

'It's time I finished my story, Vysogota. I've been unfolding it for you for thirty nights, from the Equinox to Samhain. But I haven't told you everything. Before I leave, you have to learn what happened on the day of the Equinox in the village called Unicorn.'

*

She groaned when he pulled her from the saddle. The hip he had kicked her in the day before was hurting.

He tugged on the chain attached to the collar and pulled her towards a light-coloured building.

Several armed men were standing in the doorway. And one tall woman.

'Bonhart,' said one of the men, slim and brown-haired, with a thin face, holding a brass-tipped knout. 'It has to be said that you're full of surprises.'

'Greetings, Skellen.'

The man addressed as Skellen looked her straight in the eye for some time. She trembled under his gaze.

'Well?' he addressed Bonhart again. 'Will you explain at once, or perhaps bit by bit?'

'I don't like explaining things in the courtyard, for you get a mouthful of flies. May we go inside?'

'By all means.'

Bonhart yanked the chain.

Another man was waiting in the main room. He was dishevelled and pale, and was probably the cook, because he was

busy cleaning traces of flour and cream from his clothing. His eyes lit up at the sight of Ciri. He came closer.

He wasn't the cook.

She recognised him at once, remembered those hideous eyes and the ugly mark on his face. He was the one who had pursued her on Thanedd with the Squirrels. She'd escaped him by jumping out of a window, and he had ordered the elves to jump after her. What had that elf called him? Rence?

'Well, well!' he said mordantly, jabbing a finger hard and painfully into her breast. 'Miss Ciri! We haven't seen each other since Thanedd. I've been looking for you a long, long time, miss. And I've finally found you!'

'I don't know, sir, who you are,' Bonhart said coldly. 'But what you've claimed to find is actually mine, so keep your mitts off, if you value your fingers.'

'My name's Rience.' The sorcerer's eyes flashed unpleasantly. 'Kindly condescend to commit that to memory, Mr Bounty Hunter, sir. And who I am will be soon be revealed. Whom the maid belongs to will also soon be revealed. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. For now I only want to give her my regards and make a pledge. You don't have anything against that, I trust?'

'You are free to trust.'

Rience approached Ciri and looked into her eyes from close up.

'Your guardian, the hag Yennefer,' he said slowly and scornfully, 'once fell into disfavour with me. And so when I got my hands on her, I, Rience, taught her pain. With these hands, with these fingers. And I promised her that should you fall into my hands, princess, I would also teach you pain. With these hands, with these fingers . . .'

'Risky,' Bonhart said softly. 'You're taking a great risk, Mr Rience, or whatever your name is, bothering my little girl and threatening her. She is vengeful, liable to hold it against you. I repeat: keep your hands, fingers and all other parts of your body well away from her.'

'Enough.' Skellen cut them off, without taking his curious eyes off Ciri. 'Stop it, Bonhart. And you too, Rience, calm yourself. I've shown you mercy, but I may change my mind and order you bound to the table legs again. Sit down, both of you. Let's talk like

cultured people. Just the three of us and no one else. For we have, it seems to me, much to talk about. But for now we'll put the subject of our conversations under guard. Mr Silifant!'

'Just guard her well.' Bonhart handed Silifant the end of the chain. 'Guard her with your life.'

*

Kenna stayed on the sidelines. Granted, she wanted to observe the wench, whom everybody had recently been talking about, but she felt a strange aversion to pushing in amongst the small crowd surrounding Harsheim and Silifant, who were taking the mysterious captive over to a post in the courtyard.

Everybody was crowding around, jostling, peering. They were even trying to touch her, shove her, pull her. The girl trod stiffly, limping slightly, but held her head high. He's beaten her, thought Kenna. But he didn't break her.

'So she must be Falka . . .'

'The maid's barely grown!'

'A maid, huh? A cut-throat!'

'I heard she slayed six men, the brute, in the arena in Claremont . . .'

'And before that? How many others? The she-devil . . .'

'She-wolf!'

'And the mare, what a mare, look. A horse of marvellous blood . . . And here, by Bonhart's saddle flap, what a sword . . . Ah . . . a marvel!'

'Leave it alone!' Dacre Silifant growled. 'Don't touch! Get your hands off other people's things. Don't touch the girl either; don't paw her, don't hinder or insult her! Show some charity. We know not if we shan't be executing her before dawn. May she at least know peace until that time.'

'If the wench is to go to her death,' grinned Cyprian Fripp the younger, 'perhaps we could sweeten the remainder of her life and satiate her well? Throw her on the hay and bed her?'

'Aye!' Kabernik Turent cackled, 'We could! Let's ask Tawny

Owl if it's allowed—'

'I tell you it's not allowed!' Dacre cut them off. 'Naught else occupies your minds, you damned fornicators! I said leave the maid in peace. Andres, Stigward, stand here by her. Don't take your eyes off her, or move a foot away. And use the lash on any that come close!'

'Sod that!' said Fripp. 'Very well, makes no difference to us. Let's be off, fellows, to the hay barn, and join the villagers, they're roasting a ram and a porker for the banquet. For today is the Equinox, a feast, isn't it? While the masters are deliberating, we can make merry.'

'Let's go. Take a demijohn from the chest, Dede. We'll take a drink! May we, Mr Silifant? Mr Harsheim? It's the feast today, and we shan't be heading anywhere tonight.'

'Oh, what droll designs!' Silifant frowned. 'They think of naught but feasting and toping! And who will stay here to help guard the wench and wait on Sir Stefan's summons?'

'I shall stay,' said Neratin Ceka.

'And I,' said Kenna.

Dacre Silifant looked at them attentively. Finally, he gestured his assent. Fripp and company roared their thanks incoherently.

'But have a care down there, at that merrymaking!' Ola Harsheim warned. 'Don't molest any wenches, or you might get jabbed in the privates with a pitchfork!'

'Sod that! Coming with us, Chloe? And you, Kenna? Won't you think it over?'

'No. I'm staying.'

*

'They left me chained to the post, with my hands bound. Two of them were guarding me. And the two standing nearby kept glancing over, watching me. The tall, good-looking woman. And a man with slightly feminine looks and bearing. Odd in some way.'

The cat sitting in the middle of the room yawned broadly, bored, because the mouse it was tormenting had stopped providing

amusement. Vysogota said nothing.

‘Bonhart, Rience and that Skellen-Tawny Owl were still debating in the headman’s hall. I didn’t know what about. I might have expected the worst, but I was resigned. One more arena? Or would they simply kill me? Blow it, I thought, let it finally be over.’

Vysogota said nothing.

*

Bonhart sighed.

‘Don’t glower, Skellen,’ he repeated. ‘I simply wanted to make some money. It’s time, you notice, I retired, to sit on the porch and watch pigeons. You gave me a hundred florins for the She-Rat, you badly wanted her dead. That puzzled me. How much could the maid really be worth, I thought. And I worked out that if she were killed or handed over, she would certainly be worth less than if she were kept. An old principle of economics and commerce. Goods like her keep gaining in value. One can always haggle . . .’

Tawny Owl wrinkled his nose, as though there was a bad smell in the vicinity.

‘You’re painfully frank, Bonhart. But get to the point. To the explanations. You fled with the girl through the whole of Ebbing, and all of a sudden you show up and start explaining the laws of economics. Tell me what happened.’

‘What is there to explain?’ Rience smiled repellently. ‘Mr Bonhart has simply finally grasped who the wench really is. And how much she’s worth.’

Skellen didn’t grace him with a glance. He was looking at Bonhart, into his fishlike, expressionless eyes.

‘And he pushes this precious girl, this valuable acquisition, meant to guarantee his pension, out into the arena in Claremont,’ he drawled, ‘and makes her fight to the death. Risks her life, though she’s allegedly worth so much alive. What’s it about, Bonhart? Because something doesn’t add up.’

‘Had she perished in the arena,’ Bonhart didn’t lower his eyes, ‘it would have meant she wasn’t worth anything.’

‘I see,’ Tawny Owl frowned slightly. ‘But rather than taking the

wench to another arena you brought her to me. Why, if I might ask?'

'I repeat,' Rience grimaced. 'He twigged who she is.'

'You're shrewd, Lord Rience.' Bonhart stretched until his joints creaked. 'You've guessed right. Yes, it's true that there's one more riddle linked to the witcher girl trained in Kaer Morhen. In Geso, when the noblewoman was robbed, the wench's tongue wagged. That she was apparently so important and titled that the baron's daughter was such small beer and so low-ranking she ought to bow down before her. In that case, this Falka, I think to myself, must be at least the daughter of a count. Curious. Firstly: a witcher girl. Are there so many of them? Secondly: in the Rats' gang. Thirdly: the imperial coroner is chasing around after her, in person, from Korath to Ebbing and ordering her killed. And on top of all that . . . she's a high-born noble woman. Ha, I think to myself, someone ought to ask that wench who she really is.'

He was silent for a time.

'At first –' he wiped his nose with his cuff '– she wouldn't talk. Although I asked. I asked with hand, foot and whip. I didn't want to cut her . . . But as luck would have it, a barber surgeon turned up. With instruments for extracting teeth. I bound her to a chair . . .'

Skellen swallowed audibly. Rience smiled. Bonhart studied a cuff.

'She told me everything, before . . . As soon as she saw the instruments. Those toothed pliers and pincers. She became more forthcoming at once. It turns out she's a—'

'Cintran princess,' said Rience, looking at Tawny Owl. 'The heiress to the throne. A candidate for marriage to Emperor Emhyr.'

'Which Lord Skellen didn't deign to tell me,' the bounty hunter sneered. 'He ordered me simply to murder her, he stressed it several times. Kill her mercilessly, on the spot! Well, Lord Skellen? Kill a queen? Our emperor's future spouse? With whom, if one is to believe the rumours, the emperor will tie the knot any moment, after which there is to be a general amnesty?'

Bonhart glared at Skellen as he delivered his oration. But the imperial coroner didn't lower his eyes.

'And so,' the hunter continued, 'out it comes: a delicate situation. Thus, though I regret it, I gave up my plans regarding the

witcher girl-princess. I've brought the whole predicament here, to Lord Skellen. To talk, to sort things out . . . For I'd say that this predicament is a little too much for one Bonhart . . .'

'A very reasonable conclusion,' said a harsh voice from Rience's bosom. 'Very reasonable, Mr Bonhart. What you've caught, gentlemen, is a little too much for you both. Luckily, you still have me.'

'What's that?' Skellen leaped up from his chair. 'What the bloody hell is that?'

'My master, the sorcerer Vilgefortz.' Rience drew from his bosom a tiny silver casket. 'More precisely, my master's voice. Coming from this magical device; it's called a xenogloss.'

'Greetings to all you,' said the casket. 'Shame I can only hear you, but urgent business prevents me from using teleprojection or teleportation.'

'That's all we bloody need,' Tawny Owl snarled. 'But I might have guessed. Rience is too stupid to act alone and by himself. I might have guessed you were lurking somewhere in the gloom, Vilgefortz. You lurk in the dark like a fat old spider, waiting for your cobweb to quiver.'

'What a vivid comparison.'

Skellen snorted.

'And don't try to pull the wool over our eyes, Vilgefortz. You're using Rience and his casket not because of the amount of work you have, but from fear of the army of sorcerers, your former comrades in the Chapter, who are scanning the whole world in search of traces of magic with your algorithm. Were you to try teleportation, they would locate you in an instant.'

'What impressive knowledge.'

'We haven't been introduced.' Bonhart bowed quite theatrically before the silver box. 'But nevertheless, is the honourable Rience promising to torture the girl on your instructions and with your authorisation, master sorcerer? Am I not mistaken? Upon my word, the girl is becoming more and more important with every moment. It turns out she's necessary to everybody.'

'We haven't been introduced,' Vilgefortz said from the casket. 'But I know you, Leo Bonhart, you'd be astonished just how well. And the girl is, indeed, important. After all, she's the Lion Cub of

Cintra, the Elder Blood. In keeping with Ithlinne's Prophecy, her descendants will rule over the world in the future.'

'Why do you need her so much?'

'I only need her placenta. Her womb. Once I've removed it, you can take the rest. What do I hear there, some kind of snorting? Some kind of disgusted sighing and puffing? Whose? Bonhart's – who physically and psychologically maltreats the girl every day in intricate ways? Or Stefan Skellen's – who intends to kill her on the orders of traitors and plotters? Eh?'

*

I eavesdropped on them, recalled Kenna, lying on her pallet with her hands behind her head. I stood around the corner and heard their thoughts. And my hair stood on end. Over my entire body. All of a sudden I understood the extent of the predicament I'd got myself into.

*

'Yes, yes,' said the voice from the xenogloss, 'you've betrayed your emperor, Skellen. Without hesitation, at the first opportunity.'

Tawny Owl snorted disdainfully.

'The charge of treachery from the lips of such an arch-traitor as you, Vilgefortz, is indeed a great matter. I'd feel honoured, if it didn't smack of a cheap, vulgar joke.'

'I'm not accusing you of treachery, Skellen, I'm mocking your naivety and inability to betray. Who are you betraying your emperor for? For Ardal aep Dahy and de Wett, princelings, their morbid pride piqued, insulted because the emperor rejected their young daughters by planning a marriage with the Cintran. Whereas they were hoping that a new dynasty would emerge from their families, that their families would become the first in the empire, that soon they'd rise even higher than the throne! Emhyr divested them of that hope at one stroke and then they decided to amend the course of history. They aren't yet ready with an armed rebellion, but they can at least eliminate the girl that Emhyr chose over their

daughters. Of course, they don't feel like sullying their own delicate aristocratic hands; they found a hired thug, Stefan Skellen, suffering from an excess of ambition. Was it like that, Skellen? Don't you want to tell us?'

'What for?' Tawny Owl shouted. 'And tell whom? As usual you know everything, don't you, O great mage? Rience, as usual, doesn't know anything and that's as it should be, and Bonhart is unconcerned . . .'

'You, though, as I've already demonstrated, don't have anything to boast about. The princes bought you with promises, but you're too intelligent not to realise that you'll gain nothing with the lordlings. Today they need you as a tool to eliminate the Cintran, tomorrow they'll get rid of you, because you're a low-born upstart. Did they offer you Vattier de Rideaux's position in the new empire? You surely don't believe that, Skellen. They need Vattier more, since secret services always stay the same – coups or not. They only want to murder using your hands, but they need Vattier to take over the security apparatus. Besides, Vattier is a viscount and you're a nobody.'

'Indeed,' Tawny Owl pouted. 'I'm too intelligent not to have noticed that. In that case, I ought in turn to betray Ardal aep Dahy and join you, Vilgefortz? Is that what you're driving at? But I am not a weathercock! If I support the idea of revolution, it's from conviction and principle. Autocratic tyranny ought to be finished, a constitutional monarchy introduced, and after that democracy . . .'

'What?'

'The power of the people. A system where the people will rule. The citizenry of all states, through the most worthy and honest representatives chosen in an honest election . . .'

Rience roared with laughter. Bonhart laughed wildly. The xenogloss of the mage Vilgefortz laughed heartily, if somewhat screechingly. All three of them laughed and guffawed, weeping great tears.

'Very well,' Bonhart interrupted the merriment. 'We haven't gathered here for diversion, but to trade. The girl, for now, doesn't belong to the population of honest citizens of all states, she belongs to me. But I can resell her. What does my lord sorcerer have to offer?'

'Does ruling the world interest you?'

‘No.’

‘Then I shall let you,’ Vilgefortz said slowly, ‘be present during what I do to the girl. You’ll be able to watch. I know you prefer that kind of voyeurism to all other pleasures.’

Bonhart’s eyes flashed with white flame. But he was composed.

‘And more specifically?’

‘And more specifically: I’m prepared to pay your fee twentyfold. Two thousand florins. Think, Bonhart; that’s a sack of money you won’t be able to lift. You’re going to need a pack mule. It’ll suffice you for your retirement, porch, pigeons, and even for vodka and harlots, if you do it in sensible moderation.’

‘Agreed, mage, sir,’ the hunter laughed, seemingly blithely. ‘You’ve touched my heart with that vodka and those harlots. Let’s strike a deal. But I’d also be interested in that observation you suggested, too. I’d prefer, admittedly, to watch her expire in the arena, but I’d also be glad to take a look at your knife work. Throw it in as a bonus.’

‘Done.’

‘That didn’t take you long,’ Tawny Owl observed sardonically. ‘In sooth, Vilgefortz, you’ve struck up a partnership with Bonhart swiftly and smoothly. A partnership which indeed is and will be a *societas leonina*. But might you have forgotten something? The headman’s hall where you’re sitting and the Cintran you’re trading are surrounded by two dozen armed soldiers. My soldiers.’

‘My dear Skellen,’ came Vilgefortz’s voice from the box. ‘You insult me by thinking I plan to disadvantage you in the exchange. On the contrary. I mean to be extremely generous. I can’t guarantee you – as you deigned to call it – democracy. But I guarantee you material assistance, logistical support and access to information, owing to which you’ll stop being a tool and a minion to the conspirators, and will become a partner. One whose person and opinion Prince Joachim de Wett, Duke Ardal aep Dahy, Count Broinne, Count d’Arvy and all the rest of the blue-blooded plotters will take into account. What if it’s a *societas leonina*? Certainly, if Cirilla is the loot, then I shall take the lion’s share, deservedly so, it seems to me. Does it pain you? After all, you will make a considerable profit. If you give me the Cintran, Vattier de Rideaux’s position is yours for the taking. And as the head of the secret service, Stefan Skellen, one can enact all sorts of utopias, perhaps

even democracy and honest elections. So as you see, I give you the fulfilment of your life's dreams and ambitions in exchange for one skinny fifteen-year-old. Do you see that?'

'No,' Tawny Owl shook his head. 'I only hear it.'

'Rience.'

'Yes, master.'

'Give Lord Skellen an example of the quality of our information. Tell him what you got out of Vattier.'

'There's a spy in your troop,' said Rience.

'What?'

'You heard. Vattier de Rideaux has planted someone here. They know about everything you're doing. Why you're doing it and for whom. Vattier has an agent amongst you.'

*

He walked quietly over to her. She almost didn't hear him.

'Kenna.'

'Neratin.'

'You listened in to my thoughts. Over there, in the headman's hall. You know what I was thinking. So you know who I am.'

'Listen, Neratin—'

'No. You listen, Joanna Selborne. Stefan Skellen is betraying his country and his emperor. He's conspiring. Everyone who's with him will end up on the scaffold. Will be torn apart by horses in Millennium Square.'

'I don't know anything, Neratin. I carry out my orders . . . What do you want from me? I serve the coroner . . . And who do you serve?'

'The empire. Viscount de Rideaux.'

'What do you want from me?'

'To demonstrate good sense.'

'Go away. I won't betray you, I won't tell . . . But go away, please. I can't, Neratin. I'm a simple woman. It's too much for my

head . . .’

*

I don’t know what to do. Skellen said ‘Miss Selborne’. As though to an officer. Who am I serving? Him? The emperor? The empire?

And how am I to know?

Kenna pushed herself away from the corner of the cottage, flourished a withy and growled menacingly to drive away some village children who were curiously watching Falka sitting at the foot of the post. Oh, I’ve got myself in a fine pickle.

Oh, there’s a whiff of the noose in the air. And horse shit in Millennium Square.

I don’t know how it will finish, thought Kenna. But I have to go inside her. Enter Falka. Sense her thoughts if only for a moment. Know what she knows.

Understand.

*

‘She came close,’ said Ciri, stroking the cat. ‘She was tall, well-groomed, standing out very much from the rest of that pack . . . Even pretty, in her own way. And commanding respect. The two who were guarding me, vulgar oafs, stopped swearing when she approached.’

Vysogota said nothing.

‘She,’ Ciri went on, ‘leaned over and looked me in the eyes. I felt something at once . . . Something strange . . . It was as though something had crunched at the back of my head. It hurt. There was a rushing sound in my ears. For a moment everything went very bright . . . Something entered me, something repulsive and slimy . . . I recognised it. Yennefer had shown it to me in the temple . . . But I didn’t want to allow that woman do it . . . So I simply pushed away the thing she’d put into me, pushed it away and expelled it from myself, with all the strength I could muster. And the tall woman bent backwards and staggered, as though she’d been

punched, took two steps backwards . . . And blood rushed from her nose. From both nostrils.'

Vysogota said nothing.

'But I,' Ciri raised her head, 'understood what had happened. I suddenly felt the Power in me. I'd lost it in Korath desert, I'd renounced it. Later I couldn't draw on it, couldn't make use of it. But she, that woman, had given me the Power, had literally shoved the weapon into my hand. It was my chance.'

*

Kenna staggered and sat down heavily on the sand, swaying and feeling for the ground as though drunk. Blood was pouring from her nose and down her mouth and chin.

'What's . . .' Andres Vierny leaped up, but all of a sudden seized his head in both hands, opened his mouth and uttered a croak. He stared at Stigward with eyes wide open, but blood was already dripping from the pirate's nose and ears and his eyes had clouded over. Andres dropped to his knees, looking at Neratin Ceka, who was standing to one side and watching impassively.

'Nera . . . tin . . . Help . . .'

Ceka didn't move. He was looking at the girl. She turned her eyes on him and he tottered.

'It's not necessary,' he quickly forestalled. 'I'm on your side. I want to help you. Here, I'll cut through your bonds . . . Take the knife, cut through the collar yourself. I'll fetch the horses.'

'Ceka . . .' Andres Vierny stammered out, choking. 'You trai—'

The girl struck him with a gaze and he fell onto Stigward, who was lying motionless and curled up in a foetal position. Kenna still couldn't stand up. Sticky drops of blood dripped onto her chest and stomach.

'Alarm!' yelled Chloe Stitz, suddenly appearing from behind the cottages and dropping a mutton rib. 'Alaaaaarm! Silifant! Skellen! The girl's getting away!'

Ciri was already mounted. She was holding a sword.

'Yaaaaaa, Kelpie!'

‘Alaaaaaaarm!’

Kenna was clawing the sand. She couldn’t get up. Her legs were totally unresponsive, as though made of wood. A psionic, she thought. I’ve encountered a super-psionic. The girl is about ten times stronger than me . . . I’m lucky she didn’t kill me . . . How come I’m still conscious?

A group was now running from the cottages, led by Ola Harsheim, Bert Brigden and Til Echrade, and the guards from the gate – Dacre Silifant and Boreas Mun – hurried into the courtyard. Ciri wheeled her horse around, yelled and galloped towards the river. But armed men were already running from there.

Skellen and Bonhart dashed out of the hall. Bonhart holding his sword. Neratin Ceka yelled, rode his horse at them and knocked them both down. Then he hurled himself, straight from the saddle, at Bonhart and pinned him to the ground. Rience dashed out onto the threshold and looked on, dumbfounded.

‘Seize her!’ Skellen roared, springing up from the ground. ‘Seize her or kill her!’

‘Alive!’ Rience howled. ‘Aliiiive!’

Kenna saw Ciri driven away from the riverside palisade, rein her mare around and speed towards the gate. She saw Kabernik Turent leap forward and try to drag her from the saddle, saw a sword flash and a crimson outpouring gush from Turent’s neck. Dede Vargas and Fripp the younger also saw it. They decided not to bar the girl’s way, but bolted between the shacks.

Bonhart jumped to his feet, pushed Neratin Ceka away with a blow of his sword pommel and smote him terribly, diagonally across his breast, and then raced after Ciri. Neratin, slit open and spurting blood, managed to catch him by the legs, and only released him when he was skewered to the sand with the point of a sword. But those few seconds of delay were sufficient. The girl spurred her mare, fleeing from Silifant and Mun. Skellen came up stealthily and wolf-like from the left, and swung an arm. Kenna saw something sparkle in flight, saw the girl writhe and sway in the saddle and a fountain of blood erupt from her face. She leaned back so far that for a moment she was lying on the mare’s croup. She didn’t fall but straightened up and remained in the saddle, then pressed herself to the horse’s neck. The black mare jostled the armed men and raced straight for the gate. Behind her ran Mun, Silifant and Chloe Stitz with a crossbow.

‘She won’t jump it! She’s ours!’ Mun yelled triumphantly. ‘No horse can clear seven feet!’

‘Don’t shoot, Chloe!’

Chloe Stitz didn’t hear in the general uproar. She stopped. Put the crossbow to her cheek. It was widely known that Chloe never missed.

‘She’s dead meat!’ she cried. ‘Dead meat!’

Kenna saw a man whose name she didn’t know run forward, raise a crossbow and shoot Chloe point-blank in the back. The bolt passed right through her in an explosion of blood. Chloe dropped without a sound.

The mare reached the gate and drew back its head a little. And jumped. It soared and quite simply scaled the gate, gracefully gathered up its fore hooves and streamed over it like a black silk ribbon. Its curled hind hooves didn’t even brush the upper bar.

‘Ye Gods!’ screamed Dacre Silifant. ‘Ye Gods, what a horse! Worth its weight in gold!’

‘The mare goes to whoever catches her!’ Skellen screamed. ‘To horse! Mount up and after her!’

The search party galloped through the finally open gate, kicking up dust. Bonhart and Boreas Mun galloped ahead of everyone.

Kenna stood up with effort. And immediately staggered and sat down heavily on the sand. Her legs were tingling painfully.

Kabernik Turent wasn’t moving, but lay in a red puddle with arms and feet splayed apart. Andres Vierny tried hard to lift the still-unconscious Stigward.

Chloe Stitz, huddled up on the sand, seemed as tiny as a child.

Ola Harsheim and Bert Brigden dragged the short man, the one who’d killed Chloe, before Skellen. Tawny Owl was panting and trembling with fury. From the bandolier slung across his chest he took out another orion, the same kind of steel star he had wounded the girl’s face with a moment earlier.

‘May you rot in hell, Skellen,’ said the short man. Kenna recalled his name. Mekesser. Jediah Mekesser. A Gemmerian. She had first met him in Rocayne.

Tawny Owl stooped and swung his arm vigorously. The six-

toothed star whined in the air and plunged deeply into Mekesser's face, between his eye and nose. He didn't even cry out when hit, but simply began shaking violently and spasmodically in Harsheim and Brigden's grip. He shook for a long time and bared his teeth so ghoulishly that everybody turned their heads away. Everybody except Tawny Owl.

'Pull my orion from him, Ola,' said Stefan Skellen, when at last the corpse was hanging inertly in the two men's arms. 'And bury that scum in the muck, with that other scum, the hermaphrodite. Not a trace shall remain of those two execrable traitors.'

The wind suddenly howled and clouds massed. It suddenly became dark.

*

The guards on the citadel walls shouted. The Scarra sisters were snoring a duet. Kohut pissed noisily into the empty bucket. Kenna pulled the blanket up under her chin. She was thinking back.

They didn't catch the girl. She vanished. Simply vanished. Boreas Mun – unprecedentedly – lost the black mare's trail after about three miles. Suddenly, without warning, it became dark, the wind flattening trees almost to the ground. The rain lashed down, nay, even thunder rumbled and lightning flashed.

Bonhart didn't give up. They returned to Unicorn. They all yelled at one another, interrupting and shouting each other down: Bonhart, Tawny Owl, Rience and the fourth, mysterious, inhuman, croaking voice. Then they ordered the entire hanza to mount up, unlike those – like me – who were unable to ride. They banded together peasants with torches and drove them into the forests. They returned just before dawn.

With nothing. If you didn't count the horror in their eyes.

The tales, Kenna recalled, only began a few days later. In the beginning everyone was too afraid of Tawny Owl and Bonhart. They were so furious it was better to get out of their way. Even Bert Brigden, an officer, was hit across the head with the handle of a knout for some imprudent word.

But later people talked about what had happened during the chase. About the tiny straw unicorn from the little chapel that

suddenly grew to the size of a dragon and scared the horses so much the riders fell from them, only miraculously avoiding breaking their necks. About the cavalcade of fiery-eyed apparitions galloping across the sky on skeleton horses led by a terrible skeleton king ordering his phantom servants to wipe out the black mare's hoof prints with their ragged cloaks. About the macabre choir of goatsucker nightjars, calling: "Liiiquorrrr of blood, liiiquorrrr of blood!" About the horrific wailing of the ghastly beann'shie, the harbinger of death . . .

The wind, rain, clouds, bushes and fantastically-shaped trees, and fear, which turns everything into nightmares, commented Boreas Mun, who had been there, after all. That's the whole explanation. But the nightjars? The nightjars were screaming, as nightjars always do, he added.

And the trail, the hoof prints, which suddenly vanish, as though the horse had flown up into the heavens?

The face of Boreas Mun, a tracker able to track down a fish in water, stiffened at the question. The wind, he answered, the wind covered the tracks with sand and foliage. There's no other explanation.

Some people even believed, Kenna recalled. Some people even believed that they were all natural or predictable phenomena. And even laughed at them.

But they stopped laughing. After Dun Dare. No one laughed after Dun Dare.

*

He stepped back involuntarily and sucked in air on seeing her.

She had mixed goose lard with soot from the chimney and with the greasepaint thus created had blackened her eye sockets and eyelids, extending them with long lines to her ears and temples.

She looked like a demon.

'From the fourth tussock up to the high forest, keeping to the very edge,' he repeated the directions. 'Then along the river until you get to three dead trees, and then due west through a hornbeam woodland. When you see the pines, ride along the edge and count the tracks. Turn into the ninth and don't turn off after that. Then

it'll be the Dun Dare settlement, there's a hamlet on the north side. A few cottages. And beyond them, at the crossroads, a tavern.'

'I remember. I'll make it, don't worry.'

'Be most vigilant at the bends in the river. Beware of places where the reeds thin out. And places covered in knotgrass. And should darkness overtake you before the pine forest, stop and wait until morning. Under no circumstances ride across the bogs at night. It's almost a new moon now, and the clouds—'

'I know.'

'As far as the Lake Land goes . . . Head north, across the hills. Avoid main roads, the main roads are heaving with soldiers. When you get to a river, a large river, which is called the Sylte, you're over halfway.'

'I know. I have the map you drew.'

'Oh, yes. Indeed.'

Ciri checked her harness and saddlebags yet again. Mechanically. Not knowing what to say. Putting off what had to be said.

'It was agreeable to have you to stay,' he forestalled her. 'Truly. Farewell, O witcher girl.'

'Farewell, O hermit. Thank you for everything.'

She was already in the saddle, already prepared to click her tongue at Kelpie, when he came over and took her arm.

'Ciri. Stay. See out the winter . . .'

'I'll reach the lake before the frosts. But later, if it's as you said, nothing will matter any longer. I'll teleport back to Thanedd. To the school in Aretuza. To Madam Rita . . . Vysogota . . . Like it used to be . . .'

'The Tower of the Swallow is a legend. Remember, it's just a legend.'

'I'm just a legend,' she said bitterly. 'Have been since my birth. Zireael, the Swallow, the Unexpected Child. The Chosen One. The Child of Destiny. The Child of the Elder Blood. I'm going, Vysogota. Farewell.'

'Farewell, Ciri.'

*

The tavern by the crossroads past the hamlet was empty. Cyprian Fripp the younger and his three companions had forbidden the local people from entering and drove away travellers. They, however, spent their time eating and drinking, never leaving the smoky, gloomy tavern, which smelled as a tavern usually does in winter when the doors and windows are kept shut – of sweat, cats, mice, footwraps, pinewood, farts, fat, burnt food and wet, steaming clothing.

'Sod this rotten place,' centurion Yuz Jannowitz, a Gemmerian, said for probably the hundredth time, gesturing towards the serving wenches to bring him vodka. 'Damn that Tawny Owl. Ordering us to hunker down in this mangy hole! I'd sooner be riding through forests with the patrols!'

'Then you must be stupid,' replied Dede Vargas. 'It's bloody freezing outside! I'd druther be here in the warm. With the maid close at hand!'

He slapped the wench hard on the bottom. She squealed, not very convincingly and with evident apathy. She was slow-witted, to tell the truth. Working in a tavern had only taught her that when they slap or pinch you, you should squeal.

Cyprian Fripp and his company had already begun to take advantage of the two serving wenches the day after arriving. The innkeeper was afraid to complain and the wenches too dim-witted to think about protesting . . . Life had taught them that if a wench protested she got hit. It was more judicious, usually, to wait till they get bored.

'That there Falka,' Rispat La Pointe, bored, took up another stock topic of their bored evening conversations, 'croaked somewhere in the forests, I tell you. I saw Skellen slice her face open with the orion and the blood shooting out in a fountain! She can't have come through that, I tell you!'

'Tawny Owl missed her,' Yuz Jannowitz stated. 'He barely scratched her with the orion. Granted he carved her face up good and proper, saw it for myself. But did it stop the wench jumping the gate? Did she fall from her horse? Not a chance! And we measured the gate afterwards: seven foot effing two. And? She jumped it! And then what! You couldn't have stuck a knife blade between the

saddle and her little arse.'

'Blood was pouring from her,' protested Rispat La Pointe. 'She rode away, I'm telling you, rode off and then fell and croaked in a hollow somewhere. Wolves and birds ate the carcass, martens finished it off, and ants. That's the end, *deireadh*. So we're sitting here in vain, drinking our money away. Our money, it is, for I don't seem to see any pay!'

'It can't be that no traces or signs of a corpse are left,' said Dede Vargas with conviction. 'Something's always left: the skull, pelvis or one of the bigger bones. Rience, that sorcerer, will eventually find Falka's remains. Then the matter will be over.'

'And perhaps then they'll drive us so hard we'll recall with delight this idleness and this lousy pigsty.' Cyprian Fripp the younger threw a bored glance at the tavern's walls, on which he already knew every nail and every damp patch. 'And that poxy booze. And those two, what smell of onions, and when you rut them they lie like calves, staring at the ceiling and picking their teeth.'

'Everything's better than this tedium,' Yuz Jannowitz stated. 'I feel like howling! Let's fucking do something! Anything! Shall we torch the village or what?'

The door creaked. The sound was so unexpected that all four of them leaped up from their seats.

'Scram!' Dede Vargas roared. 'Get out, old man! Beggar! Filthy bastard! Get back outside!'

'Leave him.' Fripp, bored, waved an arm. 'See, he's lugging some pipes. He's just a beggar, probably an old soldier who earns a crust by playing and singing in taverns. It's cold and rainy outside. Let him stay . . .'

'Just well away from us.' Yuz Jannowitz showed the beggar where to sit. 'Or we'll be crawling with lice. I can see from here what specimens are crawling over him. You'd think they were tortoises, not lice.'

'Give him some victuals, landlord!' Fripp the younger beckoned imperiously, 'And us some hooch!'

The beggar took off his bulky fur hat and solemnly gave off a stench that filled the room.

'Thanks be to you, m'lord,' he said. 'For today is Samhain's Eve, a holy day. It doesn't befit to drive anyone away on a holy day,

to be soaked and frozen in the rain. It befits to regale a body on a holy day . . .'

'In truth!' Rispat La Pointe slapped himself in the forehead. 'Today is Samhain's Eve! The end of October!'

'A night of witchcraft.' The beggar slurped the watery broth he was brought. 'A night of ghosts and horrors!'

'Oho!' said Yuz Jannowitz. 'The old gimmer, heed you, is about to divert us with beggarly tales!'

'Let him divert us,' Dede Vargas yawned. 'Anything's better than this boredom!'

'Samhain,' repeated Cyprian Fripp the younger. 'It's already five weeks since Unicorn. And two weeks that we've been here. Two whole weeks! Samhain, ha!'

'A night of portents.' The beggar licked the spoon, fished something out of the bowl with a finger and ate it. 'A night of dread and witchcraft!'

'What did I say?' Yuz Jannowitz grinned. 'We'll have a beggar's tale!'

The beggar sat up straight, scratched himself and hiccoughed.

'Samhain Eve,' he began with emphasis, 'the last night before the November new moon, is the last night of the old year to the elves and when the new day dawns it'll be their New Year. Thus there is among the elves a custom that on the night of Samhain every fire in the homestead and yard should be lit with a single pitch taper, and the rest of the taper stowed well away until May, when Beltane is kindled with the same flame. Then, they say, there will be prosperity. Not only elves do thus; some of our folk do likewise. To protect themselves from evil spirits . . .'

'Ghosts!' Yuz snorted. 'Just listen to the old fart!'

'It's Samhain night!' the beggar said in an excited voice. 'On this night spirits walk the earth! The spirits of the dead knock on the windows. "Let us in," they moan, "let us in". Then they should be given honey and groats, all sprinkled with vodka . . .'

'I'd sooner sprinkle my own throat with vodka,' Rispat La Pointe chortled. 'And your ghosts, old man, can kiss me right here.'

'Oh, m'lord, don't make fun of ghosts, they're liable to hear, and they're vengeful! Today it's Samhain Eve, a night of dread and

witchcraft! Prick up your eyes, do you hear something rustling and tapping all about? It's the dead coming from the beyond, they want to steal into homesteads, to warm themselves by the fire and eat their fill. There, over the bare stubble fields and leafless forests rages a gale and a frost, the poor ghosts are chilled, so they head towards homesteads where there's fire and warmth. Then one mustn't forget to put out food for them in a bowl on the step, or on the threshing floor, for if the phantoms find nothing there, they go into cottages themselves after midnight, to search for—'

'Oh my!' one of the serving wenches whispered loudly, and immediately squealed, as Fripp pinched her behind.

'Not a bad tale!' he said. 'But a long way off being a good one! Pour the old man a mug of mulled wine, landlord, and perhaps he'll tell a good one! The test of a good ghost story, boys, is when you goose the wenches and they're so engrossed they don't even notice!'

The men cackled and the two girls, whose degree of attentiveness was being tested, squealed. The beggar quaffed the mulled wine, slurping loudly and burping.

'Just don't get drunk or fall asleep here!' Dede Vargas warned menacingly. 'We aren't giving you drink for nothing! Tell a tale, sing, play the pipes! We want merriment!'

The beggar opened his mouth, where a single tooth stood like a white milepost in a dark steppe.

'It, it's Samhain, m'lord! What music? What playing? 'Tis not allowed! Samhain's music is the gale outside! It's the howling of werewolves and vampires, the wailing and moaning of vengeful ghosts, and ghouls grinding their teeth! The beann'shie howls and cries and whoever hears her cry is destined to die soon. Every evil spirit leaves its hideaway, witches fly to their last coven before winter! Samhain is a night of frights, of marvels and visions! Don't venture into the forest or a leshy will maul you to death! Don't pass through the boneyard or a corpse will seize you! Better not to leave your house at all, and to be on the safe side stick a new iron knife into the threshold. No evil will dare to pass over it. Whereas womenfolk must closely guard their children, for on Samhain night a rusalka or weeper may steal her child and replace it with a loathsome changeling. And if any woman is with child she better not go outside, for a night spirit may enchant the foetus in her womb! Instead of a babe a striga with iron teeth will be born—'

'Lawks!'

‘With iron teeth. First it bites its mother’s breast. Then her hands. It bites her face . . . Ooh, but now I have a hunger . . .’

‘Have a bone, there’s still meat on it. Bain’t be healthy for old people to eat too much, they might choke and peg it, ha, ha! Oh, all right, bring him more wine, wench. Well, old man, go on about those ghosts!’

‘Samhain, m’lord, is the last night for spectres to make merry. Later the frost takes their strength away, so they sink into the Chasm, beneath the earth, from where they don’t stick their noses out the whole winter. For that reason from Samhain right until February, to the holy day of Imbaelk, is the best time for an expedition to haunted places, to search for treasure. If when it’s warm someone pokes around by a wight’s barrow, for example, the wight will awake as sure as eggs is eggs, jump out annoyed and devour the rummager. But from Samhain to Imbaelk poke and dig around, as much as you’re able: the wight sleeps soundly like an old bear.’

‘What has he dreamed up, the old bugger!’

‘But I speaks the truth, m’lord. Yes, yes. Samhain is a magical, awful night, but also at once the best for all kinds of prophecies and predictions. On such a night it’s worth telling fortunes and prophesying from bones and palms and from a white cock, from an onion, from cheese, from a cony’s innards, from a rotting flittermouse . . .’

Fripp spat on the ground.

‘The night of Samhain, a night of frights and phantoms . . . Better to sit tight at home. With all the family . . . By the fire . . .’

‘With all the family,’ Cyprian Fripp repeated, suddenly grinning voraciously at his comrades. ‘All the family, see? Along with her, what’s been slyly hiding away from us in the bushes!’

‘The blacksmith’s daughter!’ Yuz Jannowitz guessed at once. ‘That golden-haired peach! You’re cute, Fripp. Perhaps we’ll catch her at home today! Well, boys? Shall we dart over to the blacksmith’s shack?’

‘Ooh, why not now.’ Dede Vargas stretched vigorously. ‘I can see that blacksmith’s daughter in front of me now, I tell you, those titties bouncing, that little bottom wiggling . . . We ought to have taken her then, not wait, but Dacre Silifant, that stupid stickler. . . Well, but now Silifant ain’t here, and the blacksmith’s daughter’s at

home! Waiting!'

'We've already hacked down the village headman with a battle axe.' Rispat grimaced. 'We butchered the churl who came to help him. Do we need more corpses? The blacksmith and his son are built like oak trees. We won't take them with fear. We need to—'

'Cut them up,' Fripp completed the sentence calmly. 'Just cut them a little, nothing more. Drink up, we'll get set and ride to the village. We'll have ourselves a Samhain! We'll don our sheepskins with the fur on the outside, we'll bellow and clamour, the boors will think it's devils or wights!'

'Shall we fetch the blacksmith's daughter here, to our quarters, or make merry our way, in the Gemmerian style, in front of her family?'

'The one doesn't rule out the other.' Fripp the younger looked out into the night through the window's oiled parchment. 'What a blizzard's whipped up, dammit! The poplars are bending right over!'

'Oh, ho, ho,' said the beggar from over his mug. 'That isn't the wind, m'lord, that's not a blizzard! It's witches dashing astride their brooms, though some are in stone mortars, sweeping over their tracks with their brooms. Who knows when one of them may cross a fellow's path in the forest or steal up from behind? Who knows when she may attack! And she has teeth like these!'

'It's children you should be frightening with witches, beggar!'

'Don't speak, my liege, at the wrong time. For I'll tell you more, that the most menacing hags, the countesses and duchesses of the witchly state, oh, ho, ho, they don't ride on brooms, or on peels or in mortars, no! Those ones gallop on their black cats!'

'He, he, he, he!'

'It be the truth! For on Samhain Eve, on that one and only night of the year, hags' cats turn into mares as black as pitch. And woe betide he who on a night as black as a pall hears the clatter of hooves and sees a hag on a black mare. He who meets such a witch will not shun death. The witch will twist him around like a leaf blown in the wind and carry him off to the beyond!'

'You can finish when we return! And come up with a good tale, you bloody beggar, and make ready your pipes! When we return, there'll be revels here! There'll be dancing and the blacksmith's

maid will be dandled . . . What is it, Rispat?'

Rispat La Pointe, who had gone out onto the porch to relieve himself, returned at a run with a face as white as snow. He was gesticulating frantically, pointing at the door. He didn't manage to utter a word. And there was no need. A horse neighed loudly from the courtyard.

'The black mare,' said Fripp, his face almost stuck to the parchment. 'The same black mare. It's her.'

'A witch?'

'It's Falka, you dolt.'

'It's her ghost!' Rispat sucked in air. 'A phantom! She *can't* have survived! She died and is returned as a spectre! On the night of Samhain . . .'

'She will come at night like a black pall,' muttered the beggar, pressing the empty mug to his belly. 'And who shall meet her will not avoid death . . .'

'Weapons, get your weapons,' Fripp said excitedly. 'Quickly! Cover the door from both sides! Don't you understand? We've struck lucky! Falka doesn't know about us, she's come here to get warm, cold and hunger have driven her out of her hideout! Straight into our arms! Tawny Owl and Rience will shower us with gold! Get your weapons . . .'

The door creaked.

The beggar hunched over the table and squinted. His sight was poor. His eyes were old and ruined, fogged and chronically sore. On top of that it was gloomy and smoky in the tavern. So the beggar could barely see the slender figure that had entered the main chamber from the hallway, dressed in a jerkin of muskrat pelts, wearing a hood and shawl which covered her face. The beggar had good hearing, though. He heard the soft cry of one of the serving wenches, the clatter of the other's clogs and the innkeeper's hushed curse. He heard the scraping of swords in scabbards. And Cyprian Fripp's quiet, scornful voice:

'We have you, Falka! Didn't expect us here, did you?'

'Oh, yes I did,' the beggar heard. And he trembled at the sound of her voice.

He saw the slender figure move and heard a sigh of terror. The muffled scream of one of the wenches. He couldn't see that the girl

named Falka had removed her hood and shawl. He couldn't see her hideously disfigured face. Or her eyes painted all around with a paste of soot and grease, like a demon's.

'I am not Falka,' said the girl. The beggar saw again her fast, blurred movement, saw something shine fierily in the light of the cressets.

'I'm Ciri of Kaer Morhen. I'm a witcher! I've come here to kill you.'

The beggar, who had seen many a tavern brawl in his life, had a practiced method for avoiding injury: he ducked under the table, curled up and grabbed the table legs tightly. From that position, naturally, he couldn't see anything. And didn't want to. He was clutching the table tightly, and it was sliding around the room with the other furniture, amidst clattering, banging and crunching, the thudding of heavily booted feet, curses, shouts, grunts and the clanging of steel.

One of the serving wenches was yelling shrilly, unremittingly.

Someone tumbled onto the table, shifting it along with the beggar, and fell onto the floor alongside him. The beggar yelled, feeling hot blood splash onto him. Dede Vargas, the one who had at first wanted to drive him away – the beggar recognised him by the brass buttons on his jerkin – croaked horribly and thrashed about, spurting blood and flailing his arms around. One of his wild movements caught the beggar right in the eye. He could no longer see anything. The screaming serving wench choked, fell silent, took a breath and began to yell again, at a somewhat higher pitch.

Someone sprawled on the floor with a thud and blood splashed the freshly cleaned pine floorboards. The beggar couldn't tell that the dying man was Rispat La Pointe, slashed in the side of the neck by Ciri. He didn't see her turn a pirouette right in front of Fripp and Jannowitz's noses, and pass through their guards like a shade, like grey smoke. Jannowitz slipped behind her with a swift, soft, feline turn. He was an expert swordsman. Standing firmly on his right foot he struck out with a long, extended thrust, aiming at the girl's face, straight at her hideous scar. He couldn't miss.

But he did.

He was too slow to shield himself. She lunged from close up, two-handed, cutting him across his chest and stomach. And at once sprang back, whirled around, evading Fripp's blow, and slashing the

crouching Jannowitz across the neck. Jannowitz pitched over headfirst against a bench. Fripp leaped over the bench and the corpse and struck powerfully. Ciri parried obliquely, made a half-turn and jabbed him in the side above his hip. Fripp staggered, sprawled onto the table and instinctively extended his arms in front of himself to keep his balance. The moment he rested his hand on the table Ciri hacked it off in a swift slash.

Fripp raised the stump spurting blood, examined it intently and then looked at the hand lying on the table. And suddenly dropped – sitting down heavily on the floor with a thud, just as though he had slipped on some soap. He sat, yelling, and then began to bay, with a savage, high-pitched, long-drawn-out wolf-like howl. Crouching under the table, the blood-drenched beggar heard the ghastly duet continue for a moment – the monotonously yelling serving wench and the spasmodically howling Fripp.

The wench was the first to fall silent, her screaming ending in an inhuman, choking croak. Fripp simply fell silent. ‘Mamma . . .’ he suddenly said, utterly distinctly and lucidly. ‘Dear mamma . . . What is this . . . ? How did . . . ? What has . . . happened to me? What’s . . . the matter with me?’

‘You’re dying,’ said the disfigured girl.

What was left of the beggar’s hair stood up on his head. He clenched his teeth on the sleeve of his coat in order to stop them chattering.

Cyprian Fripp the younger made a sound as though he was having difficulty swallowing. After that he uttered no more sounds. None at all.

It was completely silent.

‘What have you done . . . ?’ the innkeeper groaned in the silence. ‘What have you done, girl . . . ?’

‘I’m a witcher. I kill monsters.’

‘They’ll hang us . . . They’ll burn down the tavern and the village!’

‘I kill monsters,’ she repeated, but in her voice suddenly appeared something like surprise. Something like hesitancy. Uncertainty.

The innkeeper moaned and groaned. And sobbed.

The beggar slowly emerged from under the table, moving away

from Dede Vargas's body, and his hideously mutilated face.

'You ride a black mare . . .' he mumbled. 'On a night as black as a pall . . . You sweep away the tracks behind you . . .'

The girl turned around and looked at him. She had already wrapped the shawl around her face and the black-ringed spectral eyes looked out from over it.

'Whoever meets you,' the beggar mumbled, 'will not avoid death . . . For you yourself are death.'

The girl looked long at him. Long. And rather dispassionately.

'You're right,' she said finally.

*

Somewhere in the swamps, far away, but much closer than before, a beann'shie's plaintive wailing sounded a second time.

Vysogota lay on the floor, where he had collapsed as he was getting out of bed. He found to his horror that he couldn't stand up. His heart pounded in his throat, choking him.

Now he knew whose death the elven apparition's nocturnal cry was auguring. Life was beautiful, he thought. In spite of everything.

'O Gods . . .' he whispered. 'I don't believe in you . . . But if you do exist . . .'

A dreadful pain suddenly exploded in his chest, behind his breastbone. Somewhere in the swamps, far away, but much nearer than before, the beann'shie howled savagely for the third time.

'If you do exist, protect the witcher girl on the road!'

‘I have enormous eyes, all the better to see you with!’ shrieked the great, iron wolf. ‘I have enormous paws, all the better to seize and hug you with! Everything about me is enormous, everything, and soon you will discover it for yourself. Why are you looking at me so strangely, little girl? Why do you not answer?

The witcher girl smiled.

‘I have a surprise for you.’

Flourens Delannoy,

The Surprise, from the book *Fairy Tales and Stories*

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The novices stood before the high priestess as straight as ramrods, tense, mute, slightly pale. They were ready to set off, prepared down to the minutest detail. Men's grey travelling clothes, warm, loose-fitting sheepskin coats and comfortable elven boots. Haircuts which could easily be kept clean and tidy on camps and marches, so as not to interfere with work. Very small bundles, containing only provisions and essential equipment. The army was to provide them with the rest. The army they were enlisting in.

The faces of the two girls were composed. Seemingly. Triss Merigold could see that the hands and lips of the two girls were quivering faintly.

The wind tugged at the bare branches of the trees in the temple grounds, swept dead leaves across the flagstones of the courtyard. The sky was a deep blue. A blizzard was in the air. You could feel it.

Nenneke broke the silence.

'Do you have your postings?'

'I don't,' Eurneid mumbled. 'For the moment I'll be in winter quarters in a camp outside Vizima. The recruiting officer said that in the spring mercenary units from the North will be stopping there . . . I'm to be a nurse in one of them.'

'But I,' said Iola the Second, 'already have my posting. To Mr Milo Vanderbeck, field surgeon.'

'Mind you don't disgrace me.' Nenneke gave the novices a menacing look. 'Mind you dishonour neither myself, nor the temple, nor the name of Great Melitele.'

'Certainly not, O mother.'

'And look after yourselves.'

'Yes, O mother.'

'You'll be dead tired attending the wounded, you will not know sleep. You'll be frightened and have doubts as you gaze on pain and death. And then it's easy to misuse narcotics or stimulants. Be careful of that.'

‘We know, O mother.’

‘War, fear, slaughter and blood,’ the high priestess’ eyes drilled into the two girls, ‘mean a slackening of morals, and for some are also a powerful aphrodisiac. How they will act on you, my girls, you do not and cannot know at present. Please be careful about that too. If, though, it comes to it, take preventative measures. Should one of you get into trouble, in spite of that, stay well away from shady quacksalvers and village wise-women! Search for a temple, or better yet a sorceress.’

‘We know, O mother.’

‘That’s everything. Now come closer to receive my blessing.’

She placed her hands on their heads in turn, embraced and kissed them in turn. Eurneid sniffed, Iola the Second simply burst into tears. Nenneke, although her eyes were shining a little more than usual, snorted.

‘Don’t make a scene,’ she said, seemingly crossly and sharply. ‘You’re going to a normal war. People return from them. Take your things and I bid you goodbye.’

‘Goodbye, O mother.’

They walked briskly towards the temple gate, without looking back. The high priestess Nenneke, the sorceress Triss Merigold and the scribe Jarre watched them go.

Jarre drew attention to himself by grunting intrusively.

‘What’s the matter?’ Nenneke glared at him.

‘You let them!’ the boy exploded bitterly. ‘You allowed them, girls, to sign up! And me? Why am I not allowed? Am I to continue leafing through dusty parchments, here, behind these walls? I’m neither a cripple nor a coward! It’s a disgrace for me to stay in the temple, when even girls—’

‘Those girls,’ the high priestess interrupted, ‘have spent their whole young lives learning to treat and heal illnesses and to care for the sick and wounded. They are going to war not out of patriotism or a hankering after adventure, but because there are countless wounded and sick people there. Piles of work, day and night! Eurneid and Iola, Myrrha, Katje, Prine, Debora and the other girls are the temple’s contribution to this war. The temple, as part of society, is repaying its debt to society. It’s giving the army and the war its contribution: experts and specialists. Do you understand

that, Jarre? Specialists! Not arrow fodder!'

'Everybody's joining the army! Only cowards are staying at home!'

'You're talking nonsense, Jarre,' Triss said sharply. 'You don't understand anything.'

'I want to go to war . . .' the boy's voice broke. 'I want to rescue . . . Ciri . . .'

'My, my,' Nenneke said mockingly. 'The knight errant wants to ride out to rescue his sweetheart. On a white horse . . .'

She fell silent under the sorceress's gaze.

'In any case; enough of this, Jarre.' She shot the boy a black look. 'I said I'm not letting you! Return to your books! Study. Your future is scholarship. Come, Triss. Let's not waste time.'

*

A bone comb, a cheap ring, a book with a tattered binding, and a faded light blue sash lay spread out on a cloth before the altar. Iola the First, a priestess with prophetic powers, was kneeling over the objects.

'Don't hurry, Iola,' Nenneke, standing beside her, warned. 'Start concentrating slowly. We don't want a dazzling prophecy, we don't want an enigma with a thousand solutions. We want an image. A distinct image. Take the aura from these objects; they belonged to Ciri, Ciri touched them. Take the aura. Slowly. There's no hurry.'

Outside, a strong wind howled and a snowstorm whirled. Snow quickly covered the temple's roofs and courtyard. It was the nineteenth day of November. A full moon.

'I'm ready, O mother,' Iola the First said in her melodious voice.

'Begin.'

'One moment.' Triss sprang up from the bench and threw the chinchilla fur from her shoulders. 'One moment, Nenneke. I want to enter the trance with her.'

'That isn't safe.'

‘I know. But I want to see. With my own eyes. I owe her that. I owe it to Ciri . . . I love that girl like a sister. She saved my life in Kaedwen, risking her own life to do it . . .’

The sorceress’s voice suddenly broke.

‘Just like Jarre.’ The high priestess shook her head. ‘Run to the rescue, blindly, recklessly, not knowing where or why. But Jarre is a naive young boy, and you’re supposedly a mature, wise sorceress. You ought to know that you won’t be helping Ciri by entering a trance. But you may harm yourself.’

‘I want to enter the trance with Iola,’ Triss repeated, biting her lip. ‘Let me, Nenneke. As a matter of fact, what am I risking? An epileptic fit? Even if I am, you’d pull me out of it, wouldn’t you?’

‘You risk,’ Nenneke said slowly, ‘seeing things you ought not to see.’

The hill, Triss thought in horror, *Sodden Hill. Where I died. Where I was buried and my name was carved into the obelisk over the grave. The hill and the grave that will one day call for me.*

I know it. It was prophesied.

‘I’ve already made my decision,’ she said coldly, haughtily standing up and throwing her luxuriant hair back with both hands onto her shoulders.

‘Let us begin.’

Nenneke kneeled down and rested her forehead on her folded hands.

‘Let us begin,’ she said softly. ‘Make ready, Iola. Kneel beside me, Triss. Take Iola’s hand.’

It was dark outside. The snowstorm moaned. Snow was falling.

*

In the South, far beyond the Amell mountains, in Metinna, in a land called Hundred Lakes, in a place far from the town of Ellander and the Temple of Melitele, five hundred miles away as the crow flies, a nightmare jolted the fisherman Gosta awake. After waking, Gosta could remember nothing of the dream, but an eerie anxiety kept him awake for a long time.

*

Every experienced angler knows you must wait for the first ice to land a perch.

That year, the winter – although unexpectedly early – played tricks and was as fickle as a pretty, popular girl. The first frost and snowstorm came as an unpleasant surprise, like a brigand from an ambush, at the beginning of November, right after Samhain, when no one had been expecting snow or frost and there was still plenty of work to do. By the middle of November the lake was already glazed over with a very thin layer of ice, which seemed just about able to bear the weight of a man, when the fickle winter suddenly subsided. Autumn returned, torrents of rain shattered the ice and a warm, southerly wind pushed it against the bank and melted it. What the devil? the peasants wondered. Is this winter or is it not?

Not even three days passed before winter returned. This time it came with no snow, with no wind; instead, the frost gripped like a pair of blacksmith's tongs until everything creaked. Over the course of a night the eaves dripping with water now grinned with sharp-fanged icicles, and astonished waterfowl almost froze to their duck ponds.

And the lakes of Centloch heaved a sigh and turned to ice.

Gosta waited one more day, just to be sure, then took the chest with a shoulder strap where he kept his fishing tackle down from the loft. He stuffed his boots well with straw, donned a sheepskin coat, took his chisel and a sack and hurried to the lake.

It's common knowledge that it's best to fish for perch with the first ice.

The ice was thick. It sagged a little beneath the man, groaned a little, but held firm. Gosta reached the broad water, cut an ice-hole with the chisel, sat down on the chest, unwound a horsehair line fastened to a short larch rod, attached a little tin fish with a hook, and cast it into the water. The first perch, measuring half a cubit, snatched the bait before it had sunk or the line become taut.

Before an hour was up more than four dozen striped green fish with blood-red fins lay all around the ice hole. Gosta had more perch than he needed, but his angler's euphoria wouldn't let him

stop fishing. After all, he could always give the fish away to his neighbours.

He heard a long-drawn-out snort.

He lifted his head up from the ice hole. A splendid black horse was standing on the lake shore, steam belching from its nostrils. The face of the rider, who was dressed in a muskrat coat, was covered.

Gosta swallowed. It was too late to run. In his heart of hearts he hoped the rider wouldn't dare to venture out onto the thin ice.

He was still mechanically moving his rod as another perch jerked the line. The angler hauled it out, removed the hook and tossed it down on the ice. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the rider dismount, toss the reins onto a leafless bush and walk towards him, treading gingerly on the slippery surface. The perch flapped about on the ice, flexing its spined dorsal fin and moving its gills. Gosta stood up and reached for his chisel, which as a last resort might serve as a weapon.

'Fear not.'

It was a girl. Now, the scarf was removed he could see her face, disfigured by a hideous scar. On her back was a sword. He saw a hilt of exquisite workmanship, sticking up above her shoulder.

'I won't do you any harm,' she said quietly. 'I only want to ask the way.'

Course you do, thought Gosta. *Pull the other one. Now, in winter. In the frost. Who treks or travels? Only a brigand. Or an outcast.*

'This land, is it Mil Trachta?'

'It is . . .' he mumbled, staring into the ice hole, into the black water. 'Mil Trachta. But we says: Hundred Lakes.'

'And Tarn Mira lake? Do you know of such a place?'

'Everyone does.' He glanced at the girl, frightened. 'We calls it Bottomless Lake, mind. It's enchanted. Awfully deep . . . Rusalkas live there, drown folk, they do. And phantoms live in the ancient, enchanted ruins.'

He saw her green eyes light up.

'There are ruins there? A tower, perhaps?'

'What tower?' He couldn't suppress a snort. 'Stone upon stone,

covered over with stone, overgrown with weeds. A heap of rubble . . .'

The perch had stopped flopping, and was lying, moving its gills, amidst its colourful, striped brothers. The girl stared at it, lost in thought.

'Death on the ice,' she said, 'has something bewitching about it.'

'Eh?'

'How far is it to the lake with the ruins? Which way should I ride?'

He told her. He showed her. He even scratched it on the ice with the sharp end of the chisel. She nodded, trying to remember. The mare at the lakeside struck its hooves on the frozen ground and snorted, belching steam from its nostrils.

*

He watched her move away along the western edge of the lake, gallop along the edge of the cliff against a background of leafless alders and birches, through a breathtaking, fairy-tale forest, adorned with a white icing of hoarfrost. The black mare ran with unutterable grace, swiftly, but at the same time lightly, the beat of its hooves barely audible on the frozen ground, a faint silver powder of snow dropping from the branches it knocked against. As though it were not an ordinary horse but one from a fairy-tale, as if a spectral horse was running through a mythical forest, the trees bound in hoarfrost like icing.

And perhaps it *was* an apparition?

A demon on a ghostly horse, a demon that assumed the form of a girl with huge green eyes and a disfigured face?

Who, if not a demon, travels in winter? Or asks the way to enchanted ruins?

After she had ridden away, Gosta quickly packed away his fishing tackle. He walked home through the forest. He was going out of his way, but his good sense and instincts warned him not to take the forest tracks, to stay out of sight. The girl, his good sense told him, had not – contrary to all appearances – been a phantom.

She was a human being. The black mare hadn't been an apparition, it was a horse. And people who gallop through the wilds – in winter, to boot – are very often being hunted.

An hour later a search party galloped along the forest track. Fourteen horses.

*

Rience shook the silver box once again, swore and smacked his saddle pommel in fury. But the xenogloss was silent. As the grave.

'Magic shit,' commented Bonhart coldly. 'It's broken, the cheap gewgaw.'

'Or Vilgefortz is showing what he thinks of us,' Stefan Skellen added.

Rience raised his head and glared at the two of them.

'Thanks to this cheap gewgaw,' he stated caustically, 'we're on the trail and won't lose it now. Thanks to Lord Vilgefortz we know which way the girl is headed. We know where we're going and what we have to do. I'd call that plenty. Compared to your efforts of a month ago.'

'Don't talk so much. Hey, Boreas? What does the trail say?'

Boreas Mun straightened up and cleared his throat.

'She was here an hour before us. She's riding hard where she can. But it's difficult terrain. Even on that exceptional mare she's not more than five, six miles ahead of us.'

'And so she's still pushing on among those lakes,' Skellen muttered. 'Vilgefortz was right. And I didn't believe him . . .'

'Neither did I,' Bonhart admitted. 'Until yesterday, when those peasants confirmed there really is some kind of magical structure by Tarn Mira.'

The horses snorted, steam billowing from their nostrils. Tawny Owl glanced over his left shoulder at Joanna Selborne. For several days he had been none too pleased by the telepath's expression. I'm getting edgy, he thought. This chase has exhausted all of us, physically and mentally. It's time to be done with it. High time.

A cold shudder ran down his back. He recalled the dream that

had visited him the night before.

‘Very well!’ he said, coming back to his senses. ‘That’s enough meditation. To horse!’

*

Boreas Mun hung from his saddle, looking for tracks. It wasn’t easy. The earth had frozen solid, hard as iron, and the loose snow, quickly blown away by the wind, only lingered in furrows and clefts. It was in them that Boreas was searching for the black mare’s hoof prints. He had to pay close attention in order not to lose the trail, especially now, when the magical voice coming from the silver box had fallen silent, stopped giving advice and instructions.

He was unbelievably weary. And anxious. They’d been tracking the girl for almost three weeks, since Samhain and the massacre in Dun Dare. Almost three weeks in the saddle, constantly on the hunt. And still neither the black mare nor the girl riding it had weakened or slowed their pace.

Boreas Mun looked for tracks.

He couldn’t stop thinking about a dream from the night before. In it he had been drowning. The black water had closed over his head and he sank to the bottom, the icy water gushing into his throat and lungs. He awoke hot and sweaty, wet through, although a truly bitter winter was raging around them.

That’s enough, he thought, hanging from his saddle, looking for tracks. It’s high time we were done with it.

*

‘Master? Do you hear me? Master?’

The xenogloss was silent as the grave.

Rience moved his arms vigorously and breathed on his numb hands. The cold nipped his neck and shoulders, his lower back and loins hurt; each jolt of the horse reminded him of the pain. He didn’t even feel like swearing. Almost three weeks in the saddle, in an unending pursuit. In the bitter cold and for several days in

severe frost.

And Vilgefortz was silent.

We are too. And we're scowling at each other.

Rience rubbed his hands and pulled down his sleeves.

Skellen, he thought, looks at me strangely. Might he be plotting a betrayal? He came to an agreement with Vilgefortz too quickly and too easily back then . . . And that troop, those thugs, it's him they're loyal to, it's his orders they carry out. When we seize the maid, he's liable – heedless of the agreement – to kill or carry her away to those conspirators of his, in order to enact his insane ideas about democracy and civil government.

But perhaps Skellen's got over his conspiracies by now? Perhaps that born conformist and opportunist is now thinking about delivering the maid to Emperor Emhyr?

He looks at me strangely. That Tawny Owl. And that whole mob of his . . . That Kenna Selborne . . .

And Bonhart? Bonhart is an unpredictable sadist. When he speaks of Ciri, his voice trembles with fury. Depending on his whims, if we capture the girl he's liable to beat her to death or kidnap her and make her fight in the arena. The agreement with Vilgefortz? He won't care about it. Particularly now, when Vilgefortz . . .

He removed the xenogloss from his bosom.

'Master? Do you hear me? It's Rience . . .'

The device was silent. Rience didn't even feel like swearing.

Vilgefortz remains silent. Skellen and Bonhart made a pact with him. Only in a day or two, when we catch up with the girl, it may turn out that there is no pact. And then I might have my throat cut. Or ride in fetters to Nilfgaard, as proof of and as ransom against Tawny Owl's loyalty . . .

Sod it!

Vilgefortz remains silent. He isn't giving us any advice. He's not giving us directions. He isn't dispelling our doubts with his calm, logical voice, which touches the depths of your soul. He's silent.

The xenogloss has broken down. Perhaps because of the cold? Or maybe . . .

Maybe Skellen was right? Perhaps Vilgefortz really has turned his attention to something else and doesn't care about us or our fate?

By all the devils, I never thought it would turn out like this. Had I, I wouldn't have been so enthusiastic about this mission . . . I would have gone and killed the Witcher instead of Schirrú . . . Damn it! I'm freezing out here and Schirrú is probably nice and warm . . .

To think that I insisted on going after Ciri, and Schirrú after the Witcher. I asked for it myself . . . Back at the beginning of September when Yennefer fell into our hands.

*

The world, a moment ago still an unreal, soft and muddily sticky blackness, abruptly took on hard surfaces and contours. It became brighter. And materialised.

Yennefer opened her eyes, rocked by convulsive shivers. She lay on the stones, among dead bodies and tarred planks, littered with the remains of the rigging of the longship *Alkyone*. She could see feet all around her. Feet in heavy boots. One of the boots had just kicked her, to bring her around.

'Get up, witch!'

Another kick, sending pain shooting right into the roots of her teeth. She saw a face bending over her. 'Get up, I said! On your feet! Recognise me?'

She blinked. Yes, she did. It was the man she had burned, when he was fleeing from her using a teleporter. Rience.

'We'll square accounts,' he promised her. 'We'll square accounts for everything, you slut. I'll teach you what pain is. I'll teach you what pain is with these fingers and these hands.'

She tensed up, clenched and spread her fingers, ready to cast a spell. And immediately curled up in a ball, choking, wheezing and trembling. Rience guffawed.

'Nothing doing, eh?' she heard. 'You haven't even got a scrap of power! You're no match for Vilgefortz when it comes to sorcery! He's squeezed the very last drop out of you, like whey from curds.

You can't even—'

He didn't complete the sentence. Yennefer pulled out a dagger from a sheath fastened to her inner thigh, sprang like a cat and thrust blindly. She missed. The blade merely brushed her target, tearing his trousers. Rience leaped aside and fell over.

Immediately, a hail of blows and kicks rained down on her. She howled as a heavy boot dropped on her hand, squeezing the dagger from her crushed fist. Another boot kicked her in the belly. The sorceress curled up, rasping. She was picked up from the ground, her arms jerked behind her. She saw a fist flying towards her, the world suddenly flashed brightly, and her face exploded with pain. A wave of pain passed downwards, to her stomach and crotch, transforming her knees into a thin jelly. She drooped in the arms holding her up. Someone seized her from behind by the hair, lifting up her head. She was struck once more, in the eye socket, and again everything vanished in a blinding flash.

She didn't faint. She could still feel. They beat her. They beat her hard, cruelly, as a man is beaten. With blows that aren't just meant to hurt, but meant to fracture, meant to crush all energy and the will to resist from the victim. She was beaten, jerking in the steely grip of many hands.

She wanted to faint but couldn't. She could feel it.

'Enough,' she suddenly heard from far away, from behind the curtain of pain. 'Have you gone mad, Rience? Do you mean to kill her? I need her alive.'

'I vowed to her, master,' snarled the shadow looming in front of her, which gradually took on Rience's form and face. 'I promised I'd pay her back . . . With these hands . . .'

'I care little for what you promised her. I repeat, I need her alive and capable of articulated speech.'

'It's not so easy,' laughed the one holding her by the hair, 'to knock the life out of a cat or a witch.'

'Don't be clever, Schirrú. I said she's been sufficiently beaten. Pick her up. How do you do, Yennefer?' The sorceress spat red and lifted her puffy face. At first she didn't recognise him. He was wearing a kind of mask, covering the entire left side of his head. But she knew who it was.

'Go to hell, Vilgefortz,' she mumbled, gingerly touching her

front teeth and cut lips with her tongue.

‘What did you make of my spell? Did you like it when I lifted you and that boat up from the sea? Did you enjoy the flight? What charms did you protect yourself with to survive the fall?’

‘Go to hell.’

‘Tear that star from her neck. And to the laboratory with her. Let’s not waste time.’

She was dragged, pulled, occasionally carried. A stony plain, with *Alkyone* lying smashed on it amid numerous other wrecks with protruding ribs, like the skeletons of sea monsters. Crach was right, she thought. The ships that disappeared without trace on the Sedna Abyss weren’t victims of natural disasters. Ye Gods . . . Pavetta and Duny . . .

Above the plain, in the distance, mountain peaks thrust up into the overcast sky.

Then there were walls, gates, cloisters, floors, staircases. Everything somehow odd, unnaturally large . . . Still too few details to let her work out where she was, where she’d come to, where the spell had carried her. Her face was swelling up, making observations all the more difficult. Smell became the one sense supplying her with information – she smelled formalin, ether and spirits. And magic. The smells of a laboratory. She was brutally shoved down into a steel armchair. Cold, painfully tight clamps slammed shut on her wrists and ankles. Before the steel jaws of a vice tightened on her temples and immobilised her head, she managed to glance around the large and glaringly lit room. She saw one more armchair and a strange steel construction on the stone floor.

‘Yes indeed,’ she heard the voice of Vilgefortz from behind her. ‘That little chair is for your Ciri. It’s been here for ages; it can’t wait. Neither can I.’

She heard him up close, literally felt his breath. He stuck some needles into her head, attached something to her ears. Then he stood before her and removed the mask. Yennefer sucked in air involuntarily.

‘That’s the work of your Ciri,’ he said, indicating his once classically beautiful, now hideously mutilated face, criss-crossed with golden clasps and fastenings securing a multifaceted crystal in his left eye socket.

‘I tried to catch her when she entered the Tower of the Gull,’ the sorcerer calmly explained. ‘I meant to save her life, certain that the teleporter would kill her. How naive of me! She passed through smoothly, with such force that the portal exploded, blew up right in my face. I lost an eye and my left cheek, as well as a lot of skin from my face, neck and chest. A very disagreeable, very bothersome, very complicated accident. And very ugly, isn’t it? Ha, you ought to have seen me before I began to regenerate magically.

‘If I believed in such things,’ he continued, pushing a bent copper tube into her nose, ‘I’d have thought it was Lydia van Bredevoort’s revenge. From beyond the grave. I’m regenerating, but it’s slow, time-consuming and heavy going. It’s particularly difficult with the regeneration of the eyeball . . . The crystal in my eye socket plays its role splendidly; I can see in three dimensions, but yet it’s a foreign body, and the lack of a natural eyeball occasionally makes me absolutely furious. Then, seized by – let’s face it – irrational anger, I vow to myself that when I catch Ciri – immediately after catching her – I’ll order Rience to pluck out one of those huge, green eyes. With his fingers. With these fingers, as he likes to say. You’re saying nothing, Yennefer? Perhaps because you know I’d also like to rip out one of your eyes? Or both?’

He stuck thick needles into the veins on the back of her hands. Sometimes he missed and jabbed to the very bone. Yennefer gritted her teeth.

‘You’ve caused me problems. You’ve made me interrupt my work. You’ve exposed me to risk. Forcing your way over the Sedna Abyss in that boat, towards my Maelstrom . . . The echo of our brief duel was powerful and travelled far, it may have reached the wrong ears, prying ears. But I couldn’t stop myself. The thought that I would have you here, that I’d be able to connect you up to my scanner, was too appealing.

‘For you can’t possibly imagine –’ he stuck in another needle ‘– that I was taken in by your provocation? That I swallowed the bait? No, Yennefer. If you think so, you’re mistaking stars reflected in the surface of a pond at night for the sky. You thought you were tracking me, whereas in fact I was tracking you. You made my job easier by sailing over the Abyss. For I cannot find Ciri, you see, even with the help of my peerless scanning device. The girl has powerful, innate defence mechanisms, her own powerful anti-magical and suppressive aura: it’s the Elder Blood, after all. But my super-scanners ought to detect her anyhow. Yet they don’t.’

Yennefer was now completely entwined in a network of silver and copper wires and encased in a scaffolding of silver and porcelain tubes. Glass vessels containing colourless liquids wobbled on racks placed by the chair.

'And so I thought –' Vilgefortz thrust another tube into her nose, this time a glass one '– that the only way of tracking Ciri was an empathic probe. For that I needed someone who had a sufficiently strong emotional bond with the girl and had developed an empathic matrix, a kind of algorithm – to coin a phrase – of feelings and mutual affection. I thought about the Witcher, but he had disappeared, and besides, witchers are poor mediums. I planned to order the kidnapping of Triss Merigold, our Fourteenth from the Hill. I pondered over abducting Nenneke of Ellander . . . But when it turned out that you, Yennefer of Vengerberg, were literally forcing yourself into my hands . . . Truly I couldn't have hoped for anything better . . . Once connected to the scanner you will track down Ciri for me. Admittedly, the operation requires your cooperation . . . But there are, as you know, ways of making people cooperate.

'Of course,' he went on, rubbing his hands, 'you deserve a few explanations. For example – how did I find out about the Elder Blood? About Lara Dorren's legacy? What that gene actually is? How Ciri ended up having it? Who passed it on to her? How will I take it from her and what will I use it for? How does the Sedna Maelstrom work, who have I sucked into it, what did I do with them and why? Plenty of questions, aren't there? It's such a pity there's no time to tell you everything, explain everything. Nay, even astonish you, for I'm certain several of the facts would astonish you, Yennefer . . . But, as has been said before, there's no time. The elixirs are beginning to take effect, so it's time you started concentrating.'

The sorceress clenched her teeth, stifling the deep groan shooting from her guts.

'I know,' Vilgefortz nodded, drawing closer a professional looking megascope; a screen and a great crystal ball on a tripod, wrapped around by a web of silver wires. 'I know it's most disagreeable. And very painful. The sooner you set about scanning, the sooner it'll be over. Well, Yennefer. I want to see Ciri, here, on this screen. Where she is, who she's with, what she's doing, what she eats, where and with whom she sleeps.'

Yennefer screamed shrilly and wildly, in despair.

‘It hurts,’ Vilgefortz guessed, staring at her with his living eye and his dead crystal. ‘Well, of course it hurts. Start scanning, Yennefer. Don’t resist. Don’t play the hero. You know full well it’s impossible to endure this. The result of resistance may be pitiful; a stroke will follow, you’ll suffer paraplegia or simply turn into a vegetable. Start scanning!’

She clenched her jaw so hard her teeth creaked.

‘Why not, Yennefer?’ the mage said kindly. ‘If only out of curiosity! You’re surely curious about how your darling’s coping. Perhaps danger is hanging over her? Perhaps she’s in need? You know, after all, how many people wish Ciri ill and desire her death. Start scanning. When I find out where the girl is, I’ll bring her here. She’ll be safe . . . No one will find her here. Ever.’

His voice was warm and velvety.

‘Start scanning, Yennefer. Start scanning. I implore you. I give you my word: I’ll only take what I need from Ciri. And then I’ll give both of you your freedom. I swear.’

Yennefer gritted her teeth even harder. Blood trickled down her chin. Vilgefortz suddenly stood up and beckoned.

‘Rience!’

Yennefer felt some kind of device tightening over her hands and fingers.

‘At times,’ said Vilgefortz, bending over her, ‘where magic, elixirs and narcotics fail, what works on the stubborn is good old-fashioned pain. Don’t make me do it. Start scanning.’

‘Go to hell, Vilgefoooortz!’

‘Tighten the screws, Rience. Slowly.’

*

Vilgefortz glanced at the torpid body being dragged across the floor towards the stairs to the cellar. Then he lifted his eye towards Rience and Schirrú.

‘There’s always the risk,’ he said, ‘that one of you will fall into the hands of my enemies and be interrogated. I’d like to think that

you'll demonstrate as much fortitude. Yes, I'd like to think so. But I don't.'

Rience and Schirrú said nothing. Vilgefortz started up the megascope again and projected the image generated by the huge crystal onto the screen.

'That's all she could produce,' he said, pointing. 'I wanted Cirilla, she gave me the Witcher. Fascinating. She didn't allow the girl's empathic matrix to be wrested from her, but she cracked when it came to Geralt. And I didn't suspect her of harbouring any feelings for Geralt at all . . . Well, for now let's settle for what we have. Witcher, Cahir aep Ceallach, the bard Dandelion, some woman? Hmmm . . . Who'll undertake this task? The final solution to the witcher problem?'

*

Schirrú volunteered, recalled Rience, raising himself up in the stirrups to give his saddle-sore buttocks at least some relief. Schirrú volunteered to kill the Witcher. He recognised the countryside Yennefer had traced Geralt and his company to; he had friends or family there. Vilgefortz sent me, meanwhile, to negotiate with Vattier de Rideaux, and then to tail Skellen and Bonhart . . .

And I – stupidly – was glad at the time, certain that the easier and more pleasant task had fallen to me. One I would make short, easy, pleasant work of . . .

*

'If the peasants weren't lying –' Stefan Skellen stood up in his stirrups '– the lake must be over that hill, in the valley.'

'The trail leads there,' Boreas Mun confirmed.

'Why have we stopped here?' Rience rubbed a frozen ear. 'Spur on the horses and let's go!'

'Not so fast.' Bonhart held him back. 'Let's split up. We'll encircle the valley. We don't know which of the lake's shores she took. If we choose the wrong way, we may put the lake between us.'

‘How very true,’ Boreas nodded.

‘The lake’s frozen over.’

‘It may be too thin for the horses. Bonhart’s right, we must split up.’

Skellen quickly issued orders. The group led by Bonhart, Rience and Ola Harsheim, numbering seven horses in total, galloped along the eastern shore, quickly disappearing into the black forest.

‘Very well,’ Tawny Owl ordered. ‘Let’s go, Silifant . . .’

He realised at once that something wasn’t right.

He reined his horse around, slapped it with his knout and rode directly for Joanna Selborne. Kenna backed up her mount, and her face seemed to be made of stone.

‘It’s no use, sir,’ she said hoarsely. ‘Don’t even try. We’re not going with you. We’re turning back. We’ve had enough.’

‘We?’ Dacre Silifant yelled. ‘Who’s “we”? What is this, a mutiny?’

Skellen leaned over in the saddle and spat on the frozen earth. Andres Vierny and Til Echrade, the fair-haired elf, had stopped behind Kenna.

‘Miss Selborne,’ said Tawny Owl scathingly, in a slow, drawling voice, ‘It isn’t the point that you are squandering a very promising career, that you’re permanently throwing away the chance of a lifetime. You’ll be handed over to the hangman. Along with these fools who’ve listened to you.’

‘Whoever’s meant to hang won’t drown,’ Kenna replied philosophically. ‘And don’t threaten us with the hangman, sir. For who knows who’s closer to the scaffold; you or us.’

‘Is that what you think?’ Tawny Owl’s eyes flashed. ‘You’re convinced of that after slyly eavesdropping on somebody’s thoughts? I thought you were cleverer than that. But you’re stupid, woman. Whoever’s with me wins, whoever’s against me always loses! Remember that, girl. Even though you think I’m incriminated now, I’ll still manage to send you to hang. Do you hear, you mutineers? I’ll have your flesh torn from your bones with red hooks.’

‘We have but one life, sir,’ Til Echrade said softly. ‘You’ve

chosen your way, and we've chosen ours. Both are uncertain and risky. And no one knows what fate will befall any of us.'

'You won't set us on the girl like dogs, Mr Skellen, sir.' Kenna raised her head proudly. 'And we won't let ourselves be killed like dogs, like Neratin Ceka. Oh, enough talking. We're turning back! Boreas! Come with us.'

'No.' The tracker shook his head, wiping his forehead with his fur hat. 'Farewell. I don't wish you ill. But I'm staying. It's my service. I took the oath.'

'To whom?' Kenna frowned. 'The Emperor or Tawny Owl? Or a sorcerer talking from a box?'

'I'm a soldier. I serve.'

'Wait,' called Dufficey Kriel, riding out from behind Dacre Silifant. 'I'm with you. I've had enough of this too! Last night I dreamed of my own death. I don't want to croak for this lousy, suspicious affair!'

'Traitors!' yelled Dacre, flushing like a cherry. It seemed as though dark blood would spurt from his face. 'Turncoats! Miserable curs!'

'Shut your trap.' Tawny Owl was still looking at Kenna, and his eyes were just as hideous as the bird from which he took his name. 'They've chosen their way; you heard. There's no point shouting or wasting spit. But we'll meet again one day. I promise you.'

'Perhaps even on the same scaffold,' Kenna said without spitefulness. 'For they won't put you to death alongside noble princes, will they Skellen? But with us churls. But you're right, there's no point wasting spit. Let's be going. Farewell, Boreas. Farewell, Mr Silifant.'

Dacre spat over his horse's ears.

*

'And beyond what I've said here –' Joanna Selborne proudly raised her head, brushing a dark lock from her forehead '– I have nothing to add, Illustrious Tribunal.'

The convenor of the tribunal looked down on her. His face was inscrutable. His eyes grey. And decent.

Anyway, what do I care? thought Kenna. *I'll try. You can only die once; sink or swim. I'm not going to rot in the citadel and wait for death. Tawny Owl didn't make wild promises, he's liable to take revenge even from beyond the grave . . .*

What do I care? Perhaps they won't notice. Sink or swim!

She pressed her hand to her nose, seemingly wiping it. She looked straight into the grey eyes of the tribunal convener.

'Guard!' said the convener. 'Please take the witness Joanna Selborne back to . . .'

He broke off and started coughing. Sweat suddenly broke out on his forehead.

'To the tribunal chancellery,' he finished, sniffing loudly. 'Write out the appropriate documents. And release her. The witness Selborne is of no further use to the court.'

Kenna surreptitiously wiped away the drop of blood that was trickling from her nose. She smiled charmingly and thanked him with a delicate bow.

*

'They've deserted?' Bonhart repeated in disbelief. 'More of them have deserted? And just rode away, like that? Skellen? You permitted it?'

'If they inform on us . . .' Rience began, but Tawny Owl interrupted him at once.

'They won't inform, because they don't want to lose their own heads! And besides, what could I have done? When Kriel joined them, only Bert and Mun were left with me and there were four of them . . .'

'Four,' said Bonhart malevolently, 'isn't many at all. As soon as we've caught up with the girl I'll go after them. And I'll feed them to the crows. In the name of—'

'Let's catch her up first,' Tawny Owl cut him off, urging on his grey with his knout. 'Boreas! Keep your eyes on the trail!'

The valley was filling up with a dense blanket of fog, but they knew that down below was a lake, because there was a lake in

every valley in Mil Trachta. The one, meanwhile, to which the black mare's hoof prints were leading, was undoubtedly the one they were looking for, the one Vilgefortz had ordered them to look for. Which he had described to them precisely. And whose name he had given them.

Tarn Mira.

The lake was narrow, no wider than an arrow shot, crowded into a slightly bent crescent between high, steep hillsides covered in black spruce, beautifully sprinkled with a white, snowy powder. The hillsides were swathed in such a silence that there was a ringing in their ears. Even the crows – whose portentous cawing had accompanied them on the trail for the last fortnight or so – had fallen silent.

'This is the southern end,' stated Bonhart. 'If the mage hasn't made a hash of everything and landed us in it, the magical tower is on the northern shore. Keep your eyes on the trail, Boreas! If we pick up the wrong one, the lake will separate us from her!'

'The trail is clear!' Boreas Mun called from below. 'And fresh! It's leading towards the lake!'

'Ride!' Skellen brought his grey, skittering on the steep slope, under control. 'Downhill!'

They rode down the slope, cautiously, reining back the snorting horses. They struggled through the bare, black, ice-covered thicket blocking the way to the bank.

Bonhart's horse stepped gingerly onto the ice, crunching through the dry reeds sticking up from the glazed surface. The ice creaked and long arrows of cracks diverged like a star from under the horse's hooves.

'About face!' Bonhart pulled in the reins and turned his snorting horse back towards the bank. 'Dismount! The ice is thin.'

'Only by the bank, in the reeds,' Dacre Silifant judged, striking a heel onto the icy crust. 'But even here it's at least an inch and a half. It'll hold a horse sure as anything, no need to wo—'

His words were drowned out by cursing and neighing. Skellen's grey slipped, sat down on its haunches, and its legs spread apart under it. Skellen struck it with his spurs, swore again, and this time the curse was accompanied by the harsh crunch of ice breaking. The grey pounded with its fore hooves. Its hind ones,

imprisoned, thrashed about in the tangle, breaking up the ice and churning the dark water spurting from under it. Tawny Owl dismounted, tugged on the reins, but slipped and went sprawling, miraculously not falling under the hooves of his own horse. The two Gemmerians, now also on their feet, helped him up. Ola Harsheim and Bert Brigden hauled the whinnying grey out onto the bank.

'Dismount,' Bonhart repeated, his eyes fixed on the fog covering the lake. 'There's no sense risking it. We'll catch up with the maid on foot. She also dismounted, she's also moving on foot.'

'How very true,' confirmed Boreas Mun, pointing at the lake. 'It's plain to see.'

Only at the very edge, beneath overhanging branches, was the crust of ice smooth and translucent, like the dark glass of a bottle. Under it reeds and water plants turned brown were visible. Further from the bank, the ice was covered in a very thin layer of wet snow. And on it, as far as the fog permitted them to see, were dark footprints.

'We have her!' Rience cried heatedly, throwing his reins on a broken bough. 'So she's not as cunning as she seems! She set off on the ice, straight across the middle of the lake. Had she chosen one of the banks or the forest, it wouldn't have been easy to pursue her!'

'Straight across the middle of the lake . . .' Bonhart repeated, giving the impression of being lost in thought. 'The shortest and straightest way to the alleged magical tower Vilgefortz talked about leads across the middle of the lake. She knows that. Mun? How far ahead of us is she?'

Boreas Mun, who was already on the lake, knelt down over a boot print, leaned over low and examined it.

'A half-hour,' he estimated. 'Not more. It's getting warmer, but the print isn't fuzzy, you can see every hobnail in the sole.'

'The lake,' mumbled Bonhart, vainly trying to look through the fog, 'stretches north for more than five miles. So said Vilgefortz. If the maid has half an hour's start, she's about a mile ahead of us.'

'On slippery ice?' Mun shook his head. 'Not even that. Six, seven furlongs, at most.'

'Even better! March!'

'March,' Tawny Owl repeated. 'Onto the ice and quick march!'

They walked swiftly, puffing. The quarry's closeness excited

them, filled them with euphoria like a narcotic.

‘She won’t escape us!’

‘As long as we don’t lose the trail . . .’

‘And as long as she isn’t leading us up the garden path in this fog . . . It’s white as milk . . . You can’t see twenty paces ahead, dammit . . .’

‘Move your arses,’ Rience snarled. ‘Quick, quick! As long as there’s snow on the ice, we’re following her trail . . .’

‘The trail is fresh,’ Boreas Mun suddenly muttered, stopping and stooping down. ‘Very fresh . . . You can see the print of every hobnail . . . She’s just in front of us . . . Just in front of us . . . Why can’t we see her?’

‘And why can’t we hear her?’ Ola Harsheim wondered. ‘Our footsteps boom on the ice, the snow creaks. So why don’t we hear her?’

‘Because you’re yakking!’ Rience cut them off abruptly. ‘Keep marching!’

Boreas Mun took off his hat to wipe his sweat-covered forehead.

‘She’s there, in the fog,’ he said softly. ‘Somewhere there, in the fog . . . But the devil knows where. The devil knows whence she’ll strike . . . Like back there . . . In Dun Dare . . . On Samhain Eve . . .’

He began to draw his sword from its scabbard with a trembling hand. Tawny Owl leaped at him, seized him by the arm and tugged him forcefully.

‘Shut your trap, you old fool,’ he hissed.

But it was too late. The terror had spread to the others. They also drew their swords, involuntarily positioning themselves to have one of their companions behind them.

‘She’s not a spectre!’ Rience snapped loudly. ‘She isn’t even a witch! And there are ten of us! In Dun Dare there were only four and they were all drunk!’

‘Spread out,’ said Bonhart suddenly, ‘to the left and right, in a line. And move forward together! Don’t lose sight of each other.’

‘You too?’ Rience grimaced. ‘Has it infected you too, Bonhart?

I thought you were less superstitious than that.' The bounty hunter looked at him with eyes that were colder than ice.

'Spread out into a line,' he repeated, ignoring the sorcerer. 'Keep your distance. I'm going back for my horse.'

'What?'

Bonhart didn't grace Rience with an answer again. Rience swore, but Tawny Owl quickly placed a hand on his shoulder.

'Leave it,' he snapped, 'let him go. And let's not waste time! In a line! Bert and Stigward, left! Ola, right . . .'

'What for, Skellen?'

'The ice will break more easily under men walking in a group,' Boreas Mun muttered, 'than spread out in a line. Furthermore, if we walk in a line abreast, there's less of a risk the wench will outflank us.'

'Outflank us?' Rience snorted. 'How could she? The tracks in front of us are as plain as a pikestaff. The maid is going straight ahead. Were she to try to turn, the trail would betray it—'

'Enough chatter.' Tawny Owl cut them off, looking back into the fog into which Bonhart had vanished as he left them. 'Forward!' They went on.

'It's getting warmer,' Boreas Mun panted. 'The ice on top is melting, it'll form overflow ice . . .'

'The fog's getting thicker . . .'

'But the footprints can still be seen,' said Dacre Silifant. 'Moreover, it seems the girl has slowed down. Her strength is waning.'

'As is ours,' Rience tore off his hat and fanned himself with it.

'Quiet,' Silifant suddenly stopped. 'Did you hear that? What was it?'

'I didn't hear anything.'

'But I did . . . Like a scraping . . . A scraping on the ice . . . But not from there,' Boreas Mun pointed at the fog, into which the trail was fading. 'It seems to be over on the left, to the side . . .'

'I heard it too,' Tawny Owl confirmed, looking anxiously around. 'But now it's gone quiet. Dammit, I don't like it. I don't like it!'

‘The footprints!’ Rience said with wearied emphasis. ‘We can still see her footprints! Don’t you have eyes? She’s walking straight ahead! If she took even a single step to one side we’d know it from the trail! Quick march, we’ll have her soon! I give my word, we’ll see her in a moment—’

He broke off. Boreas Mun sighed so hard his lungs groaned. Tawny Owl cursed.

Ten paces in front of them, just before the limit of visibility bordered by the dense fog, the tracks ended. They vanished.

‘A pox on it!’

‘What is it?’

‘Has she taken flight or what?’

‘No.’ Boreas Mun shook his head. ‘She hasn’t. It’s worse.’

Rience swore crudely, pointing at scratches in the icy crust.

‘Skates,’ he growled, involuntarily clenching his fists. ‘She has skates . . . Now she’s darting across the ice like the wind . . . We won’t catch her! What, damn his eyes, has become of Bonhart? We won’t catch the maid without horses!’

Boreas Mun hawked loudly and sighed. Skellen slowly unbuttoned his sheepskin coat, uncovering a bandolier with a row of orions slung across his chest.

‘We won’t have to hunt her,’ he said coldly. ‘She’ll be the one hunting us. I’m afraid we won’t have long to wait.’

‘Have you gone mad?’

‘Bonhart anticipated this. That’s why he went back for his horse. He knew the girl would lure us into a trap. Beware! Listen for the grating of skates on ice!’

Dacre Silifant paled visibly despite his cheeks being flushed from the cold.

‘Fellows!’ he yelled. ‘Beware! Take heed! And gather together! Don’t get lost in the fog!’

‘Shut up!’ Tawny Owl roared. ‘Keep quiet! Absolute silence or we won’t hear . . .’

They heard. A short, strangled cry reached their ears from the fog to the left, from the furthest end of the line. And the sharp, rough grating of skates, making the hair stand on end like iron

scoring glass. ‘Bert!’ Tawny Owl yelled. ‘Bert! What’s happening over there?’

They heard an unintelligible cry, and a moment later Bert Brigden emerged from the fog, fleeing pell-mell. As soon as he was near he slipped, fell over and slid across the ice on his stomach.

‘She got . . . Stigward,’ he panted out, struggling to get up. ‘She cut him down . . . as she flashed past . . . So swiftly . . . I barely saw her . . . She’s a witch . . .’

Skellen swore. Silifant and Mun, both with swords in hand, whirled around, staring goggle-eyed into the fog. Grating. Grating. Grating. Quick. Rhythmic. And more and more clearly. More and more clearly.

‘Where’s it coming from?’ roared Boreas Mun, spinning around, flourishing the blade of his sword two-handed. ‘Where’s it coming from?’

‘Quiet!’ screamed Tawny Owl with an orion in his raised hand. ‘I think it’s from the right! Yes! From the right! She’s coming up on the right! Look out!’

The Gemmerian walking on the right wing suddenly cursed, turned around and ran blindly into the fog, sloshing through the melting layer of ice. He didn’t get far, not even out of sight. They heard the sharp grating of skates gliding and made out a blurred, flickering shadow. And the flash of a sword. The Gemmerian howled. They saw him fall, saw a broad spray of blood on the ice. The wounded man thrashed about, curled up, screamed and moaned. Then he fell silent and stopped moving.

But while he was still moaning he drowned out the sound of the skates. They didn’t expect the girl to be able to turn back so swiftly.

She fell among them, right in their midst. She cleaved Ola Harsheim as she flashed past, low, beneath the knee, folding him up like a penknife. She spun in a pirouette, covering Boreas Mun in a stinging hail of icy shards. Skellen leaped aside, slipped and caught Rience by a sleeve. They both fell over. The skates grated just beside them and cold, sharp fragments stung their faces. One of the Gemmerians yelled and his cry broke off in a savage croak. Tawny Owl knew what had happened. He’d heard many people having their throats cut.

Ola Harsheim shouted, rolling around on the ice.

Grating. Grating. Grating.

Silence.

‘Mr Stefan,’ Dacre Silifant gibbered. ‘Mr Stefan . . . You’re my only hope . . . Save me . . . Don’t let me—’

‘She’s fucking crippled meeeee!’ Ola Harsheim bellowed. ‘Help me, for fuck’s sake! Help me get up!’

‘Bonhart!’ Skellen yelled into the fog. ‘Bonhaaaart! Heeeelp us! Where are you, you whoreson? Bonhaaaart!’

‘She’s got us surrounded,’ Boreas Mun gasped, spinning around and straining to hear. ‘She’s skating around us in the fog . . . She’ll strike at will . . . Death! That wench is death! We’ll breathe our last here! It’ll be a massacre, like it was on Samhain Eve in Dun Dare . . .’

‘Stick together,’ Skellen groaned. ‘Stick together, she’s picking us off one by one . . . When you see her looming up, don’t lose your heads . . . Trip her up with swords, saddlebags, belts . . . Use anything to stop her—’

He broke off. This time, they didn’t even hear the scraping of skates. Dacre Silifant and Rience saved their lives by dropping flat onto the ice. Boreas Mun managed to jump aside, slipped, fell over and upended Bert Brigden. As the girl flashed by, Skellen swung and threw an orion. It found a target. But not the right one. Ola Harsheim, who had managed to get up, tumbled over in convulsions onto the blood-spattered ice; his staring eyes seemed to cross on the steel star sticking out of the bridge of his nose.

The last of the Gemmerians threw down his sword and began to sob in short, choking spasms. Skellen sprang at him and struck him hard in the face.

‘Pull yourself together!’ he roared. ‘Get a grip on yourself! It’s just one girl! Just one girl!’

‘Like in Dun Dare on Samhain Eve,’ said Boreas Mun softly. ‘We shall never get off this ice, off this lake. Listen out, listen out! And you’ll hear death gliding towards you.’

Skellen picked up the Gemmerian’s sword and tried to shove it into the sobbing man’s hand, but unsuccessfully. The Gemmerian, racked by spasms, turned his dull gaze onto him. Tawny Owl threw down the sword and jumped at Rience.

‘Do something, sorcerer!’ he roared, tugging at his arm. Terror

redoubled his strength, and although Rience was taller, heavier and more powerful, he flopped around in Tawny Owl's grasp like a rag doll. 'Do something! Summon that high and mighty Vilgefortz of yours! Work some magic yourself! Work magic, perform witchcraft, invoke spirits, conjure up demons! Do something – anything – you little turd! Do something, before that she-phantom kills us all!'

The echo of his cry boomed across the forested hillsides. Before it died away, the skates grated again. The sobbing Gemmerian fell to his knees and covered his face in his hands. Bert Brigden howled, flung his sword away and bolted. He slipped, fell over and scampered for a few paces on all fours, like a dog.

'Rience!'

The sorcerer swore and raised a hand. As he chanted the spell, his hand was trembling, his voice too. But he was successful. Though not, admittedly, completely successful.

The threadlike, fiery lightning bolt spurting from his fingers carved up the ice, fracturing the surface. But not crossways, as it should have, to bar the way of the approaching girl. It broke lengthways. The crust of ice cleaved open with a loud cracking sound, black water gushed and rumbled, and the rapidly widening rift shot towards Dacre Silifant, who was looking on in stupefaction.

'Jump aside!' Skellen yelled. 'Ruuuuuun!'

It was too late. The crack sped between Silifant's legs and split open, the ice shattering like glass and breaking into huge slabs. Dacre lost his balance, and the water stifled his howl. Boreas Mun fell into the breach, the kneeling Gemmerian vanished under the water, and Ola Harsheim's body disappeared. Rience plopped after them into the black depths, followed by Skellen, who managed to catch hold of the edge at the last moment. Meanwhile, the girl pushed off powerfully and flew over the breach, landing so hard the melting ice splashed, and darted after the fleeing Brigden. A moment later a hair-raising scream reached the ears of Tawny Owl, who was hanging onto the edge of the ice floe.

She'd caught up with him.

'Sir . . .' moaned Boreas Mun, who by some miracle had managed to crawl out onto the ice. 'Give me your hand . . . My lord coroner . . .'

After being hauled out, Skellen turned blue and began to shiver violently. The edge of the ice was breaking under Silifant,

who was struggling to drag himself out. Dacre vanished beneath the water again. But he surfaced at once, choking and spitting, and dragged himself onto the ice with superhuman effort. He crawled out and collapsed, exhausted to the limits. A puddle spread out beside him. Boreas moaned and closed his eyes. Skellen was trembling.

'Save me . . . Mun . . . Help . . .'

Rience hung onto the edge of the ice, submerged up to his armpits. His wet hair was plastered smoothly to his skull. His teeth were chattering like castanets, sounding like a ghoulish overture to some infernal *danse macabre*. The skates grated. Boreas didn't move. He waited. Skellen was trembling.

She approached. Slowly. Blood trickled from her sword, marking the ice with a trail of drops. Boreas swallowed. Although he was soaked to the skin with icy water, he suddenly felt unbearably hot.

But the girl wasn't looking at him. She was looking at Rience, who was vainly struggling to get out onto the ice.

'Help me . . .' Rience overcame the chattering of his teeth. 'Save me . . .'

The girl braked, whirling on the skates with the grace of a dancer. She stood with legs slightly apart, holding her sword in both hands, low, across her thighs.

'Help me . . .' Rience howled, digging his numbing fingers into the ice. 'Save me . . . And I'll tell you . . . where Yennefer is . . . I swear . . .'

The girl slowly pulled the scarf from her face and smiled. Boreas Mun saw the hideous scar and fought to stifle a shout.

'Rience,' said Ciri, still smiling. 'You were going to teach me pain, weren't you? Do you remember? With those hands. With those fingers. Those ones? Those, the ones you're holding the ice with?'

Rience answered, but Boreas didn't understand what he said, for the sorcerer's teeth were chattering and rattling so much they made articulated speech impossible. Ciri spun around on her skates and lifted the sword. Boreas clenched his teeth, convinced she would slash Rience, but the girl was picking up momentum to set off. To the tracker's astonishment she skated away, quickly, gathering speed with powerful thrusts. She vanished into the fog,

and a moment later the rhythmic scraping of the skates also died away.

'Mun . . . Puuull . . . me . . . out . . .' Rience barked out, chin on the edge of the ice floe. He flung both hands on the ice, trying to hang on with his fingernails, which had largely been torn away. He spread his fingers, trying to cling to the blood-stained ice with his hands and wrists. Boreas Mun looked at him and was certain, terrifyingly certain . . .

They heard the grinding of the skates at the last moment. The girl approached at extraordinary speed, literally a blur. She skated up at the very edge of the floe, speeding along right beside the brink.

Rience screamed. And choked on the viscous, leaden water. And vanished.

There was blood on the ice, on the perfectly even tracks left by the skates. And fingers. Eight fingers.

Boreas Mun vomited on the ice.

*

Bonhart galloped along the edge of the lake, hurtling along, heedless that any moment the horse might break its legs on the snow-covered clefts. Frosted over spruce branches lashed his face, and whipped his arms, and icy powder poured down his collar.

He couldn't see the lake. The entire valley was filled with fog, like a bubbling witch's cauldron.

But Bonhart knew the girl was there.

He sensed it.

*

Deep under the ice, a school of striped perch curiously followed the silver, fascinatingly glimmering casket which had slipped out of the pocket of a corpse floating in the water. Before the casket had sunk to the bottom, raising a cloud of silt, the boldest of the perch even tried to nudge it with their snouts. But they suddenly took flight in

terror.

The casket was emitting strange, alarming vibrations.

'Rience? Can you hear me? What's been going on? Why haven't you responded for two days? Give me your report! What about the maid? You can't let her enter the tower! Do you hear? You can't let her enter the Tower of the Swallow . . . Rience! Answer, dammit! Rience!'

Rience, naturally, could not answer.

*

The embankment came to an end, the shore flattened out. *It's the end of the lake*, thought Bonhart, *I've done it. I've trapped the maid. Where is she? And where's that sodding tower?*

The curtain of fog suddenly ruptured and lifted. And then he saw her. She was right in front of him, sitting on her black mare. *She's a witch*, he thought, *she communicates with that beast. She sent it to the end of the lake and ordered it to wait for her.*

But that won't help her.

I have to kill her. The devil take Vilgefortz. I have to kill her. First I'll make her beg for her life . . . And then I'll kill her.

He yelled, pricked his horse with his spurs and launched into a breakneck gallop.

And suddenly realised he had lost. That she'd deceived him.

Not more than a furlong separated him from her – but over thin ice. She was on the other side of the lake. What's more, the crescent of open water now curved around the opposite way – the girl, riding along the 'bowstring', was much closer to the end of the lake than he was.

Bonhart swore, tugged on the reins and steered his horse onto the ice.

*

‘Ride, Kelpie!’

Frozen earth shot from under the black mare’s hooves.

Ciri clung to the horse’s neck. The sight of Bonhart pursuing her filled her with dread . . . She was afraid of him. An invisible fist tightened on her stomach at the thought of facing him in combat.

No, she couldn’t fight him. Not yet.

The Tower. Only the tower could save her. And the portal. As on Thanedd, when the sorcerer Vilgefortz was upon her, was already reaching for her . . .

The only hope was the Tower of the Swallow.

The fog lifted.

Ciri reined in her horse, suddenly feeling a dreadful heat. Unable to believe what she saw. What was in front of her.

*

Bonhart saw it too. And yelled triumphantly.

There was no tower at the end of the lake. There weren’t even the ruins of a tower; there was nothing. Just a barely visible, barely outlined hillock, just a mound of boulders covered in frozen, leafless stalks.

‘That’s your tower!’ he roared. ‘That’s your magical tower! That’s your salvation! A heap of stones!’

The girl seemed not to hear or see. She urged the mare nearer the hillock, onto the stony mound. She raised both hands towards the sky, as though cursing the heavens for what had befallen her.

‘I told you that you were mine!’ roared Bonhart, spurring on his bay. ‘That I’ll do what I want with you! That no one will stop me from doing it! Not people, not gods, not devils, nor demons! Or enchanted towers! You’re mine, witcher girl!’

The bay’s shoes jangled on the icy surface of the lake.

The fog suddenly swirled, boiled under the impact of a strong wind appearing as if from nowhere. The bay whinnied and danced, baring its teeth on the bit. Bonhart leaned back in the saddle, and tugged on the reins with all his might, because the horse was

frantic, tossing its head, stamping and slipping on the ice.

In front of him – between him and the shore where Ciri was standing – a snowy-white unicorn was dancing on the ice, rearing up, as if on a heraldic shield.

'Don't try tricks like that on me!' roared the bounty hunter, fighting to get control of his horse. 'You won't frighten me with sorcery! I'll catch you, Ciri! I'll kill you this time, witcher girl! You're mine!'

The fog swirled again, and seethed, forming bizarre shapes. The shapes became clearer and clearer. They were horsemen. Nightmarish silhouettes of eerie horsemen.

Bonhart stared goggle-eyed.

Skeleton riders rode skeleton horses, dressed in rust-riddled armour and chainmail, ragged cloaks, dented and corroded helmets decorated with buffalo horns and the remains of ostrich and peacock plumes. The spectres' eyes shined with a bluish light from under their visors. Ragged pennants swished.

An armed man with a crown on his helmet and a necklace bumping against the rusty cuirass on his chest, galloped at the head of the demonic cavalcade.

Begone, rumbled a voice in Bonhart's head. *Begone, mortal. She is not yours. She is ours. Begone!* There was no denying Bonhart had one thing: courage. He did not take fright at the apparitions. He overcame his terror, and did not give in to panic.

But his horse turned out to be less resolute.

The bay reared, danced ballet-like on its hind legs, whinnied frantically, kicked and pranced. The ice broke with a horrifying crunching sound under the impact of its hooves, the sheets of ice stood up vertically and water gushed out. The horse squealed and struck the edge with its forehooves, fracturing it. Bonhart yanked his feet from the stirrups and jumped. Too late.

The water closed over his head. There was a drumming and a ringing as though in a belfry. His lungs were full to bursting.

He was lucky. His feet – kicking out in the water – struck something, probably his horse as it sank to the bottom. He pushed off, bursting from the water, spitting and gasping. He seized hold of the edge of the ice hole. Without yielding to panic, he drew a knife, drove it into the ice and hauled himself out. He lay, panting

heavily, the water trickling from him and splashing down.

The lake, the ice, the snowbound hillsides, the black and frost-encrusted spruce forest – all of a sudden everything was flooded with an unnatural, pallid light.

Bonhart struggled to his knees with immense effort.

Above the horizon, the deep blue was lit by a crown of brightness, a luminous dome, from which fiery pillars and spirals suddenly rose and scintillating columns and vortices of light burst forth. Shimmering, flickering, rapidly-changing shapes, ribbons and curtains hung on the horizon.

Bonhart croaked. It was as though he had an iron garrotte around his throat.

A tower had risen up where a moment before had been only a barren hillock and a pile of stones. Majestic, soaring and slender, black, glassy and gleaming, as though carved from a single piece of basalt. Fire flickered in the few windows and the aurora borealis glowed in the serrated battlements.

He saw the girl, looking towards him from the saddle. He saw her bright eyes and the cheek slashed by the line of an ugly scar. He saw the girl spur her black mare and unhurriedly ride into the black gloom, under the arched stone entrance.

And disappear.

The aurora borealis exploded in dazzling swirls of fire.

When Bonhart regained his sight, the tower was gone. There was the snow-topped hillock, the pile of stones, the withered black stalks.

Kneeling on the ice, in the puddle of water trickling from him, the bounty hunter screamed savagely, horribly. On his knees, arms raised towards the sky, he screamed, howled, swore and railed against people, gods and demons.

The echo of his cries rolled over the spruce-forested hillsides, drifted over the frozen surface of Tarn Mira lake.

*

At first, the inside of the tower reminded her of Kaer Morhen – the

same long, black corridor behind a colonnade, the same unending abyss in the perspective of columns or statues. It was beyond comprehension how that abyss could fit into the slender obelisk of the tower. But she knew, of course, that there was no point analysing it – not in the case of a tower that had risen up from nothingness, appearing where it had not been before. There could be anything in such a tower and one ought not to be surprised by anything.

She looked back. She didn't believe Bonhart had dared – or managed – to enter after her. But she wanted to make certain. The colonnade she had ridden into blazed with an unnatural brilliance.

Kelpie's hooves rang on the floor; something crunched under them. Bones. Skulls, shinbones, ribcages, thighbones, hipbones. She was riding through a gigantic ossuarium. *Kaer Morhen*, she thought, recalling. *The dead should be buried in the ground . . . How long ago that was . . . I still believed in something like that then . . . In the majesty of death, in respect for the dead . . . But death is simply death. And a dead person is just a cold corpse. It's not important where it's lying, where its bones decay.*

She rode into the gloom, under the colonnade, among the columns and statues. The darkness undulated like smoke. Her ears were filled with intrusive whispers, sighs, and soft incantations. Suddenly brightness flamed before her, as a gigantic door opened. One door opened after another. Doors. An infinite number of heavy doors opened before her without a murmur.

Kelpie went on, horseshoes resounding on the floor.

The geometry of the walls, arcades and columns surrounding her was suddenly disrupted; so confusingly that Ciri felt dizzy. She felt as though she were inside an impossible, multifaceted solid, some gigantic polyhedron.

The doors kept opening. But now they weren't delineating a single direction. They were pointing to infinite directions and possibilities.

And Ciri began to see.

A black-haired woman leading an ashen-haired girl by the hand. The girl is afraid, afraid of the dark, fears the whispers growing in the gloom, is terrified by the ringing of horseshoes. The black-haired woman with a star sparkling with diamonds around her neck is also afraid. But does not let it show. She leads the girl on. Towards her destiny.

Kelpie walks on. More doors.

Iola the Second and Eurneid, in sheepskin coats, with their bundles, marching along a frozen, snowy road. The sky is deep blue.

More doors.

Iola the First kneeling before an altar. Beside her is Mother Nenneke. They are both looking at something, their faces contorted in a grimace of dread. What do they see? The past or the future? Truth or untruth?

Above Nenneke and Iola – hands. The hands of a woman with golden eyes held out in a gesture of blessing. In the woman's necklace – a diamond, shining like the morning star. On the woman's shoulder – a cat. Over her head – a falcon.

More doors.

Triss Merigold holds back her glorious chestnut hair, buffeted and tugged by gusts of wind. There is no escape from the wind, nothing can shelter from the wind.

Not here. Not on the brow of the hill.

A long, unending row of shadows encroaches on the hill. Forms. They are walking slowly. Some turn their faces towards her. Familiar faces. Vesemir. Eskel. Lambert. Coen. Yarpen Zigrin and Paulie Dahlberg. Fabio Sachs . . . Jarre . . . Tissaia de Vries.

Mistle . . .

Geralt?

More doors.

Yennefer, in chains, fastened to a dungeon wall dripping with water. Her hands are a single mass of clotted blood. Her black hair is tousled and dishevelled . . . Her mouth is cut and swollen . . . But her will to fight and resistance are undamped in her violet eyes.

'Mummy! Hold on! Don't give up! I'm coming to help you!'

More doors. Ciri turns her head away in distress. And embarrassment.

Geralt. And a green-eyed woman with black, close-cropped hair. Both naked. Engrossed by and consumed with each other. With giving each other sensual pleasure.

Ciri fights to overcome the adrenaline tightening her throat and spurs Kelpie on. Hooves clatter. Whispers pulsate in the

darkness.

More doors.

Welcome, Ciri.

'Vysogota?'

I knew you would succeed, O courageous maiden. My brave Swallow. Did you emerge unharmed?

'I defeated them. On the ice. I had a surprise for them. Your daughter's skates . . .'

'I meant psychological harm.'

'I held back from vengeance . . . I didn't kill them all . . . I didn't kill Tawny Owl . . . Even though he hurt and disfigured me. I controlled myself.'

'I knew you'd prevail, Zireael. And that you'd enter the tower. Why, I've read about it. Because it has already been described . . . It has all been written about. Do you know what learning gives you? The ability to make use of sources.

'How's it possible that we're talking . . . O Vysogota . . . are you . . .'

Yes, Ciri. I'm dead. Oh, never mind! What I have learned is more important, what I have worked out . . . Now I know what became of the lost days, what happened in Korath desert, how you vanished from the sight of your pursuers . . .

'And how I entered here, entered this tower, right?'

The Elder Blood that flows in your veins gives you power over time. And over space. Over the dimensions and the spheres. You are now Master of the Worlds, Ciri. You have a mighty Power. Do not let criminals or rogues take it from you and use it to their own ends . . .

'I won't.'

Farewell, Ciri. Farewell, Swallow.

'Farewell, Old Raven.'

More doors. Brightness, dazzling brightness.

And the heady scent of flowers.

*

A mist lay on the lake, a haze as light as down, which the wind quickly blew away. The surface of the water was as smooth as a mirror, flowers shone white on green carpets of flat lily pads.

The banks drowned in leaves and flowers.

It was warm.

It was spring.

Ciri was not surprised. How could she be? After all, now everything was possible. November, ice, snow, frozen ground, the mound of stones on the hillock bristling with dried stalks – that was there. But here is here; here a soaring basalt tower crowned with serrated battlements, reflected in the green water of the lake, dotted with the white of waterlilies. Here it's May, for wild roses and bird cherry bloom in May, don't they?

Nearby, somebody was playing on a whistle or a pan flute; they were playing a jolly, lively tune.

On the lakeside, two snow-white horses were drinking, fore hooves in the water. Kelpie snorted and banged a hoof against a rock. Then the horses lifted their heads and nostrils, dripping water, and Ciri sighed.

Because they weren't horses, but unicorns.

Ciri was not surprised. She was sighing in awe, not in astonishment.

She could hear the tune more and more clearly. It was coming from behind the shrubs of bird cherry festooned with white blossom. Kelpie moved towards the sound by herself, without any urging. Ciri swallowed. The two unicorns, as still as statues, reflected in the surface of the water as smooth as a mirror, looked at her.

A fair-haired elf with a triangular face and huge, almond-shaped eyes was sitting on a round stone beyond the bird cherry shrub. He played on, nimbly running his lips over the pipes. Although he could see Ciri and Kelpie – although he was looking at them – he didn't stop playing.

The small flowers gave off a scent; Ciri had never before encountered bird cherry with such an intense fragrance. *No wonder*, she thought quite soberly. *Bird cherry blossom simply smells different in the world I've lived in until this moment.*

Because everything is different in that world.

The elf finished his tune with a long-drawn-out, high-pitched trill, took the instrument from his mouth and stood up.

'What took you so long?' he asked with a smile. 'What kept you?'

The Lady of the Lake

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CHAPTER ONE

The lake was enchanted. There was absolutely no doubt about it.

Firstly, it lay right beside the mouth of the enchanted Cwm Pwcca valley, permanently veiled in mist and famed for witchcraft and magical phenomena.

Secondly, it was enough to look.

The lake was deep, a vivid, pure blue, just like polished sapphire. It was as smooth as a looking glass, so smooth the peaks of the Y Wyddfa massif gazing into it seemed more stunning reflected than in reality. A cold, bracing wind blew in from the lake and nothing disturbed the dignified silence, not even the splash of a fish or the cry of a water bird.

The knight shuddered in amazement. But instead of continuing to ride along the ridge he steered his horse towards the lake, as though lured by the magical power of the witchcraft slumbering down there, at the bottom, in the depths. The horse trod timidly across broken rocks, showing by a soft snorting that it also sensed the magical aura.

After descending to the very bottom of the valley, the knight dismounted. Leading his steed by the bridle, he neared the water's edge, where faint ripples were playing among colourful pebbles.

He kneeled down, his chain mail rustling. Scaring away fry, fish as tiny and lively as needles, he scooped up water in his cupped hands. He drank slowly and gingerly, the ice-cold water numbing his lips and tongue and stinging his teeth.

As he stooped again, a sound, carried over the surface of the water, reached his ears. He raised his head. His horse snorted, as though confirming it had also heard.

He listened. No, it was no illusion. What he had heard was singing. A woman singing. Or, more likely, a girl.

The knight, like all knights, had been raised on stories of bards and tales of chivalry. And in them – nine times out of ten – girlish airs or wailing were bait, and the knights that followed them usually fell into traps. Often fatal ones.

But his curiosity got the better of him. The knight, after all,

was only nineteen years old. He was very bold and very imprudent. He was famous for the first and known for the second.

He checked that his sword slid well in the scabbard, then tugged his horse and headed along the shore in the direction of the singing. He didn't have to go far.

On the lakeside lay great, dark boulders – worn smooth to a shine. You might have said they were the playthings of giants carelessly tossed there or forgotten after a game. Some of the boulders lay in the lake, looming black beneath the crystalline water. Some of them protruded above the surface. Washed by the wavelets, they looked like the backs of leviathans. But most of them lay on the lakeside, covering the shore all the way to the treeline. Some of them were buried in the sand, only partly sticking out, leaving their true size to the imagination.

The singing that the knight could hear came from just behind the rocks near the shore. And the girl who was doing the singing was out of sight. He led his horse, holding it by the bit and nostrils to stop it whinnying or snorting.

The girl's garments were spread on a perfectly flat boulder lying in the lake. She, naked and waist-deep in the water, was washing and singing the while. The knight didn't recognise the words.

And no wonder.

The girl – he would have bet his life – was not flesh-and-blood. That was evident from her slim figure, the strange colour of her hair and her voice. He was certain that were she to turn around he would see huge, almond-shaped eyes. And were she to brush aside her ashen hair he would surely see pointed ears.

She was a dweller of Faërie. A spirit. One of the Tylwyth Têg. One of those creatures the Picts and Irish called Daoine Sidhe, the Folk of the Hill. One of those creatures the Saxons called elves.

The girl stopped singing for a moment, submerged herself up to the neck, snorted and swore very coarsely. It didn't fool the knight, though. Fairies – as was widely known – could curse like humans. Oftentimes more filthily than stablemen. And very often the oath preceded a spiteful prank, for which fairies were famous. For example, swelling someone's nose up to the size of a cucumber or shrinking another's manhood down to the size of a broad bean.

Neither the first nor the second possibility appealed to the

knight. He was on the point of a discreet withdrawal when the noise of hooves on the pebbles suddenly betrayed him. No, not his own steed, which – being held by the nostrils – was as calm and quiet as a mouse. He had been betrayed by the fairy's horse, a black mare, which at first the knight hadn't noticed among the rocks. Now the pitch-black animal churned up the pebbles with a hoof and neighed a greeting. The knight's stallion tossed its head and neighed back politely. So loudly an echo sped across the water.

The fairy burst from the water, for a moment presenting herself to the knight in all her alluring splendour. She darted towards the rock where her clothing lay. But rather than seizing a blouse and covering up modestly, the she-elf grabbed a sword and drew it from its scabbard with a hiss, whirling it with admirable dexterity. It lasted but a short moment, after which she sank down, covering herself up to her nose in the water and extending her arm with the sword above the surface.

The knight shook off his stupefaction, released the reins and genuflected, kneeling on the wet sand. For he realised at once who was before him.

'Hail,' he mumbled, holding out his hands. 'Great is the honour for me . . . Great is the accolade, O Lady of the Lake. I shall accept the sword . . .'

'Could you get up from your knees and turn away?' The fairy stuck her mouth above the water. 'Perhaps you'd stop staring? And let me get dressed?'

He obeyed.

He heard her splash out of the water, rustle her clothes and swear softly as she pulled them over her wet body. He examined the black mare, its coat as smooth and lustrous as moleskin. It was certainly a horse of noble blood, certainly enchanted. And undoubtedly also a dweller of Faërie, like its owner.

'You may turn around.'

'Lady of the Lake—'

'And introduce yourself.'

'I am Galahad, of Caer Benic. A knight of King Arthur, the lord of Camelot, the ruler of the Summer Land, and also of Dumnonia, Dyfneint, Powys, Dyfedd . . .'

'And Temeria?' she interrupted. 'Redania, Rivia, Aedirn?

Nilfgaard? Do those names mean anything to you?'

'No. I've never heard them.'

She shrugged. Apart from her sword she was holding her boots and her blouse, washed and wrung out.

'I thought so. What day of the year is it today?'

'It is,' he opened his mouth, utterly astonished, 'the second full moon after Beltane . . . Lady . . .'

'Ciri,' she said dully, wriggling her shoulders to allow her garments to lie better on her drying skin. She spoke strangely. Her eyes were large and green.

She involuntarily brushed her wet hair aside and the knight gasped unwittingly. Not just because her ear was normal, human, and in no way elven. Her cheek was disfigured by a large, ugly scar. She had been wounded. But could a fairy be wounded?

She noticed his look, narrowed her eyes and wrinkled her nose.

'That's right, it's a scar!' she repeated in her extraordinary accent. 'Why do you look so scared? Is a scar such a strange thing for a knight to see? Is it so ugly?'

He removed his chainmail hood with both hands and brushed aside his hair.

'Indeed it isn't,' he said, not without youthful pride, displaying a barely healed scar of his own, running from temple to jaw. 'And only blemishes on one's honour are ugly. I am Galahad, son of Lancelot du Lac and Elaine, daughter of King Pelles, lord of Caer Benic. That wound was dealt me by Breunis the Merciless, a base oppressor of maidens, before I felled him in a fair duel. In sooth, I am worthy of receiving that sword from your hands, O Lady of the Lake.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'The sword. I'm ready to receive it.'

'It's *my* sword. I don't let anyone touch it.'

'But . . .'

'But what?'

'The Lady of the Lake always . . . always emerges from the waters and bestows a sword, doesn't she?'

She said nothing for some time.

‘I get it,’ she finally said. ‘Well, every country has its own customs. I’m sorry, Galahad, or whatever your name is, but I’m clearly not the Lady I’m meant to be. I’m not giving away anything. And I won’t let anyone take anything from me. Just to make things clear.’

‘But,’ he ventured, ‘you must come from Faërie, don’t you, m’lady?’

‘I come . . .’ she said a moment later, and her green eyes seemed to be looking into an abyss of space and time. ‘I come from Rivia, from the city of the same name. From Loch Eskalott. I sailed here by boat. It was foggy. I couldn’t see the shore. I only heard the neighing. Of Kelpie . . . My mare, who followed me.

She spread out her wet blouse on a stone, and the knight gasped again. The blouse had been washed, but perfunctorily. Patches of blood were still visible.

‘The current brought me here,’ the girl began again, either not seeing what he had noticed or pretending not to. ‘The current and the spell of a unicorn . . . What’s this lake called?’

‘I don’t know,’ he confessed. ‘There are so many lakes in Gwynedd—’

‘In Gwynedd?’

‘Naturally. Those mountains are Y Wyddfa. If you keep them on your left hand and ride through the forests, after two days you’ll reach Dinas Dinlleu, and then on to Caer Dathal. And the river . . . The nearest river is . . .’

‘Never mind what the nearest river’s called. Do you have anything to eat, Galahad? I’m simply dying of hunger.’

*

‘Why are you watching me like that? Afraid I’ll disappear? That I’ll fly off with your hard tack and smoked sausage? Don’t worry. I got up to some mischief in my own world and confused destiny, so I shouldn’t show my face there for the moment. I’ll stay a while in yours. In a world where one searches the sky in vain for the Dragon or the Seven Goats. Where right now it’s the second full moon after

Belleteyn, and Belleteyn is pronounced ‘Beltane’. Why are you staring at me like that, pray?’

‘I didn’t know fairies could eat.’

‘Fairies, sorceresses and she-elves. They all eat. And drink. And so on.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Never mind.’

The more intently he observed her, the more she lost her enchanting aura, and the more human and ordinary – common, even – she became. Though he knew she wasn’t, couldn’t be that. One didn’t encounter common wenches at the foot of Y Wyddfa, in the region of Cwm Pwcca, bathing naked in mountain lakes and washing bloodstained blouses. Never mind what the girl looked like, she couldn’t be an earthly being. In spite of that, Galahad was now gazing quite freely and without fear at her ashen hair, which, now it was dry, to his amazement gleamed grey. At her slender hands, petite nose and pale lips, at her masculine outfit of somewhat outlandish cut, sewn from delicate stuff of extremely dense weave. At her sword, of curious construction and ornamentation, but by no means resembling a ceremonial accoutrement. At her bare feet caked with the dried sand of the beach.

‘Just for clarity,’ she began, rubbing one foot against the other, ‘I’m not a she-elf. And as for being an enchantress, I mean a fairy . . . I’m a little unusual. I don’t think I’m one at all.’

‘I’m sorry, I really am.’

‘Why exactly?’

‘They say . . .’ he blushed and stammered. ‘They say that when fairies meet young men, they lead them to Elfland and there . . . Beneath a filbert bush, on a carpet of moss, they order them to render—’

‘I understand.’ She glanced at him quickly, then bit down hard on a sausage. ‘Regarding the land of Elves,’ she said, swallowing, ‘I fled from there some time ago and am in no hurry to return. Regarding, however, the rendering of services on mossy carpets . . . Truly, Galahad, you’ve happened upon the wrong Lady. All the same, I thank you kindly for your good intentions.’

‘M’lady! I did not wish to offend—’

‘You don’t have to apologise.’

‘Only because,’ he mumbled, ‘you’re enchantingly comely.’

‘Thank you, once again. But still, nothing’s going to happen.’

They were silent for a time. It was warm. The sun, standing at its zenith, warmed the stones pleasantly. A faint breeze ruffled the surface of the lake.

‘What does . . .’ Galahad began suddenly in a strangely enraptured voice. ‘What does the spear with the bloody blade mean? Why does the King with the lanced thigh suffer and what does it mean? What is the meaning of the maiden in white carrying a grail, a silver bowl—?’

‘And besides that,’ she interrupted him. ‘Are you feeling all right?’

‘I merely ask.’

‘And I merely don’t understand your question. Is it some previously agreed password? Some signal by which the initiated recognise each other? Kindly explain.’

‘But I cannot.’

‘Why then, did you ask?’

‘Because . . .’ he stammered. ‘Well, to put it briefly . . . One of our number failed to ask when he had the chance. He grew tongue-tied or was embarrassed . . . He didn’t ask and because of that there was great unpleasantness. So now we always ask. Just in case.’

*

‘Are there sorcerers in this world? You know, people who practise the magical arts. Mages. Knowing Ones.’

‘There’s Merlin. And Morgana. But Morgana is evil.’

‘And Merlin?’

‘Average.’

‘Do you know where to find him?’

‘I’ll say! In Camelot. At the court of King Arthur. I am presently headed there.’

‘Is it far?’

‘From here to Powys, to the River Hafren, then downstream to Glevum, to the Sea of Sabina, and from there to the flatlands of the Summer Land. All in all, some ten days’ ride . . .’

‘Too far.’

‘One may,’ he stammered, ‘take a short-cut by riding through Cwm Pwcca. But it is an enchanted valley. It is dreadful there. One hears of Y Dynan Bach Têgdwell there, evil little men—’

‘What, do you only carry a sword for decoration?’

‘And what would a sword achieve against witchcraft?’

‘Much, much, don’t worry. I’m a witcher. Ever heard of one? Pshaw, naturally you haven’t. And I’m not afraid of your little men. I have plenty of dwarf friends.’

Of course you do, he thought.

*

‘Lady of the Lake?’

‘My name’s Ciri. Don’t call me Lady of the Lake. Brings up bad, unpleasant, nasty associations. That’s what they called me in the Land of . . . What did you call that place?’

‘Faërie. Or, as the druids say: Annwn. And the Saxons say Elfland.’

‘Elfland . . .’ She wrapped a tartan Pictish rug he had given her around her shoulders. ‘I’ve been there, you know? I entered the Tower of the Swallow and bang! I was among the elves. And that’s exactly what they called me. The Lady of the Lake. I even liked it at the start. It was flattering. Until the moment I understood I was no Lady in that land, in that tower by the lake – but a prisoner.’

‘Was it there,’ he blurted out, ‘that you stained your blouse with blood?’

She was silent for a long while.

‘No,’ she said finally, and her voice, it seemed to him, trembled a little. ‘Not there. You have sharp eyes. Oh well, you can’t flee from the truth, can’t bury your head in the sand . . . Yes,

Galahad. I've often become stained lately. With the blood of the foes I've killed. And the blood of the friends I tried hard to rescue . . . And who died in my arms . . . Why do you stare at me so?'

'I know not if you be a deity or a mortal . . . Or one of the goddesses . . . But if you are a dweller on this earth of ours . . .'

'Get to the point, if you would.'

'I would listen to your story,' Galahad's eyes glowed. 'Would you tell it, O Lady?'

'It is long.'

'We have time.'

'And it doesn't end so well.'

'I don't believe you.'

'Why?'

'You were singing when you were bathing in the lake.'

'You're observant.' She turned her head away, pursed her lips and her face suddenly contorted and became ugly. 'Yes, you're observant. But very naive.'

'Tell me your story. Please.'

'Very well,' she sighed. 'Very well, if you wish . . . I shall.'

She made herself comfortable. As did he. The horses walked by the edge of the forest, nibbling grass and herbs.

'From the beginning,' asked Galahad. 'From the very beginning . . .'

'This story,' she said a moment later, wrapping herself more tightly in the Pictish rug, 'seems more and more like one without a beginning. Neither am I certain if it has finished yet, either. The past – you have to know – has become awfully tangled up with the future. An elf even told me it's like that snake that catches its own tail in its teeth. That snake, you ought to know, is called Ouroboros. And the fact it bites its own tail means the circle is closed. The past, present and future lurk in every moment of time. Eternity is hidden in every moment of time. Do you understand?'

'No.'

'Never mind.'

Verily do I tell you that whoever believes in dreams is as one trying to catch the wind or seize a shadow. He is deluded by a beguiling picture, a warped looking glass, which lies or utters absurdities in the manner of a woman in labour. Foolish indeed is he who lends credence to dreams and treads the path of delusion.

Nonetheless, whoever disdains and does not believe them at all also acts unwisely. For if dreams had no import whatsoever why, then, would the Gods, in creating us, give us the ability to dream?

The Wisdom of the Prophet Lebioda, 34:1

CHAPTER TWO

A light wind ruffled the surface of the lake, which was steaming like a cauldron, and drove ragged wisps of mist over it. Rowlocks creaked and thudded rhythmically, the emerging oar-blades scattering a hail of shining drops.

Condwiramurs put a hand over the side. The boat was moving at such a snail's pace the water barely foamed or climbed up her hand.

'Oh, my,' she said, packing as much sarcasm into her voice as she could. 'What speed! We're hurtling over the waves. It's making my head spin!'

The rower, a short, stocky, compact man, growled back angrily and indistinctly, not even raising his head, which was covered in a grizzly mop of hair as curly as a caracul lamb's. The novice had put up with quite enough of the growling, hawking and grunting with which the boor had dismissed her questions since she had boarded.

'Have a care,' she drawled, struggling to keep calm. 'You might do yourself a mischief from such hard rowing.'

This time the man raised his face, which was as swarthy and weather-beaten as tanned leather. He grunted, hawked, and pointed his bristly, grey chin at the wooden reel attached to the side of the boat and the line disappearing into the water stretched tight by their movement. Clearly convinced the explanation was exhaustive, he resumed his rowing. With the same rhythm as previously. Oars up. A pause. Blades halfway into the water. A long pause. The pull. An even longer pause.

'Aha,' Condwiramurs said nonchalantly, looking heavenwards. 'I understand. What's important is the lure being pulled behind the boat, which has to move at the right speed and the right depth. Fishing is important. Everything else is unimportant.'

What she said was so obvious the man didn't even take the trouble to grunt or wheeze.

'Who could it bother,' Condwiramurs continued her monologue, 'that I've been travelling all night? That I'm hungry?

That my backside hurts and itches from the hard, wet bench? That I need a pee? No, only trolling for fish matters. Which is pointless in any case. Nothing will take a lure pulled down the middle of the current at a depth of a score of fathoms.'

The man raised his head, looked at her foully and grumbled very – very – grumblingly. Condwiramurs flashed her little teeth, pleased with herself. The boor went on rowing slowly. He was furious.

She lounged back on the stern bench and crossed her legs, letting her dress ride up.

The man grunted, tightened his gnarled hands on the oars, and pretended only to be looking at the fishing line. He had no intention of rowing any faster, naturally. The novice sighed in resignation and turned her attention to the sky.

The rowlocks creaked and the glistening drops fell from the oar blades.

The outline of an island loomed up in the quickly dispersing mist. As did the dark, tapering obelisk of the tower rising above it. The boor, though he was facing forwards and not looking back, knew in some mysterious way that they had almost arrived. Without hurrying, he laid the oars on the gunwales, stood up and began to slowly wind in the line on the reel. Condwiramurs, legs still crossed, whistled, looking up at the sky.

The man finished reeling in the line and examined the lure: a large, brass spoon, armed with a triple hook and a tassel of red wool.

'Oh my, oh my,' said Condwiramurs sweetly. 'Haven't caught anything? Oh dear, what a pity. I wonder why we've had such bad luck? Perhaps the boat was going too fast?'

The man cast her a look which expressed many foul things. He sat down, hawked, spat over the side, grasped the oars in his great knotty hands and bent his back powerfully. The oars splashed, rattled in the rowlocks, and the boat darted across the lake like an arrow, the water foaming with a swoosh against the prow, eddies seething astern. He covered the quarter arrow shot that separated them from the island in less than a grunt, and the boat came up onto the pebbles with such force that Condwiramurs lurched from the bench.

The man grunted, hawked and spat. The novice knew that

meant – translated into the speech of civilised people – *get out of my boat, you brash witch*. She also knew she could forget about being carried ashore. She took off her slippers, lifted her dress provocatively high, and disembarked. She fought back a curse as mussel shells pricked her feet.

'Thanks,' she said through clenched teeth, 'for the ride.'

Neither waiting for the answering grunt nor looking back, she walked barefoot towards the stone steps. All of her discomforts and problems vanished and evaporated without a trace, expunged by her growing excitement. She was there, on the island of Inis Vitre, on Loch Blest. She was in an almost legendary place, where only a select few had ever been.

The morning mist had lifted completely and the red orb of the sun had begun to show more brightly through the dull sky. Squawking gulls circled around the tower's battlements and swifts flashed by.

At the top of the steps leading from the beach to the terrace, leaning against a statue of a crouching, grinning chimera, was Nimue.

The Lady of the Lake.

*

She was dainty and short, measuring not much more than five feet. Condwiramurs had heard that when she was young she'd been called 'Squirt', and now she knew the nickname had been apt. But she was certain no one had dared call the little sorceress that for at least half a century.

'I am Condwiramurs Tilly.' She introduced herself with a bow, a little embarrassed as she was still holding her slippers. 'I'm glad to be visiting your island, Lady of the Lake.'

'Nimue,' the diminutive sorceress corrected her. 'Nimue, nothing more. We can skip titles and honorifics, Miss Tilly.'

'In that case I'm Condwiramurs. Condwiramurs, nothing more.'

'Come with me then, Condwiramurs. We shall talk over breakfast. I imagine you're hungry.'

‘I don’t deny it.’

*

There was white curd cheese, chives, eggs, milk and wholemeal bread for breakfast, served by two very young, very quiet serving girls, who smelt of starch. Condwiramurs ate, feeling the gaze of the diminutive sorceress on her.

‘The tower,’ Nimue said slowly, observing her every movement and almost every morsel she raised to her mouth, ‘has six storeys, one of which is below ground. Your room is on the second floor above ground. You’ll find every convenience needed for living. The ground floor, as you see, is the service area. The servants’ quarters are also located here. The subterranean, first and third floors house the laboratory, library and gallery. You may enter and have unfettered access to all the floors I’ve mentioned and the rooms there. You may take advantage of them and of what they contain, when you wish and however you wish.’

‘I understand. Thank you.’

‘The uppermost two storeys contain my private chambers and my private study. Those rooms are absolutely private. In order to avoid misunderstandings: I am extremely sensitive about such things.’

‘I shall respect that.’

Nimue turned her head towards the window, through which the grunting Ferryman could be seen. He had already dealt with Condwiramurs’ luggage, and was now loading rods, reels, landing nets, scoop nets and other fishing tackle into his boat.

‘I’m a little old-fashioned,’ she continued. ‘But I’ve become accustomed to having the exclusive use of certain things. Like a toothbrush, let’s say. My private chambers, library and toilet. And the Fisher King. Do not try, please, to avail yourself of the Fisher King.’

Condwiramurs almost choked on her milk. Nimue’s face didn’t express anything.

‘And if . . .’ she continued, before the girl had regained her speech, ‘if he tries to avail himself of you, decline him.’

Condwiramurs finally swallowed and nodded quickly, refraining from any comment whatsoever. Though it was on the tip of her tongue to say she didn't care for anglers, particularly boorish ones. With heads of dishevelled hair as white as curds.

'Good,' Nimue drawled. 'That's the introductions over and done with. Time to get down to business. Doesn't it interest you why I chose precisely *you* from among all the candidates?'

If Condwiramurs pondered the answer at all, it was only so as not to appear too cocksure. She quickly concluded, though, that with Nimue, even the slightest false modesty would offend by its insincerity.

'I'm the best dream-reader in the academy,' she replied coolly, matter-of-factly and without boastfulness. 'And in the third year I was second among the oneiromancers.'

'I could have taken the number one.' Nimue was brutal, frank. 'Incidentally, they suggested that high-flyer somewhat insistently, as it happens, because she was apparently the important daughter of someone important. And where dream-reading and oneiromancy are concerned, you know yourself, my dear Condwiramurs, that it's a pretty fickle gift. Fiascos can befall even the best dream-reader.'

Condwiramurs kept to herself the riposte that she could count her fiascos on the fingers of one hand. After all, she was talking to a master. *Know your limits, my good sir*, as one of her professors at the academy, a polymath, used to say.

Nimue praised her silence with a slight nod of her head.

'I made some enquiries at the academy,' she said a moment later. 'Hence, I know that you do not boost your divination with hallucinogens. I'm pleased about that, for I don't tolerate narcotics.'

'I divine without any drugs,' confirmed Condwiramurs with some pride. 'All I need for oneiroscopy is a hook.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'You know, a hook,' the novice coughed, 'I mean an object in some way connected to what I'm supposed to dream about. Some kind of thing or picture . . .'

'A picture?'

'Uh-huh. I divine pretty well from a picture.'

'Oh,' smiled Nimue. 'Oh, since a painting will help, there

won't be any problem. If you've satisfactorily broken your fast, O first dream-reader and second-among-oneiromancers. I ought to explain to you without delay the other reasons why it was you I chose as my assistant.'

Cold emanated from the stone walls, alleviated neither by the heavy tapestries nor the darkened wood panelling. The stone floor chilled her feet through the soles of her slippers.

'Beyond that door,' she indicated carelessly, 'is the laboratory. As has been said before, you may make free use of it. Caution, naturally, is advised. Moderation is particularly recommended during attempts to make brooms carry buckets of water.'

Condwiramurs giggled politely, although the joke was ancient. All the lecturers regaled their charges with jokes referring to the mythical hardships of the mythical sorcerer's apprentice.

The stairs wound upwards like a sea serpent. And they were precipitous. Before they arrived at their destination Condwiramurs was sweating and panting hard. Nimue showed no signs of effort at all.

'This way please.' She opened the oak door. 'Mind the step.'

Condwiramurs entered and gasped.

The chamber was a picture gallery. The walls were covered from floor to ceiling with paintings. Hanging there were large, old, peeling and cracked oils, miniatures, yellowed prints and engravings, faded watercolours and sepias. There were also vividly coloured gouaches and temperas, clean-of-line aquatints and etchings, lithographs and contrasting mezzotints, drawing the gaze with distinctive dots of black.

Nimue stopped before the picture hanging nearest the door, portraying a group gathered beneath a great tree. She looked at the canvas, then at Condwiramurs, and her mute gaze was unusually eloquent.

'Dandelion.' The novice, realising at once what was expected, didn't make her wait. 'Singing a ballad beneath the oak Bleobheris.'

Nimue smiled and nodded, and took a step, stopping before the next painting. A watercolour. Symbolism. The silhouettes of two women on a hill. Gulls circling above them, and below a procession of shadows on the hillside.

'Ciri and Triss Merigold, the prophetic vision in Kaer Morhen.'

A smile, a nod, a step, the next painting. A rider at gallop on a horse down an avenue of misshapen alders extending the arms of their boughs towards him. Condwiramurs felt a shudder running through her.

'Ciri . . . Hmm . . . It's probably her ride to meet Geralt on the farm of the halfling Hofmeier.'

The next painting, a darkened oil. A battle scene.

'Geralt and Cahir defending the bridge on the Yaruga.'

Then things went more quickly.

'Yennefer and Ciri, their first meeting in the Temple of Melitele. Dandelion and the dryad Eithne, in Brokilon Forest. Geralt's company in a blizzard on the Malheur pass—'

'Bravo, splendid,' interrupted Nimue. 'Excellent knowledge of the legend. Now you know the other reason it's you that's here and not anybody else.'

*

A large canvas portraying the Battle of Brenna overlooked the small ebony table they sat down at. It showed a key moment of the battle; that is, somebody's vulgarly heroic death. The painting was beyond a doubt the work of Nikolai Certosa, which could be ascertained by the atmosphere, the perfect attention to detail and the lighting effects typical for that artist.

'Indeed, I know the legend of the Witcher and the witcher girl,' replied Condwiramurs. 'I know it, I have no hesitation in saying, thoroughly. I loved that story when I was a young girl. I became engrossed in it. I even dreamed of being Yennefer. I'll be frank, though, even if it was love at first sight, even if it was explosively torrid . . . my love wasn't everlasting.'

Nimue raised her eyebrows.

'I first became acquainted with the story,' continued Condwiramurs, 'in popular abridgements and versions for young people, *précis* cut and cleaned up *ad usum delphini*. Later, naturally, I studied the so-called serious and complete versions. Extensive to the point of superfluity, and at times also beyond. Then passion

was replaced by cool reflection and wild desire by something like

marital duty. If you know what I mean.'

Nimue confirmed she did with a barely perceptible nod.

'Summing up, I prefer legends that cleave more strongly to legendary convention, do not mix fables with reality, and don't try to integrate the simple, elegant morality of the story with deeply immoral historical truth. I prefer legends to which encyclopaedists, archaeologists and historians don't add epilogues. I prefer it when a prince climbs to the top of the Glass Mountain, kisses the sleeping princess, she wakes up and they both live happily ever after. A legend should end like that and no other way . . . Who painted that portrait of Ciri? That full-length one?'

'There isn't a single portrait of Ciri.' The voice of the little sorceress was so matter-of-fact it was almost cold. 'Not here, nor anywhere in the world. Not a single portrait has survived, not a single miniature painted by anybody who could have seen, known or even remembered Ciri. That full-length portrait shows Pavetta, Ciri's mother, and it was painted by Ruiz Dorrit, court artist to the Cintran monarchs. It is known that Dorrit painted Ciri's portrait at the age of nine, also full-length, but the canvas, called *Infanta with a Greyhound*, was lost, regrettably. Let us, though, return to the legend and your attitude to it. And to how, in your opinion, a legend ought to end.'

'It ought to end happily,' said Condwiramurs with conviction. 'Good and righteousness should triumph, evil should be punished exemplarily, and love should unite the lovers until the end of their days. And none of the heroes should bloody die! And the legend of Ciri? How does that end?'

'Precisely. How?'

Condwiramurs was struck dumb for a moment. She hadn't expected a question like that; she sensed a test, an exam, a trap. She said nothing, not wanting to be caught out.

How does the legend of Ciri end? But everybody knows that.

She looked at a dark-hued watercolour which depicted an amorphous barge gliding over the surface of a mist-shrouded lake, a barge being plied with a long pole by a woman visible only as a black shape.

That's exactly how the legend ends. Just like that.

Nimue read her thoughts.

‘It isn’t so certain, Condwiramurs. By no means is it certain.’

*

‘I heard the legend,’ began Nimue, ‘from the lips of a wandering storyteller. I’m a country child, the fourth daughter of the village wheelwright. The times the storyteller Pogwizd, a wandering beggar, dwelled in our village were the most beautiful moments of my childhood. One could take a break from the daily toil, see those fabulous wonders, see that far-distant world with the eyes of the soul. A beautiful and marvellous world . . . More distant and marvellous even than the market in the town nine miles away from us . . .

‘I was about six or seven then. My oldest sister was fourteen and was already twisted from stooping over her labours. A peasant woman’s lot! In our village, girls were prepared for that from childhood! To stoop! Endlessly to stoop, to stoop and bend over our work, over a child, under the weight of a swollen belly, forced on you by your man the moment you’d risen from childbed.

‘Those beggar’s tales made me begin to wish for something more than a stoop and the daily grind, to dream for something more than the harvest, a husband and children. The first book I bought from the takings of selling brambles gathered in the forest was the legend of Ciri. The cleaned-up version, as you nicely described it, for children, the précis *ad ursum delphini*. That version was just right for me. I was a poor reader. But already by then I knew what I wanted. I wanted to be like Philippa Eilhart, like Sheala de Tancarville, like Assire var Anahid . . .’

They both looked at a gouache depicting a castle chamber, a table and some women sitting around it, in subtle chiaroscuro. Legendary women.

‘In the academy where I was admitted – at the second attempt, actually,’ Nimue continued, ‘I only studied the myth with respect to the Great Lodge during lessons on the history of magic. At first I simply didn’t have time to read for pleasure. I had to focus, in order to . . . keep up with the darling daughters of counts and bankers to whom everything came easily, who laughed at lasses from the country . . .’

She fell silent and cracked her knuckles.

‘I finally found time for reading,’ she continued, ‘but then I realised that the vicissitudes of Geralt and Ciri entertained me much less than they had during my childhood. A similar syndrome to yours occurred. What did you call it? Marital duties? It was like that until . . .’

She fell silent and rubbed her face. Condwiramurs noticed in amazement that the hand of the Lady of the Lake was trembling.

‘I suppose I was eighteen, when . . . when something happened. Something that made the legend of Ciri live in me again. That made me begin to involve myself with it seriously, as a scholar. Made me begin to devote my life to it.’

The novice remained silent, although curiosity was raging inside her.

‘Don’t pretend you don’t know,’ Nimue said tartly. ‘Everyone knows that the Lady of the Lake is possessed by a literally pathological obsession about the legend of Ciri. Everybody gossips about how an initially harmless fad transformed into something like an addiction to narcotics, or simply a mania. There is a good deal of truth to those rumours, my dear Condwiramurs, a good deal! And you, since I chose you as my assistant, will also descend into mania and dependency. For I shall demand it. At least for the time of your apprenticeship. Do you understand?’

The novice nodded.

‘You think you understand.’ Nimue regained control of herself and calmed down. ‘But I shall explain it to you. Gradually. And when the time comes I shall explain everything to you. For the time being—’

She broke off and looked through the window, at the lake, at the black line of the Fisher King’s boat clearly standing out from the shimmering golden surface of the water.

‘For the time being, rest. Look at the gallery. You will find in the cupboards and display cases albums and boxes of engravings, all thematically linked to the tale. In the library are all the legend’s versions and adaptations, and also most of the scholarly treatises. Devote some time to them. Have a good look, read and concentrate. I want you to have some material for your dreams. A hook, as you called it.’

‘I will. Madame Nimue?’

‘Yes.’

‘Those two portraits . . . Hanging beside each other . . . Aren’t they of Ciri either?’

‘Not a single portrait of Ciri exists,’ Nimue repeated patiently. ‘Later artists only painted her in scenes, each according to their own imagination. As far as those portraits are concerned, the one on the left is more likely a free variation on the subject, since it depicts the she-elf, Lara Dorren aep Shiadhal, a person the artist couldn’t have known. For the artist is Lydia van Bredevoort, who’s certainly familiar to you from the legend. One of her surviving oils still hangs in the academy.’

‘I know. And the other portrait?’

Nimue looked long at the picture, at the image of a slender girl with fair hair and a sad expression wearing a white dress with green sleeves.

‘It was painted by Robin Anderida,’ she said, turning around and looking Condwiramurs straight in the eyes. ‘And who it portrays . . . You tell me, dream-reader and oneiromancer. Explain it. And tell me about your dream.’

*

Master Robin Anderida was the first to see the emperor approaching and bowed. Stella Congreve, Countess of Liddertal, stood up and curtseyed, gesturing to the girl seated on a carved armchair to do the same.

‘Greetings, Ladies.’ Emhyr var Emreis inclined his head. ‘Greetings to you, too, Master Robin. How goes the work?’

Master Robin coughed in embarrassment and bowed again, nervously wiping his fingers on his smock. Emhyr knew that the artist suffered from acute agoraphobia and was pathologically shy. But whose concern was that? What mattered was how well he painted.

The emperor, as was customary when he was travelling, was wearing an officer’s uniform of the Impera guards’ brigade: black armour and a cloak with an embroidered silver salamander. He walked over and looked at the portrait. First at the portrait and only afterwards at the model: a slender girl with fair hair and a wistful

gaze. She was wearing a white dress with green sleeves, with a slight décolletage decorated with a peridot necklace.

'Excellent,' he said intentionally into space, so they wouldn't know who he was praising. 'Excellent, Master. Please continue, without paying attention to me. A word, if you would, Countess.'

He walked away, towards the window, making her follow him.

'I ride,' he said quietly. 'State affairs. Thank you for your hospitality. And for her. For the princess. Good work, indeed, Stella. Truly deserving of praise. Both for you and her.'

Stella Congreve curtseyed low and gracefully.

'Your Imperial Majesty is too good to us.'

'Don't speak too soon.'

'Oh . . .' She pursed her lips slightly. 'Has it come to that?'

'It has.'

'What will become of her, Emhyr?'

'I don't know,' he replied. 'In ten days I renew the offensive in the North. And it promises to be an exacting, a very exacting war. Vattier de Rideaux is monitoring plots and conspiracies aimed at me. Reasons of state may force on me very extreme acts.'

'That child is not to blame for anything.'

'I said reasons of state. Reasons of state have nothing in common with justice. In any case . . .' He waved a hand. 'I want to talk to her. Alone. Come closer, Princess. Closer, closer, look lively. Your emperor commands.'

The girl curtseyed low. Emhyr looked her up and down, returning in his memory to that momentous audience in Loc Grim. He was full of appreciation, nay admiration, for Stella Congreve, who in the course of the six months that had passed since that moment had managed to transform the ugly duckling into a little noblewoman.

'Leave us,' he commanded. 'Take a break, Master Robin. To clean your brushes, let's say. While I would ask you, Countess, to wait in the antechamber. And you, Princess, follow me onto the terrace.'

The wet snow which had fallen in the night was melting in the first rays of the morning sun, and the roofs of the towers and

pinnacles of Darn Rowan Castle were still wet and glistened as though on fire.

Emhyr went over to the balcony's balustrade. The girl – in keeping with protocol – hung back three paces. He gestured impatiently for her to come closer.

The emperor said nothing for a long time, resting both hands on the balustrade, staring at the hills and the evergreen yews covering them, clearly distinct from the white limestone of the rocky faults. The river glinted, a ribbon of molten silver winding through the valley.

Spring was in the air.

'I reside here too seldom,' said Emhyr. The girl said nothing. 'I come here too seldom,' he repeated, turning around. 'And it's a beautiful place, exuding calm. A beautiful region . . . Do you agree with me?'

'Yes, Your Imperial Majesty.'

'Spring is in the air. Am I right?'

'Yes, Your Imperial Majesty.'

From below, in the courtyard, came the sound of singing disturbed by clanking, rattling and the clattering of horseshoes. The escort, informed that the emperor had ordered his departure, was hurriedly making ready for the road. Emhyr remembered that among the guardsmen was one who sang. Often. And regardless of circumstances.

Look on me graciously
With eyes of cornflower blue
Grant me mercifully
Your fondness so true
Think on me mercifully
And at this night hour
Decline me not graciously
But receive me to your bower

'A pretty ballad,' he said ponderously, touching his heavy, gold,

imperial necklace with his fingers.

'It is, Your Imperial Majesty.'

Vattier assures me he is on Vilgefortz's trail. That finding him is a question of days, at most weeks. The traitors' heads will fall, and the real Cirilla, Queen of Cintra, will be brought to Nilfgaard.

And before the authentic Cirilla, Queen of Cintra, comes to Nilfgaard, something will have to be done with her look-alike.

'Raise your head.'

She obeyed.

'Do you have any wishes?' he asked, suddenly and harshly. 'Any complaints? Requests?'

'No, Your Imperial Highness. I do not.'

'Indeed? Interesting. Ah well, but I can't exactly order you to have any. Raise your head, as befits a princess. Stella has taught you manners, I trust?'

'Yes, Your Imperial Majesty.'

Indeed, they have taught her well, he thought. *First Rience, and then Stella. They've taught her the roles and lines well, no doubt threatening her with torture and death for a slip or mistake. They warned her she would have to perform before a cruel audience, unforgiving of errors. Before the awe-inspiring Emhyr var Emreis, Emperor of Nilfgaard.*

'What's your name?' he asked abruptly.

'Cirilla Fiona Elen Riannon.'

'Your real name.'

'Cirilla Fiona—'

'Do not try my patience. Your name!'

'Cirilla . . .' The girl's voice broke like a twig. 'Fiona . . .'

'That will do, by the Great Sun,' he said between clenched teeth. 'That will do!'

She sniffed loudly. Contrary to protocol. Her mouth trembled, but protocol did not forbid that.

'Calm yourself,' he commanded, but in a soft and almost gentle voice. 'What do you fear? Are you ashamed of your own name? Are you afraid to disclose it? If I ask, it is only because I'd

like to address you by your rightful name. But I have to know what it sounds like.'

'It sounds dull,' she answered, and her huge eyes suddenly gleamed like emeralds lit by a flame. 'For it is a dull name, Your Imperial Majesty. A name just right for somebody who's a nobody. As long as I am Cirilla Fiona I mean something . . . As long as . . .'

Her voice stuck in her throat so abruptly that she involuntarily brought her hands up to her neck as though what was around it was not a necklace but a garrotte. Emhyr continued to measure her with his gaze, still full of appreciation for Stella Congreve. At the same time, he felt anger. Unjustified anger. Unjustified and therefore very infuriating.

What do I want from this child? he thought, feeling the anger rising in him, seething in him, frothing up like soup in a pot. *What do I want from a child, whom . . ?*

'Know that I had nothing to do with your abduction, girl,' he said sharply. 'I didn't have anything to do with your kidnapping. I didn't issue any such orders. I was deceived . . .'

He was furious with himself, aware he was making a mistake. He ought to have ended the conversation much earlier, ended it haughtily, arrogantly, menacingly, as befitted an emperor. He ought to have forgotten about this girl with the green eyes. This girl that did not exist. She was a double. An imitation. She didn't even have a name. She was nobody. *The emperor does not ask for forgiveness, does not demean himself before someone who . . .*

'Forgive me,' he said, and the words were unfamiliar, clung unpleasantly to his lips. 'I committed an error. Yes, it's true, I'm guilty of what happened to you. I was at fault. But I give you my word that you are in no danger. Nothing ill will befall you. No harm, no discredit, no woe. You needn't be afraid.'

'I'm not.' She raised her head and looked him straight in the eyes, contrary to protocol. Emhyr shuddered, moved by the honesty and trust of her gaze. He immediately stood erect, imperious and repellently supercilious.

'Ask me for whatever you wish.'

She looked at him again, and he involuntarily recalled the innumerable occasions when he had so easily bought himself ease of conscience for the harm or pain he'd caused somebody. Secretly and reprehensibly pleased that he was paying so little.

‘Ask me for whatever you wish,’ he repeated, and because he was already weary his voice suddenly gained in humanity. ‘I’ll make your every wish come true.’

If only she wouldn’t look at me, he thought. *I can’t bear her gaze.*

Apparently people are afraid to look at me, he thought. *So what then am I afraid of?*

Vattier de Rideaux can shove his ‘reasons of state’. If she asks, I’ll have her taken home, where she was snatched from. I’ll order her taken there in a golden carriage and six. All she need do is ask.

‘Ask me for whatever you wish,’ he repeated.

‘Thank you, Your Imperial Majesty,’ said the girl, lowering her eyes. ‘Your Imperial Majesty is very noble and generous. If I might make a request . . .’

‘Speak.’

‘I’d like to be able to stay here. Here, in Darn Rowan. With Lady Stella.’

He wasn’t surprised. He’d sensed something like that.

Tact restrained him from asking questions that would have been humiliating for them both.

‘I gave my word,’ he said, coldly. ‘Let your wish come true.’

‘Thank you, Your Imperial Majesty.’

‘I gave my word,’ he repeated, trying hard to avoid her gaze, ‘and I shall keep it. I think, nonetheless, that you’ve made a bad choice. You gave voice to the wrong wish. Were you to change your mind . . .’

‘I shall not,’ she said, when it became clear that the emperor was not going to complete his sentence. ‘Why should I? I’ve chosen Lady Stella, I’ve chosen things I have known so little of in my life . . . A home, warmth, goodness . . . kindness. You can’t make a mistake by choosing something like that.’

Poor, naive creature, thought Emperor Emhyr var Emreis, Deithwen Addan yn Carn aep Morvudd, the White Flame Dancing on the Barrows of his Enemies. *By choosing something like that one can make the most awful mistakes.*

But something – perhaps a distant memory – stopped the emperor from saying it aloud.

*

‘Interesting,’ said Nimue, after listening to the account. ‘An interesting dream, indeed. Were there any others?’

‘And some!’ Condwiramurs cut off the top of her egg with a swift, sure movement of her knife. ‘My head’s still spinning from that pageant! But that’s normal. The first night always brings deranged dreams. You know, Nimue, they say about us dream-readers that our talent isn’t about being able to dream. If you pass over visions during trances or under hypnosis, our dreams don’t differ from other people’s in intensity, richness or pro-cognitive content. Something quite different distinguishes us and determines our talent. We remember the dreams. We seldom forget what we have dreamed—’

The Lady of the Lake cut her off. ‘Because your endocrine glands function in some abnormal way. Your dreams, to trivialise them somewhat, are nothing more than endorphin released into the body. Like most native, magical gifts yours is also mundanely organic. But why am I talking about something you know perfectly well yourself? Go on, what other dreams do you remember?’

‘A young lad.’ Condwiramurs frowned. ‘Wandering among desolate fields, with a bundle over his shoulder. The fields are barren, it’s spring. Willows by the roads and on the baulks. Willows, twisted, full of hollows, spreading their branches . . . Naked, not yet in leaf. The lad is walking, looking around. Night falls. Stars appear in the sky. One of them is moving. It’s a comet. A reddish, twinkling spark, cutting slantways across the horizon.’

‘Well done,’ Nimue smiled. ‘Although I have no idea who you were dreaming about, we can at least precisely determine the date of the event. The red comet was visible for six days in the spring of the year the Cintran Peace was signed. To be more precise, in the first days of March. Did any date markers appear in the other dreams?’

‘My dreams,’ snapped Condwiramurs, salting her egg, ‘are not a farmer’s calendar. They don’t have charts with dates! But, to be precise, I dreamed a dream about the Battle of Brenna, after having a good look at the canvas of Nikolai Certosa in your gallery. And the date of the Battle of Brenna is also known. It’s the same date as

the year of the comet. Am I wrong?'

'You aren't. Was there anything special in the dream about the battle?'

'No. A seething mass of horses, people and weapons. Soldiers were fighting and yelling. Someone, probably a bit dim, was wailing, "Eagles! Eagles!"'

'What else? You said it was a whole pageant of dreams.'

'I don't remember . . .' Condwiramurs broke off.

Nimue smiled.

'Oh, all right.' The novice lifted up her nose haughtily, not letting the Lady of the Lake make a spiteful remark. 'I occasionally forget, naturally. No one's perfect. I repeat, my dreams are visions, not library cards—'

'I know,' interrupted Nimue. 'This isn't a test of your dream-reading abilities; it's an analysis of a legend. Of its mysteries and gaps. We're doing pretty well, as a matter of fact. In the first dreams you already identified the girl in the portrait, Ciri's double, with whom Vilgefortz tried to hoodwink Emperor Emhyr.'

They stopped, because the Fisher King had entered the kitchen. After bowing and grunting he took a loaf of bread, a tureen and a small, linen bundle. He went out, not forgetting to bow and grunt.

'He's limping badly,' said Nimue, seemingly offhandedly. 'He was seriously wounded. A wild boar gashed open his leg during a hunt. That's why he spends so much time in the boat. When he's rowing and catching fish the wound doesn't bother him. In the boat he forgets about his disability. He's a very decent and good man. And I . . .'

Condwiramurs remained politely silent.

'Need a man,' explained the small sorceress bluntly.

Me too, thought the novice. *Dammit, as soon as I get back to the academy I'll let someone take me. Celibacy is good, but for no longer than a semester.*

Nimue cleared her throat.

'If you've broken your fast and finished daydreaming, let's go to the library.'

*

‘Let’s get back to your dream.’

Nimue opened a portfolio, flicked through several sepia watercolours and took one of them out. Condwiramurs recognised it at once.

‘The audience at Loc Grim?’

‘Of course. The double is being presented at the imperial court. Emhyr pretends he’s been tricked, puts a brave face on it. Here, look, the ambassadors of the Northern Kingdoms, for whom the charade is being played out. Here, in turn, we see the Nilfgaardian dukes who have suffered an affront: the emperor spurned their daughters, disregarding their dynastic proposals. Greedy for revenge, they whisper, leaning towards each other. They’re hatching a plot and a murder. The double stands with her head bowed, and the artist, to underscore the mystery, has even decorated her with a handkerchief to hide her facial features.

‘And we know nothing more about the bogus Ciri,’ continued the sorceress a moment later. ‘None of the legend’s versions tell us what became of the double afterwards.’

‘It’s safe to guess, though,’ said Condwiramurs sadly, ‘that the girl’s fate was unenviable. When Emhyr obtained the original – and we know he did, don’t we? – he got rid of the counterfeit. When I dreamed, I didn’t sense tragedy, and actually I ought to have sensed something, if . . . On the other hand, what I see in dreams is not necessarily the real truth. Like anybody, I dream dreams. Desires. Longings . . . and fears.’

‘I know.’

*

They talked until lunchtime, looking through portfolios and fascicles of prints. The Fisher King had been lucky with his catch, because there was grilled salmon for lunch. For supper too.

Condwiramurs slept badly that night. She had overeaten.

She didn't dream anything. She was a little downhearted and embarrassed about that, but Nimue wasn't at all concerned. *We have time*, she said. *There are plenty of nights ahead of us*.

*

The tower of Inis Vitre had several bathrooms, truly luxurious, shining with marble and glistening with brass, heated by a hypocaust located somewhere in the cellars. Condwiramurs had no problem occupying the baths for hours, but every now and again would meet Nimue in the sweathouse, a tiny wooden hut with a jetty leading out towards the lake. They would sit on benches, wet, inhaling the steam that belched from stones sprinkled with water, swishing themselves lazily with birch twigs, as salty sweat dripped into their eyes.

'If I understood right,' Condwiramurs wiped her face, 'my practice here in Inis Vitre is meant to explain all the gaps in the legend of the Witcher and the witcher girl?'

'That's right.'

'During the day, by looking at the prints and discussing them, I'm meant to charge myself up before sleep, in order at night to be able to dream the real, unknown version of a given event.'

This time Nimue didn't even consider it necessary to concur. She just beat herself a few times with the whisk, stood up and splashed water on the hot stones. The steam billowed and the heat stopped their breath for a moment.

Nimue poured the rest of the water on herself from a small wooden pail. Condwiramurs admired her figure. Although petite, the sorceress was extremely well-proportioned. A woman in her twenties would have envied her curves and firm skin. Condwiramurs, for example, was twenty-four. And was envious.

'Even if I explain anything,' she continued, wiping her sweaty face again, 'how will we be certain I'm dreaming the true version? I truly didn't know—'

'We'll discuss that outside,' interrupted Nimue. 'I've had enough of sitting in this heat. Let's cool off. And then we'll talk.'

That was also part of the ritual. They ran from the sweathouse, bare feet slapping on the planks of the jetty, and then leaped into

the lake, yelling wildly. After splashing around they climbed out onto the jetty, squeezing their hair.

The Fisher King, alarmed by the splashes and squeals, looked around from his boat and glanced at them, shielding his eyes with a hand. But he turned around at once and scrutinised his fishing tackle.

Condwiramurs considered behaviour like that insulting and reprehensible. Her opinion of the Fisher King had improved greatly when she noticed that he devoted the time he wasn't angling to reading. He even took a book with him to the privy, and it was no less than *Speculum Aureum*, a serious and demanding work. So, even if during the first days of her stay in Inis Vitre Condwiramurs had been somewhat surprised at Nimue keeping him around, she had stopped long since. It became clear that the Fisher King was only seemingly a lout and a boor. Or it was a mask he hid behind.

All the same, thought Condwiramurs, it was an insult and unforgivable affront to turn back towards one's rods and spinners when two naked women with bodies like nymphs, to whom one's eyes should have been glued, were parading on a jetty.

'If I dream something,' she said, going back to the subject and drying herself with a towel, 'what guarantee is there I've dreamed the true version? I know all the literary versions of the legend, from Dandelion's *Half a Century of Poetry* to Andrei Ravix's *The Lady of the Lake*. I know the Honourable Jarre; I know all the scholarly treatments, not to mention popular editions. Reading all those texts has left a mark, had an influence. I'm unable to eliminate them from my dreams. Is there any chance of breaking through the fiction and dreaming the truth?'

'Yes, there is.'

'How great?'

'The same chance the Fisher King has.' Nimue nodded towards the boat on the lake. 'As you can see, he keeps on casting his hooks. He catches waterweed, roots, submerged tree stumps, logs, old boots, drowned corpses and the Devil knows what else. But from time to time he catches something worthwhile.'

'So I wish us good hunting,' sighed Condwiramurs, dressing. 'Let's cast the bait and fish. Let's search for the true versions of the legend, let's unstitch the upholstery and lining, and let's tap the chest for a false bottom. And what will happen if there isn't a false

bottom? With all due respect, Nimue, we aren't the first in these fishing grounds. What chance is there that any detail or particular has escaped the attention of the hordes of scholars who fished it before us? That they've left us even a single fish?'

'They have,' stated Nimue with conviction, combing out her wet hair. 'What they didn't know, they plastered over with confabulation and purple prose. Or drew a veil over it.'

'For instance?'

'The sojourn of the Witcher in Toussaint, to give the first example that comes to mind. All the versions of the legend dismiss that episode with a curt sentence, "The protagonists wintered in Toussaint." Even Dandelion, who devoted two chapters to his exploits in that county, is astonishingly enigmatic on the subject of the Witcher. Would it not then be worth finding out what happened that winter? After the flight from Belhaven and the meeting with the elf Avallac'h in the subterranean complex of Tir ná Béa Arainne? After the skirmish in Caed Myrkvid with the druids? What did the Witcher do in Toussaint from October to January?'

'What did he do? He wintered!' snorted the novice. 'He couldn't cross the pass before the thaw, so he wintered and got bored. No wonder later authors treated that boring fragment with a laconic "The winter passed". Well, since I must, I'll try to dream something. Do we have any pictures or drawings?'

Nimue smiled.

'We even have a drawing on a drawing.'

*

The cave painting depicted a hunting scene. A large, purple bison was being pursued in wild leaps by skinny human figures with bows and spears, painted with careless brushstrokes. The bison had tiger stripes and something resembling a dragonfly was hovering above its lyre-shaped horns.

'So this,' Regis nodded, 'is that wall painting. Executed by the elf Avallac'h. The elf who knew a great deal.'

'Yes,' Geralt confirmed dryly. 'That's the painting.'

'The problem is that we've thoroughly explored these caves,

but there are no traces of any elves, or the other creatures you mentioned.'

'They were here. Now they've hidden themselves. Or decamped.'

'That's an indisputable fact. Don't forget, you were only given an audience after the flaminika's intercession. It was clearly decided that one audience would suffice. Now that the flaminika has refused cooperation quite categorically, I truly know not what else you can do. We've been dragging ourselves through these caves all day. I can't help feeling it's pointless.'

'Me too,' the Witcher said bitterly, 'I can't either. I've never understood elves. But at least I know why most people aren't fond of them. Because it's difficult not to feel that they're mocking us. The elves mock us, deride us, in everything they do, say and think. Scoff at us.'

'It's your anthropomorphism talking.'

'Perhaps a little. But the impression remains.'

'What do we do?'

'We return to Caed Myrkvid and Cahir. The druidesses have probably patched up his scalped pate. Then we mount our horses and take advantage of Princess Anna Henrietta's invitation. Don't make faces, vampire. Milva has a few broken ribs, Cahir's nut has been split open, so a little rest in Toussaint will do both of them good. We also have to untangle Dandelion from this business, because it looks like he's well and truly caught up.'

'Very well,' sighed Regis. 'Let it be. I'll have to steer clear of looking glasses and dogs, watch out for sorcerers and telepaths . . . and if in spite of that they unmask me, I'm counting on you.'

'You can,' Geralt responded gravely. 'I won't abandon you in need. Comrade.'

The vampire smiled, and because they were alone, showed his full set of fangs.

'Comrade?'

'It's my anthropomorphism talking. On we go, let's get out of these caverns, comrade. Because all we'll find here is rheumatism.'

'I agree. Unless . . . Geralt? Tir ná Béa Arainne, the elven necropolis, according to what you saw, is behind the cave painting,

right behind that wall. We could get there if we . . . you know. Smashed it. Haven't you thought about that?'

'No. I haven't.'

*

The Fisher King had been lucky again, because there was smoked char for supper. Fish so tasty that the lesson wasn't learned. Condwiramurs stuffed herself again.

*

Condwiramurs burped and tasted the smoked char. *Time for bed*, she thought, for the second time catching herself mechanically turning a page in the book without registering the content at all. *Time for bed.*

She yawned and put the book aside. She rearranged the pillows, changing their positions from reading to repose. She magicked the lamp off. The chamber was immediately plunged into darkness as opaque and viscous as molasses. The heavy velour curtains were tightly drawn – the novice had long known from experience that she dreamed better in the darkness. *What to choose*, she thought, stretching and wriggling about on the sheets. *Let it run its oneiric course or try to anchor myself?*

In spite of widespread assurances, dream-readers didn't remember even half of their prophetic dreams, a significant proportion of which remained in the oneiromancers' memory as a muddle of images, changing colour and shape like a kaleidoscope, a child's toy of mirrors and pieces of glass. Not so bad if the images were random and without even a semblance of meaning, then one could calmly wave them aside on the basis of *I can't remember, so it's not worth remembering.* Dreams like that were called 'crap' by dream-readers.

Worse and slightly shameful were 'apparitions' – dreams of which dream-readers only remembered fragments, only snatches of meaning, dreams after which all that remained the next morning was a vague sense of a signal having been received. If an 'apparition' repeated itself too often one could be certain one was

dealing with a dream of significant oneiric value. Then the dream-reader – through concentration and auto-suggestion – tried hard to force herself to re-dream the specific 'apparition' exactly. The best results occurred by making oneself re-dream it immediately on waking – which was called 'snagging'. If the dream couldn't be 'snagged' all that remained was an attempt at evoking a given dream vision during one of the next periods of sleep, by concentrating and meditating before falling asleep. That method of programming dreams was called 'anchoring'.

After twelve nights spent on the island Condwiramurs already had three lists, three sets of dreams. There was a list of successes worth boasting about – a list of 'apparitions' which the dream-reader had successfully 'snagged' or 'anchored'. That included the dreams about the rebellion on the Isle of Thanedd and the journey of the Witcher and his company through the blizzard on the Malheur pass, through the spring downpours and soft roads in the Sudduth valley. There was also – the novice hadn't admitted to Nimue – a list of failures, dreams that in spite of her efforts still remained enigmas. And there was a list of works in progress – a list of dreams that were waiting for their turn.

And there was one dream, strange, but very pleasant, which kept returning in snatches and flashes, in elusive sounds and silky touches.

A nice, tender dream.

Very well, thought Condwiramurs, closing her eyes. I'm ready.

*

'I think I know what occupied the Witcher while he wintered in Toussaint.'

'Well, well.' Nimue raised her eyes from above her spectacles and the leather-bound grimoire she was leafing through. 'Have you finally dreamed something?'

'I'll say!' Condwiramurs said cockily. 'I've dreamed it! The Witcher Geralt and a woman with short black hair and green eyes. I don't know who it could have been. Perhaps that duchess Dandelion writes about in his memoirs?'

'You must have been reading inattentively.' The sorceress

cooled her novice's enthusiasm somewhat. 'Dandelion describes Duchess Anarietta precisely, and other sources confirm that she had – and I quote – "hair of chestnut tones, blazing like gold itself."'

'And so it isn't her,' the novice agreed. 'My woman had black hair. Like coal itself. And the dream was . . . Hmmm . . . interesting.'

'I'm all ears.'

'They conversed. But it wasn't an ordinary conversation.'

'Was there something extraordinary about it?'

'For most of it she had her legs slung over his shoulders.'

*

'Tell me, Geralt, do you believe in love at first sight?'

'Do you?'

'I do.'

'Now I know what brought us together. The attraction of opposites.'

'Don't be cynical.'

'Why not? Cynicism is meant to be proof of intelligence.'

'Not true. Cynicism – in spite of all its pseudo-intelligent aura – is repulsively insincere. I can't stand insincerity of any kind. Since we're on the subject . . . Tell me, Witcher, what do you love most about me?'

'This.'

'You're descending from cynicism into triviality and banality. Try again.'

'The thing I love most about you is your mind, your intelligence and your spiritual profundities. Your independence and freedom, your—'

'I don't understand where all this sarcasm in you comes from . . .'

'It wasn't sarcasm; it was a joke.'

'I can't bear jokes like that. Especially not at the wrong time.

Everything, my dear, has its time and a time is set for all matters under the sun. There is a time for silence and a time for speech, a time for weeping tears and a time for laughter, a time for sowing and a time for groping, I mean reaping, a time for jokes and a time for gravity . . .'

'A time for carnal caresses and a time for refraining from them?'

'Hey, don't take it so literally! Accept, rather, that there's a time for compliments. Love-making without compliments smacks of physiology and physiology is shallow. Pay me compliments.'

'No one, from the Yaruga to the Buina, has such a gorgeous behind as you.'

'Blast it, now for a change you've compared me to some barbaric little northern rivers. Passing over the various metaphors, couldn't you have said from the Alba to the Velda? Or from the Alba to Sansretour?'

'I've never seen the Alba. I try hard to avoid judgements when they aren't backed up by hard experience.'

'Ooh! Truly? Then I think you've seen and experienced enough bums – for that's what we're talking about – to be able to judge. Well, White Hair? How many women have you had before me? Eh? I asked you a question, Witcher! No, no, let go, hands off, you won't wriggle out of it like that. How many women have you had before me?'

'None. You're my first.'

'At last.'

*

Nimue stared for a long time at a painting depicting ten women sitting at a round table in subtle chiaroscuro.

'Pity,' she finally said, 'that we don't know what they really looked like.'

'The Great Sorceresses?' snorted Condwiramurs. 'There are dozens of portraits of them! In Aretuza alone—'

'I said *really*,' interrupted Nimue. 'I didn't mean flattering

likenesses painted on the basis of other flattering likenesses. Don't forget there was a time when the reputations of sorceresses were maligned. As were the sorceresses themselves. And later there was the time of propaganda when the Great Sorceresses must have aroused respect, admiration and reverential fear by their very appearance. The *Meetings of the Lodge*, *The Conspiracies* and *The Convents* all date from that time, canvasses and engravings showing a table and around it ten magnificent, enchantingly beautiful women. And there aren't any real, authentic portraits. Apart from two exceptions. The portrait of Margarita Laux-Antille that hangs in Aretuza on the Isle of Thanedd and which miraculously survived the fire is authentic. And the portrait of Sheala de Tancarville in Ensenada, Lan Exeter is authentic.'

'And the portrait of Francesca Findabair painted by elves hanging in the Vengerberg gallery?' asked Condwiramurs.

'A forgery. When the Door was opened and the elves departed, they took away with them or destroyed every work of art, leaving not a single painting. We don't know if the Daisy of the Valleys was really as comely as the tales have it. We have no idea at all what Ida Emean looked like. And since in Nilfgaard images of sorceresses were destroyed very diligently and thoroughly, we don't have any idea about the true appearances of Assire var Anahid or Fringilla Vigo.'

'Let's suppose and agree that they all looked exactly as they were later portrayed,' sighed Condwiramurs. 'Dignified, imperious, good and wise, foresighted and noble. And beautiful, captivatingly beautiful . . . Let's suppose that. Then it's somehow easier to live.'

*

The daily activities on Inis Vitre took on the character of a somewhat tiresome routine. The analysis of Condwiramurs' dreams, beginning at breakfast, usually dragged on all the way to midday. The novice spent the time between noon and their next meal taking walks – which also quickly became habitual and quite boring. No wonder. In the course of an hour one could go around the island twice, feasting one's eyes all the while on such engrossing things as granite, a dwarf pine, pebbles, freshwater mussels, water and gulls.

After lunch and a long siesta followed discussions, the

inspection of tomes, scrolls and manuscripts, the study of pictures, prints and maps. And long debates about the mutual inter-relationships between legend and truth extending into the night . . .

And then the nights and dreams. Various dreams. Celibacy made itself felt. At times, instead of the mysteries of the Witcher legend, Condwiramurs dreamed of the Fisher King in all sorts of situations, from extremely non-erotic to extremely erotic. In an extremely non-erotic dream The Fisher King was dragging her behind his boat on a rope. He was rowing slowly and languidly, so she was sinking, drowning, spluttering, and on top of that a terrible fear was tormenting her – she felt that something had pushed off the lake bottom and was swimming up towards her, something awful, something that wanted to swallow the bait – her – being pulled behind the boat. That something was on the point of seizing her when the Fisher King leaned more heavily on the oars, pulling her out of range of the invisible predator's jaws. As she was dragged along she choked on water and at that moment she awoke.

In an unambiguously erotic dream she was kneeling on the bottom of the rocking boat, hanging over the side, and The Fisher King was holding her by the shoulders and fucking her exuberantly, grunting, hawking and spitting as he did so. Apart from the physical pleasure, Condwiramurs felt gut-wrenching terror – what would happen if Nimue caught them at it? She suddenly saw the face of the little sorceress rocking in the lake. . . and she awoke, soaked in sweat.

Then she got up and opened the window, luxuriated in the night air, the light of the moon and the mist rolling off the lake.

And dreamed on.

*

The tower of Inis Vitre had a terrace supported on columns, suspended over the lake. At the beginning, Condwiramurs did not pay any attention to the matter, but finally began to wonder. The terrace was strange, because it was totally inaccessible. It was impossible to get onto the terrace from any of the rooms she knew.

Aware that the abodes of sorceresses were sure to have such secret anomalies, Condwiramurs did not ask any questions. Even when – as she took a walk along the lake shore – she saw Nimue

watching her from the terrace. It was inaccessible, it turned out, only to the unauthorised and the profane.

Piqued that she was thought of as profane, she dug her heels in and pretended that nothing was the matter. But it wasn't long before the secret of the terrace was revealed.

It was after she had been visited by a series of dreams, triggered by the watercolours of Wilma Wessely. Clearly fascinated by that fragment of the legend, the artist devoted all her works to Ciri in the Tower of the Swallow.

'I'm having strange dreams after those paintings,' the novice complained the next morning. 'I'm dreaming of . . . paintings. Always the same paintings. Not situations, not scenes, but paintings. Ciri on the tower's battlements . . . An unmoving picture.'

'And nothing else? No sensations apart from visual ones?'

Nimue knew, of course, that a dream-reader as able as Condwiramurs dreamed with all her senses – she didn't only experience the dream with sight, like most people, but also with her hearing, touch, smell – even taste.

'No.' Condwiramurs shook her head. 'Only . . .'

'Yes, yes?'

'A thought. A stubborn thought. That by this lake, in this tower, I'm not the mistress at all, but a captive.'

'Follow me.'

Just as Condwiramurs had guessed, the way to the terrace was only possible through the sorceress's private chambers, which were utterly clean, pedantically tidy, smelling of sandalwood, myrrh, lavender and naphthalene. They had to use a tiny door and a winding staircase leading downwards.

This chamber, unlike the others, didn't have wood panelling or tapestries. It was simply painted white and was thus very bright. It was all the brighter since there was a huge triptych window, or rather a glass door, leading straight onto the terrace perched above the lake.

The only pieces of furniture in the chamber were two armchairs, an immense looking glass in an oval, mahogany frame and a kind of rack with a horizontal bar and a tapestry draped over it. The tapestry measured about five foot by seven and its tassels rested on the floor. It showed a rocky cliff over a tarn, and a castle

carved into the cliff, which seemed to be part of the rock wall. A castle Condwiramurs knew well from numerous illustrations.

'Vilgefortz's citadel, Yennefer's place of imprisonment. The place where the legend ended.'

'That is so.' Nimue nodded, apparently indifferently. 'The legend ended there, at least in its known versions. It's those versions we know, so we think we know the ending. Ciri fled from the Tower of the Swallow, where, as you dreamed it, she had been a prisoner. When she realised what they wanted to do to her, she escaped. The legend gives many versions of her flight—'

'The one I like most,' cut in Condwiramurs, 'is the one where she threw objects behind her. A comb, an apple and a neckerchief. But—'

'Condwiramurs.'

'I beg your pardon.'

'As I said, there are myriad versions of the escape. But it is still none too clear how Ciri reached Vilgefortz's castle straight from the Tower of the Swallow. You couldn't dream the Tower of the Swallow, could you? Try dreaming the castle. Examine that tapestry carefully . . . Are you listening to me?'

'That looking glass . . . It's magical, isn't it?'

'No. I squeeze my pimples in front of it.'

'I beg your pardon.'

'It's Hartmann's looking glass,' explained Nimue, seeing the novice's wrinkled nose and sullen expression. 'Look into it, if you wish. But please be cautious.'

'Is it true,' asked Condwiramurs in a voice trembling with excitement, 'that from Hartmann's looking glass you can pass into other—'

'Worlds? Indeed. But not at once, not without preparation, meditation, concentration and a whole host of other things. When I recommended caution I was thinking about something else.'

'What?'

'It works both ways. Something may also emerge from Hartmann's looking glass.'

*

‘Know what, Nimue . . . When I look at that tapestry—’

‘Have there been dreams?’

‘Yes. But strange ones. From a bird’s eye view. I was a bird . . . I saw the castle from the outside. I couldn’t go inside. Something barred my way.’

‘Look at the tapestry,’ commanded Nimue. ‘Look at the citadel. Look at it carefully; focus your attention on every detail. Concentrate hard; etch that image deeply into your memory. I want you to get there in your dream, to go inside. It’s important for you to go inside.’

*

A truly devilish gale must have been raging outside, beyond the castle walls. The fire was roaring in the grate, quickly consuming the logs. Yennefer was delighting in the warmth. Her current prison was, admittedly, much, much warmer than the dank dungeon where she had spent the last two months, but despite her delight her teeth still chattered. She had completely lost track of time, and no one had hurried to inform her about the date, but she was certain it was December, or perhaps even January.

‘Eat, Yennefer,’ said Vilgefortz. ‘Don’t be shy, tuck in.’

The sorceress had no intention of being shy. If, though, she was coping quite slowly and awkwardly with the chicken, it was only because her barely healed fingers were still clumsy and stiff. It was hard work to hold a knife and fork in them. And she didn’t want to eat with her fingers – she wanted to show Vilgefortz and the other diners, the sorcerer’s guests, that she was stronger than they believed. She didn’t know any of them.

‘I’m truly sorry to have to inform you,’ said Vilgefortz, caressing the stem of his wine glass, ‘that Ciri, your ward, has departed this life. You only have yourself to blame, Yennefer. You and your senseless obstinacy.’

One of the guests, a short, dark-haired man, sneezed loudly, and blew his nose on a cambric handkerchief. His nose was red and

swollen, and clearly completely blocked up.

‘Bless you,’ said Yennefer, not at all bothered by Vilgefortz’s portentous words. ‘Where did you catch such an awful chill, good sir? Did you stand in a draught after bathing?’

Another guest, old, huge, thin, with hideously pale eyes, suddenly cackled. The one with the cold, although his face contorted in anger, thanked the sorceress with a bow and a brief catarrhal sentence. Not brief enough for her not to detect a Nilfgaardian accent.

Vilgefortz turned his face towards her. He was no longer wearing on his head the golden scaffolding or the crystal lens in his eye socket, but he looked even more horrible than when, during the summer, she had first seen his mutilated face. His regenerated left eyeball was now functioning, but was much smaller than his right. The sight took her breath away.

‘You, Yennefer,’ he drawled, ‘no doubt think I’m lying, think I’m trying to ensnare you, trick you. To what end would I do that? I was as distressed as you at the news of Ciri’s death. What am I saying? Even more than you. After all, I had pinned very specific hopes on the maid, had made plans which were to have determined my future. Now the girl is dead, and my plans are ruined.’

‘Good.’ Yennefer, trying hard to hold the knife in her stiff fingers, was slicing a pork cutlet stuffed with plums.

‘You, though,’ continued the wizard, paying no attention to her remark, ‘are merely connected to Ciri by sentimental attachment, which consists in equal measure of regret caused by your own barrenness and a sense of guilt. Yes, yes, Yennefer, guilt! For, after all, you participated in the cross-breeding, in the animal husbandry that resulted in little Ciri’s birth. And then transferred your affection onto the fruit of a genetic experiment, an unsuccessful one, which failed anyway. Because the experimenters lacked in knowledge.’

Yennefer raised her glass to him in silence, praying it wouldn’t fall from her fingers. She was slowly coming to the conclusion that at least two of them would be stiff for a long time. Possibly permanently.

Vilgefortz snorted at her gesture.

‘Now it’s too late, it’s happened,’ he said through clenched teeth. ‘But know this, Yennefer, that I possess knowledge. If I’d had

the girl as well I would have made use of that knowledge. Indeed, it was bad luck for you, for I would have given you a reason for your crippled excuse of a maternal instinct. Although you're as dry and sterile as a stone, you'd not only have had a daughter, but a granddaughter too. Or, at least, an excuse for a granddaughter.'

Yennefer snorted contemptuously, although inside she was seething with fury.

'With the greatest regret I'm compelled to further spoil your splendid mood, my dear,' the sorcerer said coldly. 'Because I imagine you'll be saddened to hear that the Witcher, Geralt of Rivia, is also dead. Yes, yes, the same Witcher Geralt, with whom, as with Ciri, you were bound by an ersatz emotion, a ridiculous, foolish and sickly sweet fondness. Know, Yennefer, that our dear Witcher departed from this world in a truly ardent and spectacular fashion. In this case you don't have to reproach yourself. You're not to blame in the slightest for the Witcher's death. I'm responsible for the entire fracas. Try the marinated pears, they are simply delicious.'

Cold hatred lit up Yennefer's violet eyes. Vilgefortz burst out laughing.

'I prefer you like this,' he said. 'Indeed, were it not for the dimeritium bracelet you'd reduce me to ashes. But the dimeritium is working, so you can only scorch me with your gaze.'

The man with the cold sneezed, blew his nose and coughed until tears trickled from his eyes. The tall man scrutinised the sorceress with his unpleasant, fishy gaze.

'And where is Mr Rience?' asked Yennefer, drawing out her words. 'Mr Rience, who promised me so much, told me so much about what he'd do to me? Where is Mr Shirrú, who never passed up a chance to shove or kick me? Why have the guards, until quite recently boorish and brutal, begun to behave with timid respect? No, Vilgefortz, you don't have to answer. I know. What you've been talking about is one big lie. Ciri escaped you and Geralt escaped you, taking the time, I expect, to give your thugs a bloody good hiding. And what now? Your plans have fallen through, turned to dust. You admitted it yourself, your dreams of power have vanished like smoke. And the sorcerers and Dijkstra are fixing your position, oh yes. Not without reason and not from mercy have you stopped torturing me and forcing me to scan for information you need. And Emperor Emhyr is tightening his net, and is no doubt very, very

angry. Ess a tearth, me tiarn? A'pleine a cales, ellea?'

'I use the Common Speech,' said the one with the runny nose, holding her gaze. 'And my name is Stefan Skellen. And by no means, by no means at all, have I filled my britches. Why, I still have the impression that I'm in a much better situation than you, Madam Yennefer.'

The speech tired him, he coughed hard again and blew his nose into the sodden cambric handkerchief.

Vilgefortz struck the table with his hand.

'Enough of this game,' he said, grotesquely swivelling his miniature eye. 'Know this, Yennefer. You are no longer of use to me. In principle I ought to have you shoved in a sack and drowned in the lake, but I use that kind of method with the utmost reluctance. Until the time circumstances permit or compel me to make another decision, you shall remain in isolation. I warn you, however, that I shan't allow you to cause me problems. If you decide to go on hunger strike again, know this, that I shall not – as I did in October – waste time feeding you through a straw. I shall simply let you starve to death. And in the case of escape attempts the guards' orders are explicit. And now, farewell. If, naturally, you have satisfied your—'

'No.' Yennefer stood up and hurled her napkin down onto the table. 'Perhaps I would've eaten something more, but the company spoils my appetite. Farewell, gentlemen.'

Stefan Skellen sneezed and coughed hard. The pale-eyed man measured her with an evil look and smiled hideously. Vilgefortz looked to one side.

As usual when she was led to or from the prison, Yennefer tried to work out where she was, obtain even a scrap of information that might help her to plan her escape. And each time she met with disappointment. The castle didn't have any windows through which she could see the surrounding terrain, or even the sun to try to orient herself. Telepathy was impossible, and the two heavy dimeritium bracelets on her arms and the collar around her neck effectively prevented all attempts at magic.

The chamber in which she was being held was as cold and austere as a hermit's cell. Nonetheless, Yennefer recalled the joyous day when she was transferred there from the dungeon. From the dungeon, on whose floor stood a permanent puddle of stinking

water and on whose walls efflorescence and salting erupted. From the dungeon where she'd been fed on scraps that the rats easily tore from her lacerated fingers. When after around two months she had been unshackled and dragged out of there, allowed to bathe and change, Yennefer had been beside herself with happiness. The small room to which she had been transferred seemed like a royal boudoir to her, and the thin gruel they brought her like bird's nest soup, fit for the imperial table. Naturally, after some time, however, the gruel turned out to be dishwater, her hard pallet a hard pallet and the prison a prison. A cold, cramped prison, where after four paces you reached the wall.

Yennefer swore, sighed, and sat down on the scissor chair which was the only furniture she could use apart from the pallet. He entered so quietly she almost didn't hear him.

'The name's Bonhart,' he said. 'I'd advise you to remember that name, witch. Imprint it deeply in your memory.'

'Go fuck yourself, you swine.'

'I'm a man hunter.' He ground his teeth. 'Yes, yes, listen carefully, witch. In September, three months ago, I hunted down your little brat in Ebbing. That Ciri of yours, about whom so much is said.'

Yennefer listened attentively. *September. Ebbing. Caught her. But she isn't here. Perhaps he's lying?*

'An ashen-haired witcher girl, schooled at Kaer Morhen. I ordered her to fight in the arena, to kill people to the screams of the public. Slowly, slowly, I transformed her into a beast. I prepared her for that role with whip, fist and boot heel. The training process was lengthy. But she escaped from me, the green-eyed viper.'

Yennefer gasped imperceptibly.

'She escaped into the beyond. But we shall meet again. I'm certain that we shall meet again one day. Yes, witch. And if I regret anything it's only that they roasted your witcher lover, Geralt, in the fire. I'd have loved to let him taste my blade, the accursed freak.'

Yennefer snorted.

'Well, listen, Bonhart, or whatever your name is. Don't make me laugh. You're no match for the Witcher. You can't compare yourself to him. In any way. You are, as you admitted, a

dogcatcher. But only good for little curs. For very little curs.'

'Look here then, witch.'

He tore open his jerkin and shirt and took out three silver medallions, tangling up their chains. One was shaped like a cat's head, the next an eagle or a gryphon. She couldn't see the third one well, but it was probably a wolf.

'Country fairs,' she snorted again, feigning indifference, 'are full of stuff like that.'

'They aren't from a fair.'

'You don't say.'

'Once upon a time,' Bonhart hissed, 'decent people feared witchers more than monsters. Monsters, after all, hid in forests and the undergrowth, while witchers had the audacity to hang around temples, chanceries, schools and playgrounds. Decent people rightly considered that a scandal. So they looked for somebody to bring the impudent witchers to order. And they found someone. Not easily, not quickly, not nearby, but they did. As you can see I've bagged three. No more freaks have appeared in the area or annoyed decent citizens by their presence. And were one to appear, I'd do away with him just like I did with the previous ones.'

'In your dreams?' Yennefer's face became contorted. 'With a crossbow, from hiding? Or perhaps with a draught of poison?'

Bonhart put the medallions back under his shirt and took two paces towards her.

'You vex me, witch.'

'That was my intention.'

'Oh, yes? I'll soon show you, bitch, that I can compete with your witcher lover in any way. Why, that I'm even better than him.'

*

The guards standing outside the door started at the thudding, banging, crashing, howling and wailing. And if the guards had ever happened to hear before the yelling of a panther caught in a trap, they would have sworn there was a panther in the cell.

Then a dreadful roar reached their ears. It was the exact sound

of a wounded lion. Although the guards actually hadn't ever heard that, either, only seen one on coats of arms. They looked at each other. They nodded to each other. Then they rushed inside.

Yennefer was sitting in the corner of the chamber among the remains of her pallet. Her hair was dishevelled, her dress and blouse were torn from top to bottom, and her small breasts were rising in the rhythm of heavy breathing. Blood dripped from her nose, her face was quickly swelling, and welts from fingernails were also growing on her right arm.

Bonhart was sitting on the other side of the chamber amongst pieces of a stool, holding his crotch in both hands. Blood was dripping from his nose too, staining his grey whiskers a deep carmine. His face was criss-crossed with bloody scratch marks. Yennefer's barely healed fingers were a poor weapon, but the padlocks on the dimeritium bracelets had splendidly sharp edges.

Both tines of the fork that Yennefer had swiped from the table during supper were rammed deep and evenly into the bone of Bonhart's swelling cheek.

'Only little curs, you dogcatcher,' gasped the sorceress, trying to cover up her breasts with the remains of her dress. 'And stay away from bitches. You're too weak for them, pipsqueak.'

She couldn't forgive herself for not striking where she had aimed –his eye. But why, the target was moving, and besides, nobody's perfect.

Bonhart roared, stood up, pulled out the fork, howled and staggered from the pain. He swore hideously.

Meanwhile, two more guards looked inside the cell.

'Hey, you!' roared Bonhart, wiping blood from his face. 'In here! Drag that harlot into the middle of the floor, spread-eagle her and hold her down.'

The guards looked at each other. Then at the floor. And then at the ceiling.

'You'd better be going, sir,' said one. 'There won't be any spread-eaglin' or holdin' here. It's not among our duties.'

'And apart on that,' muttered the other, 'we don't mean to end up like Rience or Schirrú.'

*

Condwiramurs put aside the painted board, which depicted a prison cell. And, in the cell, a woman sitting with head bowed, manacled to the stone wall.

'They imprisoned her,' she murmured. 'And the Witcher was taking his pleasure in Toussaint with some brunette.'

'Do you condemn him?' Nimue asked severely. 'Knowing practically nothing?'

'No. I don't condemn him, but—'

'There are no "buts". Be quiet, please.'

They sat in silence for some time, leafing through engravings and watercolours.

'All the versions of the legend—' Condwiramurs pointed to one of the engravings '—give Rhys-Rhun castle as the place of the ending, the finale, the conclusive battle between Good and Evil. Armageddon. All of the versions. Aside from one.'

'Aside from one,' nodded Nimue. 'Aside from an anonymous, not very popular version, known as the Black Book of Ellander.'

'The Black Book states that the ending of the legend played out in Stygga citadel.'

'Indeed. And the Book of Ellander presents matters that describe the legend in a way that differs significantly from the canon.'

'I wonder—' Condwiramurs raised her head '—which of those castles is portrayed in the illustrations? Which one is shown on your tapestry? Which likeness is true?'

'We shall never know. The castle that witnessed the ending of the legend doesn't exist. It was destroyed. Not a trace of it remains. All the versions agree on that, even the one given by the Book of Ellander. None of the locations given in the sources is convincing. We do not know and shall not know what that castle looked like and where it stood.'

'But the truth—'

'But the truth means nothing whatsoever,' Nimue interrupted sharply. 'Don't forget, we don't know what Ciri really looked like.

But look at this figure here, on this piece of parchment drawn on by Wilma Wessely, in a heated conversation with the elf, Avallac'h, against a background of figurines of macabre children. It's her. Ciri. There isn't any doubt about it.'

'But,' Condwiramurs soldiered on pugnaciously, 'your tapestry —'

'Depicts the castle where the legend's climax was played out.'

There was a long silence. The sheets of parchment rustled as they were turned over.

'I don't like the version of the legend from the Black Book,' Condwiramurs began again. 'It's . . . It's—'

'Brutally authentic.' Nimue finished her novice's sentence, nodding.

*

Condwiramurs yawned, put down an edition of *Half a Century of Poetry* with an afterword by Professor Everett Denhoff Jr. She plumped up her pillow, changing the arrangement for reading to one suitable for sleeping. She yawned, stretched and blew out the lamp. The chamber was plunged into darkness, lit only by needles of moonlight squeezing through chinks in the curtains. *What should I choose tonight?* wondered the novice, wriggling on the sheets. *Take pot luck? Or anchor myself?*

After a brief moment she decided on the latter.

It was a vague, repeating dream that she couldn't see through to the end. It evaporated, vanished among other dreams, like a thread of the weft vanishes and gets lost among the pattern of a coloured fabric. A dream that vanished from her memory, but which in spite of that stubbornly remained in it.

She fell asleep immediately, the dream engulfing her at once. As soon as she closed her eyes.

A night sky, cloudless, bright from the moon and the stars. Hills, and on their slopes vineyards dusted with snow. The black, angular outline of a building: a wall with battlements, a keep, a lonely corner watchtower.

Two horsemen. The two of them ride beyond the outer wall,

they dismount, they both enter the portal. But only one of them enters the opening to a dungeon gaping in the floor.

The one with utterly white hair.

Condwiramurs moaned in her sleep, tossing around on her bed.

The white-haired man descends the stairs, deep, deep into the cellar. He walks along dark corridors, from time to time illuminating them by lighting brands held in cast-iron cressets. The glow from the torches casts ghastly shadows on the walls and vaulting.

Corridors, stairs, and again corridors. A dungeon, a huge crypt, barrels by the walls. Piles of rubble, heaps of bricks. Then a corridor which forks into two. Darkness both ways. The white-haired man lights another torch. He unsheathes the sword on his back. He hesitates, not knowing which fork to take. He finally decides on the one to the right. It's very dark, winding and full of rubble. Condwiramurs groans in her sleep. Fear grips her. She knows that the way chosen by the white-haired man leads towards danger.

She knows at the same time that the white-haired man seeks danger.

For it is his profession.

The novice thrashes around in the sheets, moaning. She's a dream-reader, she's dreaming, she's in an oneiric trance, she suddenly knows what is about to happen. *Beware!* She wants to scream, though she knows she's unable to. *Look out, behind you!*

Beware, Witcher!

The monster attacked from the darkness, from an ambush, silently and horrendously. It suddenly materialised in the darkness like a flame flaring up. Like a tongue of flame.

No matter how much he hurried, urged, fumed and stormed, the Witcher remained in Toussaint almost the whole winter. What were the reasons? I shall not write about them. It is all over. There is no point dwelling on it. Anyone who would condemn the Witcher I would remind that love has many names and not to judge less they themselves are judged.

Dandelion, *Half a Century of Poetry*

CHAPTER THREE

The monster attacked from the darkness, from an ambush, silently and horrendously. It suddenly materialised in the darkness like an exploding flame flaring up. Like a tongue of flame.

Geralt, though taken by surprise, reacted instinctively. He dodged, brushing the dungeon wall. The beast flew past, rebounded off the dirt floor like a ball, flailed its wings and leaped again, hissing and opening its awful beak. But this time the Witcher was ready.

He jabbed from the elbow, aiming at the crop beneath the crimson dewlap, which was large, twice as big as a turkey's. He found the target, and felt his blade slice the body open. The blow's force knocked the beast to the ground, against the wall. The skoffin screamed, and it was almost a human scream. It thrashed around among broken bricks, writhed and fluttered its wings, splashing blood and lashing its whip-like tail around. The Witcher was certain the battle was over, but the monster surprised him unpleasantly. It unexpectedly lunged for his throat, croaking horribly, talons outstretched and beak snapping. Geralt dodged, pushed off from the wall with his shoulder and smote with great force from below, taking advantage of the momentum he'd generated. The wounded skoffin tumbled among the bricks again, and stinking gore splashed on the dungeon wall, describing fanciful patterns. Wounded, the monster stopped thrashing around and was only trembling, croaking, extending its long neck, swelling its crop and shaking its dewlap. Blood flowed swiftly between the bricks it lay on.

Geralt could easily have finished it off, but didn't want to damage its hide too much. He waited calmly for the skoffin to bleed to death. He moved a few steps away, turned around to the wall, undid his trousers and pissed, whistling a sad song. The skoffin stopped croaking, lay still and went quiet. The Witcher moved closer and poked it gently with the point of his sword. Seeing it was done, he seized the monster by the tail and picked it up. He held it by the base of its tail at hip height. The skoffin's vulture-like beak reached the floor and its wingspan measured more than four feet.

'You're light, kurolishek.' Geralt shook the beast, which indeed didn't weigh much more than a well-fattened turkey. 'You're light.

Luckily they're paying me by the piece, not the pound.'

*

'It's the first time,' Reynart de Bois-Fresnes whistled softly through his teeth, which, as Geralt knew, he did to express the highest admiration. 'It's the first time I've ever seen anything like it. An absolute oddity, by my troth, an oddity to end all oddities. Does that mean it's the infamous basilisk?'

'No.' Geralt raised the monster higher so the knight could examine it better. 'It isn't a basilisk. It's a kurolishek.'

'Is there a difference?'

'A crucial one. A basilisk, also known as a regulus, is a reptile; but a kurolishek, also known as a skoffin or cockatrice, is neither a reptile nor a bird. It's the only member of an order that scholars called ornithoreptiles, for after lengthy debate they found—'

'And which one,' interrupted Reynart de Bois-Fresnes, clearly uninterested in the scholars' motives, 'can kill or petrify with a look?'

'Neither of them. That's fiction.'

'Why do people fear them both so much then? This one here isn't all that big. Can it really be dangerous?'

'This one here—' the Witcher shook his quarry '—usually attacks from the rear and aims unerringly between the vertebrae or below the left kidney, at the aorta. One blow of its beak usually suffices. And as regards the basilisk it doesn't matter where it strikes. Its venom is the most powerful known neurotoxin. It kills in a few seconds.'

'Ugh . . . And which one, do tell, can be despatched with the help of a looking glass?'

'Either of them. If you whack it over the head.'

Reynart de Bois-Fresnes chortled. Geralt didn't laugh. The joke about the basilisk and the looking glass had stopped amusing him in Kaer Morhen, for the teachers had flogged it to death. The jokes about virgins and unicorns were just as unamusing. The record for idiocy and primitivism was achieved in Kaer Morhen by the numerous versions of the joke about the she-dragon the young

witcher shook hands with for a bet.

He smiled. At the memories.

‘I prefer you when you smile,’ said Reynart, scrutinising him very closely. ‘I prefer you much more, a hundredfold more like you are now. Compared to how you were back then in October, after that scrap in the Druids’ Forest when we were riding to Beauclair. Back then, let me tell you, you were sullen, embittered and as sour as a usurer who’s been swindled, and as irritable as a man who hasn’t had any luck the whole night. Or even in the morning.’

‘Was I really like that?’

‘Really. Don’t be surprised that I prefer you the way you are now. Changed.’

‘Occupational therapy.’ Geralt shook the kurolishek he was holding by the tail. ‘The salutary influence of professional activity on the psyche. And so, to continue my cure, let’s get down to business. There’s a chance of making a little more money on the skoffin than the fee agreed for its killing. It’s almost undamaged. If you have a customer for a whole one, to be stuffed or prepared, don’t take less than two hundred. If you have to flog it in portions, remember that the most valuable feathers are from just above the rump, specifically, those ones, the central tail feathers. You can sharpen them much thinner than goose feathers, they write more prettily and cleanly, and are harder-wearing. A scribe who knows his stuff won’t hesitate to give five apiece.’

‘I have customers wanting to stuff a corpse,’ smiled the knight. ‘The coopers’ guild. They saw that vile creature stuffed in Castel Ravello. You know, that giant water flea, or whatever it’s called . . . You know the one. The one they clubbed to death in the dungeons under the ruins of the old castle the day after Samhain . . .’

‘I remember.’

‘Well, so the coopers saw the stuffed beast and asked me for something equally rarefied to decorate their guild chambers. The kurolishek will be just right. The coopers in Toussaint, as you can guess, are a guild who can’t complain of a shortage of orders and thanks to that are wealthy. They’re bound to give two hundred and twenty. Perhaps even more, I’ll try to haggle. And as far as the feathers are concerned . . . The barrel bodgers won’t notice if we pull a few pieces from the kurolishek’s arse and sell them to the ducal chancery. The chancery doesn’t pay out of its own pocket, but

from the ducal coffers, so they'll pay not five but ten for a feather without a quibble.'

'I take my hat off to your shrewdness.'

'*Nomen est omen.*' Reynart de Bois-Fresnes grinned more broadly. 'Mamma must have sensed something, christening me with the name of the sly fox from the well-known cycle of fables.'

'You ought to have been a merchant, not a knight.'

'I ought,' agreed the knight. 'But, well, if you're born the son of a noble lord, you'll live a noble lord and die a noble lord, having first begat further, ho, ho, noble lords. You won't change anything, no matter what. Anyway, you reckon up pretty decently, Geralt, but you don't make a living from merchandising.'

'I don't. For similar reasons to you. But with the single difference that I won't begat anything. Let's get out of these dungeons.'

Outside, at the foot of the castle walls, they were enfolded by the cold and wind from the hills. The night was bright, the sky cloudless and starry. The moonlight sparkled on the swathes of fresh, white snow lying on the vineyards.

Their tethered horses greeted them with snorts.

'We ought to meet the customer at once and collect the money,' said Reynart, looking meaningfully at the Witcher. 'But you are surely hurrying back to Beauclair, what? To a certain bedchamber?'

Geralt did not reply, as he didn't answer questions like that on principle. He hauled the kurolishek's remains onto the pack horse and then mounted Roach.

'Let's meet the customer,' he decided, turning back in the saddle. 'The night is young, and I'm hungry. And I fancy a drink. Let's ride to town. To The Pheasantry.'

Reynart de Bois-Fresnes laughed, adjusted a shield with a red and gold chequerboard pattern hanging from the pommel, and climbed up into the high saddle.

'As you wish, my good fellow. The Pheasantry it is. Yah, Bucephalus!'

They went at a walk down the snow-covered hillside towards the highway, which was clearly marked by a sparse avenue of

poplars.

‘You know what, Reynart,’ Geralt suddenly said. ‘I also prefer you as you are now. Talking normally. Back in October you were using infuriating, moronic mannerisms.’

‘’Pon my word, Witcher, I’m a knight errant,’ chortled Reynart de Bois-Fresnes. ‘Have you forgotten? Knights always talk like morons. It’s a kind of sign, like this shield here. You can recognise the fraternity, like by the arms on the shield.’

*

‘’Pon my word,’ said the Chequered Knight, ‘you needlessly bother yourself, Sir Geralt. Your beloved is surely hale, for she has doubtless utterly forgotten about her infirmity. The duchess retains excellent court medics, fully capable of curing any malaise. ’Pon my word, there’s no need to distress yourself.’

‘I’m of the same opinion,’ said Regis. ‘Cheer up, Geralt. After all the druidesses treated Milva too—’

‘And druidesses are expert healers,’ interjected Cahir, ‘the best proof of which is my very own noggin which was cut open by a miner’s axe, and which is now, take a look, almost good as new. Milva is sure to be well too. There’s no need to worry.’

‘Let’s hope.’

‘She’s hale, your Milva, and hearty,’ repeated the knight. ‘I’ll wager she’s already cavorting at wedding balls! Cutting a caper. Feasting! In Beauclair, at the court of Duchess Anarietta, balls alternate with banquets. Ha, ’pon my word, now that I’ve fulfilled my vows, I also—’

‘You’ve fulfilled your vows?’

‘Fortune shone on me! For you ought to know that I made my vows, and not just any vows, but on a flying crane. In the spring. I vowed to fell fifteen marauders before Yule. I was lucky; I’m now free of my vows. Now I can drink and eat beef. Aha, I don’t have to conceal my name. I am, if you will, Reynart de Bois-Fresnes.’

‘It’s our pleasure.’

‘Regarding those balls,’ said Angoulême, urging her horse on to catch up with them. ‘I hope platter and goblet won’t pass us by

either? And I'd also love to shake a leg!'

''Pon my word, there'll be everything at Beauclair,' Reynart de Bois-Fresnes assured them. 'Balls, feasts, banquets, revels and poetry evenings. You're friends of Dandelion's, for heaven's sake . . . Of Viscount Julian's, I meant to say. And the Lady Duchess is most fond of the latter.'

'I'll say! He was bragging about it,' said Angoulême. 'What was the truth about that love? Do you know the story, sir knight? Do tell!'

'Angoulême,' said the Witcher, 'do you have to know?'

'I don't. But I want to! Don't whinge, Geralt. And stop being sullen, for at the sight of your mush, roadside mushrooms pickle. And you, sir knight, say on.'

Other knights errant riding at the head of the procession were singing a knightly refrain with a repeating chorus. The words of the song were quite unbelievably foolish.

'It occurred these six summers past,' began the knight. 'The poet tarried with us all winter and spring, he played his lute, sang romances and declaimed poetry. Duke Raymund was actually staying in Cintra, at a council. He didn't hurry home, it was no secret he had a paramour in Cintra. And the Duchess and Lord Dandelion . . . Ha, Beauclair is strange indeed and spellbinding, full of amatory enchantment . . . You shall see for yourselves. As the Duchess and Lord Dandelion learned then. They noticed not, from verse to verse, from word to word, from compliment to compliment, posies, glances, sighs . . . To put it briefly: both came to an intimate understanding.'

'How intimate?' chortled Angoulême.

'One was not an eye witness,' said the knight coolly. 'And it is not seemly to repeat rumours. Besides, as my good lady undoubtedly knows, love has many faces, and it is a most relative thing how intimate was the understanding.'

Cahir snorted softly. Angoulême had nothing to add.

'The Duchess and Lord Dandelion,' continued Reynart de Bois-Fresnes, 'trysted in secret some two months from Belleteyn to the summer Solstice. But they disregarded caution. News got out, evil rumours began to spread. Lord Dandelion, without hesitating, mounted his horse and rode away. He acted prudently, as it turned

out. For as soon as Duke Raymund returned from Cintra, an accommodating serving lad informed him of everything. As soon as the duke found out what an insult he had suffered and how he had been cuckolded, he was seized by yellow bile, as you may imagine. He overturned a tureen of broth on the table, cleft the informer lad with a hatchet, and uttered scabrous words. He then punched the marshal's face and smashed a great Koviran looking glass before witnesses. Then he imprisoned the duchess in her chambers and, having threatened her with torture, extracted everything from her. At which point he sent after Lord Dandelion, ordered him put to death without clemency and his heart torn from his breast. For, having read something similar in an ancient ballad, he meant to fry his heart and force Duchess Anarietta to eat it in front of the entire court. Uurgh, what an abomination! Luckily, Lord Dandelion managed to flee.'

'Indeed. And the duke died?'

'He did. The incident, as I said, caused him great ill humour. His blood became so heated from it that apoplexy and palsy seized him. He lay like a plank for nigh on a year. But recovered. Even began to walk. Only he winked one eye, ceaselessly, like this.'

The knight turned around in the saddle, squinted his eye and screwed up his face like a monkey.

'Although the duke had always been an incurable fornicator and stallion,' he continued a moment later, 'that winking made him even more *pericolosus* in love-making, for every dame thought he was winking at her out of fondness and giving her amorous signs. And dames are most covetous of such homage. I in no way impute that they are all wanton and dissolute, by no means, but the duke, as I said, winked much, almost endlessly, so on the whole he got what was coming to him. His cup ran over in his frolics and one night he was struck again by the apoplexy. He gave up the ghost. In his bedchamber.'

'Atop a dame?' guffawed Angoulême.

'In truth . . .' The knight, until then deadly serious, smiled under his whiskers. 'In truth beneath one. The details are unimportant.'

'Verily,' nodded Cahir seriously. 'Duke Raymund wasn't greatly mourned, was he? During the tale I had the impression—'

'That you were fonder of the inconstant wife than the betrayed

husband,' the vampire interrupted in mid-sentence. 'Perhaps for the reason that she now reigns?'

'That is one reason,' replied Reynart de Bois-Fresnes disarmingly frankly. 'But not the only one. For Duke Raymund, may the earth lie lightly on him, was such a good-for-nothing rogue and, excuse my language, whoreson, that he would have given the very Devil stomach ulcers in half a year. And he reigned for seven years in Toussaint. While everyone adored and adores Duchess Anarietta.'

'May I then venture,' said the Witcher tartly, 'that Duke Raymund didn't leave many inconsolable friends who were ready to waylay Dandelion with daggers?'

'You may.' The knight glanced at him and his eyes were quick and intelligent. 'And, 'pon my word, you won't be wide of the mark. I said, did I not? Lady Anarietta dotes on the poet and everyone here would walk through fire for Lady Anarietta.'

The good knight returned

To find he'd been spurned

His love had not tarried

But swiftly been married

A chevalier's woe!

With a hey, nonny, no!

Crows, disturbed by the knights' singing, took flight, cawing, from the roadside thicket.

They soon rode out of the trees straight into a valley among hills on which the white towers of small castles were framed strikingly against the sky, which was coloured with dark blue streaks. Wherever they looked the gentle hillsides were covered with neat avenues of evenly trimmed bushes like columns of soldiers. The ground was carpeted with red and gold leaves.

'What is it?' asked Angoulême. 'Vines?'

'Grapevines, yes,' said Reynart de Bois-Fresnes, 'They're the famed valleys of Sansretour. The finest wines of the world are pressed from the grapes that mellow here.'

''Tis true,' agreed Regis, who as usual was an expert on

everything. ‘The crux is the volcanic earth and the microclimate here which ensures every year a simply ideal combination of sunny and rainy days. If we add traditions, expertise and the utmost care of the vinedressers, it yields a result in the form of a product of the highest class and distinction.’

‘Well said,’ the knight smiled. ‘Distinction indeed. Look over there, say, at the hillside below that castle. Here the castle gives the distinction to the vineyard and the cellars deep beneath it. That one is called Castel Ravello, and from its vineyards come such wines as Erveluce, Fiorano, Pomino and the celebrated Est Est. You must have heard of it. One pays the same for a keg of Est Est as for ten kegs of wine from Cidaris or the Nilfgaardian vineyards by the Alba. And there, look, as far as the eyes can see, other castles and other vineyards, and the names are surely no strangers to you either. Vermentino, Toricella, Casteldaccia, Tufo, Sancerre, Nuragus, Coronata, and finally Corvo Bianco – Gwyn Cerbin in the elven tongue. I trust the names are familiar to you?’

‘They are, ugh.’ Angoulême contorted her face. ‘Particularly by learning the hard way to check if some rascal of an innkeeper hadn’t poured us one of those famous wines by chance instead of the usual cider, because then you might have to leave your horse with him, so costly Castel or Est Est. Yuck. I don’t understand, it might be quality gear to those great lords, but we, ordinary folk, can get plastered just as well on the cheap stuff. And I’ll tell you this, because I’ve experienced it: you puke after Est Est just the same as you do after scrumpy.’

*

‘Caring not for Angoulême’s vulgar October jests,’ Reynart leaned back from the table, his belt loosened, ‘today we drink a fine label and a fine vintage, Witcher. We can afford it, we’ve made some money. We can revel.’

‘That’s right,’ Geralt beckoned to the innkeeper. ‘After all, as Dandelion says, perhaps there are other motivations for earning money, but I just don’t know any. So let’s eat whatever’s behind those appetising smells wafting from the kitchen. Incidentally, it’s extremely crowded in The Pheasantry today, though the hour’s quite late.’

‘Why, it’s Yuletide Eve,’ explained the innkeeper, overhearing him. ‘Folk are wassailing. Making merry. Telling fortunes. As tradition demands, and tradition here—’

‘I know,’ interrupted the Witcher. ‘And what did tradition demand from the kitchen today?’

‘Cold tongue with horseradish. Capon broth with brain meatballs. Beef roulade served with dumplings and cabbage . . .’

‘Keep it coming, good fellow. And to accompany it . . . What should we drink with it, Reynart?’

‘If it’s beef,’ said the knight after a moment’s thought, ‘then red Côte-de-Blessure. And the vintage? It was the year old Duchess Caroberta turned up her toes.’

‘That’s the year,’ the innkeeper nodded. ‘At your service, sire.’

A mistletoe wreath, clumsily thrown behind her by a wench from the next table, almost fell into Geralt’s lap. The wench’s companions whooped with laughter. And she blushed prettily.

‘You’re out of luck!’ The knight picked up the wreath and threw it back. ‘He won’t be your future husband. He’s spoken for, noble maiden. He’s already been ensnared by a pair of green orbs—‘

‘Be quiet, Reynart.’

The innkeeper brought the order. They ate and drank in silence, listening to the revellers’ merriment.

‘Yule,’ said Geralt, putting down his cup. ‘Midinvaerne. The winter solstice. I’ve been hanging around here for two months. Two wasted months!’

‘One month,’ Reynart corrected him coolly and soberly. ‘If you’ve lost anything, it’s but a month. Then the snows covered up the mountain passes and you couldn’t have left Toussaint, no matter what. You’ve waited until Yule, so you’ll surely wait till spring too. It’s force majeure, thus your grief and sorrow are in vain. While as far as your sorrow goes, don’t overdo the pretence. For I don’t believe you regret it that much.’

‘Oh, what do you know, Reynart? What do you know?’

‘Not much,’ agreed the knight, pouring the wine. ‘Not much more than what I see. And I saw your first encounter; yours and hers. In Beauclair. Do you remember the Feast of the Vat? The white knickers?’

Geralt did not reply. He remembered.

‘A charming place, Beauclair Palace, full of amatory enchantment,’ muttered Reynart, savouring the wine’s bouquet. ‘The very sight is bewitching. I recall how you were all dumbstruck when you saw it in October. What was the expression Cahir used then? Let me think.’

*

‘An elegant little castle,’ Cahir said in admiration. ‘Well I’ll be, an elegant and pleasing little castle, indeed.’

‘The duchess lives well,’ said the vampire. ‘You have to admit it.’

‘Fucking nice gaff,’ added Angoulême.

‘Beauclair Palace,’ repeated Reynart de Bois-Fresnes proudly. ‘An elven edifice, only slightly modified. Allegedly by Faramond himself.’

‘Not allegedly,’ objected Regis. ‘Beyond any doubt. Faramond’s style is apparent at first glance. It suffices to look at those small towers.’

The slender white obelisks of the red-roofed towers referred to by the vampire soared into the sky, rising up from the castle’s delicate construction which grew wider towards the ground. The sight evoked the image of candles with festoons of wax flowing over the intricately carved base of a candlestick.

‘The town spreads out at the foot of Beauclair,’ explained Sir Reynart. ‘The walls, naturally, were added later. After all, as you know, elves don’t wall their towns. Spur on your horses, noble comrades. We have a long road ahead of us. Beauclair only seems close, but the mountains distort perspective.’

‘Let us ride on.’

They rode swiftly, overtaking wanderers and goliards, wagons and carts loaded with dark, seemingly mouldy grapes. Then there were the town’s busy narrow streets, smelling of fermenting grape juice, then a gloomy park full of poplars, yews, barberries and boxwood. Then there were rose beds, mainly containing multiflora and centifolia. And further still there were the carved columns,

portals and archivolts of the palace, liveried servants and flunkeys.

The man who greeted them was Dandelion, coiffured and arrayed like a prince.

*

'Where's Milva?'

'She's well, don't worry. You'll find her in the chambers that have been prepared for you. She doesn't want to leave them.'

'Why not?'

'You'll find out later. Now follow me. The duchess awaits.'

'In our travelling things?'

'Such were her wishes.'

The hall they entered was full of people, dressed as colourfully as birds of paradise. Geralt did not have time to look around. Dandelion shoved him towards a marble staircase, beside which were two women who stood out from the crowd, being assisted by pages and courtiers.

It was quiet, but it became even quieter.

The first woman had a pointed, turned-up nose, and her blue eyes were piercing and seemed a little feverish. Her chestnut hair was pinned up into an elaborately, truly artistic coiffure, supported by velvet ribbons, complete down to the tiniest nuances, including an unerringly geometric, sickle-shaped curl on her forehead. The upper part of her dress had a plunging neckline shimmering with a thousand blue and lilac stripes on a black background. The skirt was black, densely strewn with tiny, gold chrysanthemums in a regular pattern. The neckline and décolletage – something like a complicated scaffolding or cage – held captive in its intricate coils a necklace of lacquer, obsidian, emeralds and lapis lazuli ending in a jade cross which almost plunged between her small breasts, which were supported by a close-fitting bodice. The diamond-shaped neckline was large and plunging, baring the woman's delicate shoulders, and seemed not to offer adequate support – Geralt was expecting the dress to slide from her bust at any moment. But it didn't and was held in its proper place by the mysterious arcana of dressmaking and the buffers of puffed sleeves.

The second woman equalled the first in height. She was wearing the same lipstick. And there the similarities ended. This woman wore a net cap on her short, black hair, which metamorphosed at the front into a veil extending to the tip of her petite nose. The veil's floral motif didn't mask her beautiful, sparkling eyes set off by green eye-shadow. An identical floral veil covered the modest décolletage of her long-sleeved black dress, which in several places was scattered with an apparently random pattern of sapphires, aquamarines, rock crystals and gold openwork stars.

'Her Enlightened Ladyship Duchess Anna Henrietta,' someone whispered behind Geralt's back. 'Kneel, sire.'

I wonder which of the two, thought Geralt, bending his painful knee clumsily into a ceremonial bow. *Both look just as bloody highborn. Not to say regal.*

'Arise, Sir Geralt,' said the one with the intricate chestnut coiffure and pointed nose, dispelling his doubts. 'We welcome you and your friends to Beauclair Palace in the Duchy of Toussaint. We are delighted to be able to offer lodging to people on such a noble mission. People, furthermore, being bonded in friendship with Viscount Julian, who is so dear to our heart.'

Dandelion bowed deeply and vigorously.

'The viscount,' continued the duchess, 'has disclosed your names to us, revealed the nature of your expedition, and said what brings you to Toussaint. The tale touched our heart. We shall be glad to converse with you at a private audience, Sir Geralt. That matter must, however, be somewhat postponed, since state duties make their demands upon us. The grape harvest is over and tradition demands our participation in the Festival of the Vat.'

The other woman, the one in the veil, leaned over towards the duchess and quickly whispered something. Anna Henrietta looked at the Witcher, smiled, and licked her lips.

'It is our will,' she raised her voice, 'that Geralt of Rivia shall serve us in the Vat alongside Viscount Julian.'

A murmur ran through the group of courtiers and knights like the whisper of pines struck by the wind. Duchess Anarietta shot the Witcher another smouldering glance and left the hall with her companion and a retinue of pages.

'By thunder,' whispered the Chequered Knight. 'I'll be

damned! Quite some honour has befallen you, Witcher, sir.'

'I don't quite understand what this is about,' Geralt admitted. 'In what way am I to serve Her Highness?'

'Her Grace,' broke in a portly gentleman with the appearance of a confectioner, approaching. 'Forgive me, sire, for correcting you, but in the given circumstances I must do so. We greatly respect tradition and protocol here in Toussaint. I am Sebastian Le Goff, Chamberlain and Marshal of the Court.'

'My pleasure.'

'Lady Anna Henrietta's official and protocolary title—' the chamberlain not only looked like a confectioner but even smelt of icing '—is "Her Enlightened Ladyship". Her unofficial one is "Her Grace". Her familiar one, beyond the court, is "Lady Duchess". But one should always address her as "Your Grace".'

'Thank you, I shall remember. And the other woman? How should I entitle her?'

'Her official title is: "The Honourable",' the chamberlain informed him gravely. 'But addressing her as "Ma'am" is permissible. She is kin to the duchess and is called Fringilla Vigo. In accordance with Her Grace's will, you are to serve her, Madam Fringilla, in the Vat.'

'And what does this service consist of?'

'Nothing difficult. I shall explain soon. As you see, we've used mechanical presses for years, but nonetheless tradition . . .'

*

The courtyard resounded with a hubbub and frenetic squealing of pipes, the wild music of recorders and the demented jingling of tambourines. Tumblers and buffoons dressed in garlands cavorted and somersaulted around a vat placed on a platform. The courtyard and cloisters were full of people – knights, ladies, courtiers and richly attired burghers.

Chamberlain Sebastian Le Goff raised up a staff twisted around with green vines, and struck it three times against the podium.

'Hear ye, hear ye!' he cried. 'Noble ladies, lords and knights!'

‘Yea, yea!’ replied the crowd.

‘Yea, yea! Welcome to our ancient custom! May the grape prosper! Yea, yea! May it mellow in the sun!’

‘Yea, yea! May it mellow!’

‘Yea, yea! May the trod grape ferment! May it gather strength and taste in the barrel! May it flow tastily to goblets and thence to heads, to the glory of majesty, comely ladies, noble knights and vinedressers!’

‘Yea, yea! May it ferment!’

‘Let the Beauties step forward!’

Two women – Duchess Anna Henrietta and her black-haired companion – emerged from damask tents on opposite sides of the courtyard. They were both wrapped tightly in scarlet capes.

‘Yea, yea!’ the chamberlain struck his cane on the ground. ‘Let the Youths step forward!’

The “Youths” had been instructed and knew what to do. Dandelion approached the duchess, and Geralt, the black-haired woman. Who, he now knew, was called the Honourable Fringilla Vigo.

The two women cast off their capes as one, and the crowd greeted them with thunderous applause. Geralt swallowed.

The women were wearing tiny, white, gossamer-thin blouses with shoulder straps, revealing their midriffs. And clinging frilly knickers. And nothing else. Not even jewellery.

They were also barefoot.

Geralt picked Fringilla up and she quite eagerly put an arm around his neck. She smelled faintly of ambergris and roses. And femininity. She was warm and her warmth penetrated him like an arrowhead. She was soft and her softness scalded and nettled his fingers.

They carried them to the vat – Geralt, Fringilla, and Dandelion, the Duchess – and helped them alight on the grapes, which burst and spurted forth juice. The crowd roared.

‘Yea, yea!’

The duchess and Fringilla placed their hands on each other’s shoulders, and by supporting one another more easily kept their

balance on the grapes into which they had sunk up to their knees. The must squirted and sprayed around. The women, turning, trod the grapes, giggling like schoolgirls. Fringilla winked at the Witcher, quite against protocol.

'Yea, yea!' shouted the crowd. 'Yea, yea! May it ferment!'

The crushed grapes splashed juice, the cloudy must bubbled and foamed copiously around the treaders' knees.

The chamberlain struck his cane against the planks of the platform. Geralt and Dandelion moved closer, helping the women out of the vat. Geralt saw Anarietta pinch Dandelion's ear as he carried her, and her eyes shone dangerously. It seemed to him that Fringilla's lips brushed his cheek, but he couldn't be certain whether intentionally or not. The smell of the must was heady and intoxicating.

He stood Fringilla on the podium and wrapped her in the scarlet cape. Fringilla squeezed his hand quickly and powerfully.

'These ancient traditions,' she whispered, 'can be arousing, can't they?'

'They can.'

'Thank you, Witcher.'

'The pleasure's all mine.'

'Not all yours. I assure you, not all yours.'

*

'Pour the wine, Reynart.'

More Yuletide prophecies were being carried out at the next table. A strip of apple peel cut into a long spiral was thrown down and the initial letter of one's future partner's name was divined from the shape it arranged itself into. Each time, the peel formed itself into a letter 'S'. In spite of that there was no end to the mirth.

The knight poured.

'It turned out that Milva was well,' said the Witcher pensively, 'although she still had a bandage around her ribs. She remained in her chamber, though, and refused to leave, not wanting at any cost to put on the dress she'd been presented with. It looked as though

there would be a protocolary scandal, but the omniscient Regis pacified the situation. After quoting a good dozen precedents he made the chamberlain bring a male outfit to the archer. Angoulême, for a change, joyfully discarded her trousers, riding boots and footwraps, and soap, a dress and a comb turned her into quite a pretty lass. All of us, let's face it, were cheered up by the bathhouse and the clean clothes. Even me. We set off for the audience in a very decent mood—'

'Stop for a moment,' Reynart gestured with his head. 'Business is heading towards us. Ho, ho, and not one, but two vineyards! Malatesta, our customer, is bringing a comrade . . . and a rival. Wonders will never cease!'

'Who's the other one?'

'Pomerol vineyard. We're drinking their wine, Côte-de-Blessure, right now.'

Malatesta, the steward of the Vermentino vineyard, had noticed them, waved, and approached, leading his companion, an individual with a black moustache and a bushy, black beard, who resembled a brigand more than an official.

'Gentlemen,' Malatesta introduced the bearded man, 'Mr Alcides Fierabras, steward of Pomerol vineyard.'

'Sit you down.'

'We're here for but a moment. To talk to Master Witcher regarding a beast in our cellars. I conclude from seeing your good selves here that the monster is killed?'

'Dead.'

'The agreed sum,' Malatesta assured them, 'will be transferred to your account at the Cianfanellis' bank tomorrow at the latest. Oh, thanking you, Master Witcher. Thanks a hundredfold. Such a gorgeous cellar, vaulted, north-pointing, not too dry, not too damp, just what's needed for wine, and owing to that vile brute it couldn't be used. You saw yourselves, we needs must brick up all that part of the cellar, but the beast managed to find a way through . . . Where it came from is anyone's guess . . . Probably from hell itself . . .'

He spat on the floor.

'Caves hollowed out in volcanic tuff always abound in monsters,' instructed Reynart de Bois-Fresnes wisely. He had been accompanying the Witcher for over a month, and being a good

listener, had managed to learn a great deal. ‘It goes without saying. Where there’s tuff, there’s sure to be a monster.’

‘Very well, perhaps it was Tuff.’ Malatesta glared at him. ‘Whoever that Tuff happens to be. But folk are saying it’s because our cellars are connected to deep caverns that are said to lead to the very centre of the earth. There are many similar dungeons and caves like that around here . . .’

‘Like under our cellars, to give the first example that springs to mind,’ said the black-bearded Pomerol vineyard. ‘Those dungeons go on for miles, but no one knows to where. The men who wanted to unravel the matter didn’t return. And a dreadful monster was also seen there. They say. I’d therefore like to suggest—’

‘I can guess what you want to propose,’ said the Witcher, dryly, ‘and I consent to the proposition. I will explore your cellars. We shall set the fee depending on what I find there.’

‘You won’t do badly,’ the bearded man assured him. ‘Hem, hem . . . One more thing . . .’

‘Pray speak . . .’

‘That succubus that haunts men at night and torments them . . . Which Her Enlightened Ladyship the Duchess has ordered killed . . . I believe there’s no need. For the ghoul doesn’t bother anyone, in truth . . . Yes, it occasionally haunts . . . Bedevils a little—’

‘But nobbut adults,’ Malatesta quickly interrupted.

‘You took the words out of my mouth, friend. All in all, the succubus doesn’t harm anyone. And recently there’s been no word about it at all. Doubtless, it would be scared of you, Master Witcher. What, then, is the point of tormenting it? Why, you aren’t lacking ready cash, sire. And were you to be short . . .’

‘Something could be transferred to my account at Cianfanellis’ bank,’ Geralt said with stony countenance. ‘To the witcher’s pension fund.’

‘So be it.’

‘Then not a single blond hair on the succubus’ head will be harmed.’

‘Farewell, then.’ The two vineyards stood up. ‘Feast in peace, we shan’t disturb. It’s a holiday today. A tradition. Here, in Toussaint, tradition—’

‘Is sacred,’ said Geralt. ‘I know.’

*

The party at the next table were making another noisy Yuletide prophecy, carried out with the help of balls fashioned from the soft inside of cakes and bones left over from a carp. The wine was flowing as they did so. The innkeeper and his serving girls were rushed off their feet, hurrying to and fro with jugs.

‘The famous succubus,’ remarked Reynart, serving himself more cabbage, ‘began the memorable series of witcher contracts that you took on in Toussaint. Then things speeded up and you couldn’t keep the customers away. Funny, I don’t remember which vineyard gave you the first contract . . .’

‘You weren’t present. It happened the day after the audience with the duchess. Which you didn’t attend either, as a matter of fact.’

‘No wonder. It was a private audience.’

‘Private, huh,’ snorted Geralt. ‘It was attended by some twenty people, not counting the motionless lackeys, youthful pages and a bored jester. Among that number was Le Goff, the chamberlain with the appearance and smell of a confectioner, and several magnates bowing under the weight of their golden chains. There were several coves in black: councillors, or perhaps judges. There was the baron with the Bull’s Head coat of arms I met in Caed Myrkvid. There was, naturally, Fringilla Vigo, a person evidently close to the duchess.

‘And there were we, our entire gang, including Milva in male costume. Ha, I was wrong to speak of the *entire* company. Dandelion was not with us. Dandelion, or rather Viscount What’s-His-Name, sat sprawled in a curule seat on Her Pointy-Nosed Highness Anarietta’s right hand and postured like a peacock. Like a real pet.

‘Anarietta, Fringilla and Dandelion were the only people seated. No one else was permitted to sit down. And anyway I was glad they didn’t make me kneel.

‘The duchess listened to my tale, seldom interrupting, fortunately. When, however, I briefly related the results of the conversations with the druidesses, she wrung her hands, in a

gesture suggesting worry as sincere as it was exaggerated. I know that sounds like some sort of bloody oxymoron, but believe me, Reynart, in her case that's how it was.'

*

'Oh, oh,' said Duchess Anna Henrietta, wringing her hands. 'You have sorely worried us, Master Geralt. Truly do we tell you that sorrow fills our heart.'

She sniffed through her pointed nose, held out her hand, and Dandelion at once pressed a monogrammed cambric handkerchief into it. The duchess brushed both her cheeks with the handkerchief so as not to wipe the powder off.

'Oh, oh,' she repeated. 'So the druidesses knew nothing about Ciri? They were unable to help you? Was all your effort then wasted and your journey in vain?'

'Certainly not in vain,' Geralt answered with conviction. 'I confess I'd counted on obtaining some concrete information or hints from the druids that would at least explain in the most general way why Ciri is the object of such a relentless pursuit. The druids, though, couldn't or didn't want to help me, and in this respect I indeed gained nothing. But . . .'

He paused for a moment. Not for dramatic effect. He was wondering how frank he could be in front of the entire auditorium.

'I know that Ciri's alive,' he finally said dryly. 'She was probably wounded. She's still in danger. But she's alive.'

Anna Henrietta gasped, applied the handkerchief again and squeezed Dandelion's arm.

'We pledge you our help and support,' she said. 'Stay in Toussaint as long as you wish. You ought to know that we have resided in Cintra, and we knew and were fond of Pavetta, we knew and liked little Ciri. We are with you with all our heart, Master Geralt. If needs be you shall have the assistance of our scholars and astrologers. Our libraries and book collections stand open before you. You are certain, we deeply trust, to find some track, sign or spoor that will indicate the right way. Do not act hastily. You need not hurry. You may stay here as you like; you are a most welcome guest.'

‘Thank you, Your Grace.’ Geralt bowed. ‘Thank you for your kindness and favour. We must, nonetheless, set off as soon as we have rested a little. Ciri is still in danger. When we stay in one place too long the threat not only grows, but begins to endanger the people who show us kindness. And unrelated strangers. I wouldn’t want to allow that to happen for anything.’

The duchess was silent for some time, stroking Dandelion’s forearm with measured movements, as you would a cat.

‘Your words are noble and virtuous,’ she said at last. ‘But you have nothing to fear. Our knights routed the ne’er-do-wells pursuing you so that none escaped with his life. Viscount Julian told us about it. Anyone who dares to trouble you will meet the same fate. You are under our care and protection.’

‘I value that.’ Geralt bowed again, under his breath cursing his knee – but not only his knee. ‘Nonetheless I cannot omit to mention something Viscount Dandelion forgot to tell Your Enlightened Ladyship. The ne’er-do-wells from the mine who pursued me to Belhaven, and whom your valiant knighthood vanquished in Caed Myrkvid, were indeed ne’er-do-wells of the first water, but they bore Nilfgaardian livery.’

‘And what of it?’

It was on the tip of his tongue to say that if the Nilfgaardians had captured Aedirn in twenty days, they would need just twenty minutes to capture her little duchy.

‘There is a war on,’ he said instead. ‘What happened in Belhaven and Caed Myrkvid may be regarded as a diversion at the rear. That usually results in repression. In wartime—’

‘The war,’ the duchess interrupted him, raising her pointy nose, ‘is definitely over. We wrote to our cousin, Emhyr var Emreis, regarding this matter. We sent a memorandum to him, in which we demanded that he put an end forthwith to the senseless bloodletting. The war is sure to be over, peace is sure to have been concluded.’

‘Not exactly,’ replied Geralt coldly. ‘Fire and sword are wreaking havoc on the far side of the Yaruga, blood is flowing. There’s nothing to indicate that it’s about to end. Quite the contrary, I’d say.’

He immediately regretted what he’d said.

‘What?’ The duchess’s nose, it appeared, became even pointier, and a nasty, grindingly snarling note sounded in her voice. ‘Did I hear right? The war is still raging? Why wasn’t I informed of this? Minister Tremblay?’

‘Your Grace, I . . .’ mumbled one of the golden chains, genuflecting. ‘I didn’t want to . . . concern . . . worry . . . Your Grace . . .’

‘Guard!’ Her Majesty howled. ‘To the tower with him! You are in disfavour, Lord Tremblay! In disfavour! Lord Chamberlain! Mister Secretary!’

‘At your service, Your Enlightened Ladyship . . .’

‘Have the chancellery immediately issue a severe note to our cousin, the Emperor of Nilfgaard. We demand that he immediately, and I mean immediately, stops warring and makes peace. For war and discord are evil things! Discord ruins and accord builds!’

‘Your Grace,’ mumbled the chamberlain-confectioner, as white as castor sugar, ‘is absolutely right.’

‘What are you still doing here, gentlemen? We have issued our orders! Be off with you, this instant!’

Geralt looked around discreetly. The courtiers had stony expressions, from which he concluded that similar incidents were nothing new at the court. He made a firm resolution only to say ‘yes’ to the Lady Duchess in future.

Anarietta brushed the tip of her nose with her handkerchief and then smiled at Geralt.

‘As you see,’ she said, ‘your anxieties were unfounded. You have nothing to fear and may rest here as long as you like.’

‘Yes, Your Grace.’

In the silence, the tapping of a death watch beetle in one of the pieces of antique furniture could be heard distinctly. As could the curses being hurled by a groom in a distant courtyard.

‘We also have a request for you, Master Geralt,’ Anarietta interrupted the silence. ‘In your capacity as a witcher.’

‘Yes, Your Grace.’

‘It is the request of many noble ladies of Toussaint, and ours at the same time. A nocturnal monster is plaguing local homesteads. This devil, this phantom, this succubus in female form, so lewd that

we daren't describe it, torments our virtuous and faithful husbands. She haunts bedchambers at night, committing lewd acts and disgusting perversions, which modesty forbids us to speak of. You, as an expert, surely know what the matter is.'

'Yes, Your Grace.'

'The ladies of Toussaint ask you to put an end to this abomination. And we add our voice to this request. And assure you of our generosity.'

'Yes, Your Grace.'

*

Angoulême found the Witcher and the vampire in the palace grounds, where they were enjoying a walk and a discreet conversation.

'You won't believe me,' she panted. 'You won't believe me when I tell you . . . But it's the honest truth . . .'

'Spit it out.'

'Reynart de Bois-Fresnes, the Chequered Knight errant, is standing in a queue before the ducal treasurer with the other knights errant. And do you know for what? For his monthly salary! The queue, I'm telling you, is half an arrow-shot long, and it's sparkling with coats of arms. I asked Reynart what it's all about and he said errant knights also get hungry.'

'So what's the problem?'

'You must be joking! It's a knight errant's noble vocation to wander. Not for a monthly salary!'

'The one does not preclude the other,' said the vampire Regis very gravely. 'Truly. Believe me, Angoulême.'

'Believe him, Angoulême,' said Geralt dryly. 'Stop running around the palace looking for scandal and go and keep Milva company. She's in a dreadful state, she oughtn't to be alone.'

'True. I think auntie's got her period, because she's as angry as a wasp. I think—'

'Angoulême!'

‘I’m going, I’m going.’

Geralt and Regis stopped beside a bed of slightly wilted centifolia roses. But they were unable to talk any longer. A very thin man in an elegant cloak the colour of umber emerged from behind the orangery.

‘Good day,’ he bowed, brushing his knees with a marten kalpak. ‘May I ask which of you gentlemen is the witcher, known as Geralt, and renowned for his craft?’

‘I am he.’

‘I am Jean Catillon, steward of the Castel Toricella vineyards. The fact is that a witcher would serve us very well in the vineyard. I wished to find out if you would not consider . . .’

‘What is it about?’

‘It is thus,’ began steward Catillon. ‘Owing to this damned war, merchants visit more seldom, our reserves are growing, and there is less and less space for the barrels. We thought it was a small problem, for beneath the castles the cellars go on for miles, ever deeper. I think the cellars extend to the centre of the earth. We also found a little cellar under Toricella, beautiful, if you please, vaulted, not too dry, not too damp, just right for the wine to mature —’

‘What of it?’ the Witcher interrupted.

‘It turned out that some kind of monster prowls in the cellar, if you please, which probably came from the depths of the earth. It burned two people, melted their flesh to the bone, and blinded another, because, he, I mean the monster, sire, spits and pukes some sort of caustic lye—’

‘A solpuga,’ Geralt stated bluntly. ‘Also called a venomer.’

‘Well, well,’ smiled Regis. ‘You can see for yourself, Lord Catillon, that you’re dealing with an expert. This expert, one might say, is a godsend. And have you turned to the renowned local knights errant in this matter? The duchess has an entire regiment of them, and missions like these are, let’s face it, their speciality, their raison d’être.’

‘Not at all.’ Steward Catillon shook his head. ‘Their raison d’être is to protect the roads and passes, for if the merchants couldn’t get here, we’d all be reduced to beggary. What’s more, the knights are bold and valiant, but only on horseback. None of them

would venture under the ground. What's more, they're expen—'

He broke off and fell silent. He had the expression of a person who, if he could, would kick himself. And greatly regretted it.

'They're expensive,' Geralt finished off the sentence, without excessive spitefulness. 'So you ought to know, good sir, that I'm *more* expensive. It's a free market. And there's free competition. If we sign a contract, I'll dismount and head underground. Think it through, but don't ponder too long, for I'm not staying long in Toussaint.'

'You astonish me,' said Regis, as soon as the steward had gone. 'Has the witcher in you suddenly revived? Are you accepting contracts? Going after monsters?'

'I'm astonished myself,' replied Geralt frankly. 'I reacted instinctively, prompted by an inexplicable impulse. I'll weasel out of it. I'll treat every quote they offer as too low. Always. Let's get back to our conversation . . .'

'Hold on.' The vampire gestured with his eyes. 'Something tells me you have more clients.'

Geralt swore under his breath. Two knights were walking towards him down the cypress-lined avenue.

He recognised the first at once; the huge bull's head on a snow-white tabard couldn't have been confused with any other crest. The other knight – tall, grey-haired, with nobly angular physiognomy, as though carved from granite – had five gold demi fleurs-de-lis on his blue tunic.

Having stopped at the regulation distance of two paces, the knights bowed. Geralt and Regis returned the bows, after which the four of them observed a silence of ten heartbeats as decreed by chivalric custom.

'Gentlemen,' said Bull's Head, 'may I introduce Baron Palmerin de Launfal. My name is, as you may recall—'

'Baron de Peyrac-Peyran. How could we not?'

'We have an urgent matter for Master Witcher.' Peyrac-Peyran got down to business. 'Regarding, so to speak, a professional undertaking.'

'Yes.'

'In private.'

‘I have no secrets from Master Regis.’

‘But the noble gentlemen undoubtedly do,’ the vampire smiled. ‘For which reason, with your permission, I shall go to look at that charming little pavilion, probably a temple of quiet and private contemplation. Lord de Peyrac-Peyran . . . Lord de Launfal . . .’

They exchanged bows.

‘I’m all ears.’ Geralt interrupted the silence, having no intention of waiting for the tenth heartbeat to die away.

‘The matter,’ Peyrac-Peyran lowered his voice and looked around timidly, ‘concerns this succubus . . . Well, this nocturnal phantom, the one that haunts. Which the duchess and the ladies have commissioned you to destroy. Have they promised you much for the killing of the spectre?’

‘I beg your pardon, but that’s a trade secret.’

‘But of course,’ responded Palmerin de Launfal, the knight with the fleur-de-lis cross. ‘Your conduct is commendable. Indeed, I greatly fear that I shall be insulting you with this proposal, but in spite of that I submit it. Relinquish the contract, Master Witcher. Don’t go after the succubus, leave it in peace. Saying nothing to the ladies or the duchess. And ’pon my word, we, the gentlemen of Toussaint, will outbid the ladies’ offer. Bewildering you with our generosity.’

‘A proposal,’ said the Witcher coldly, ‘that is indeed not very far from an insult.’

‘Sir Geralt,’ Palmerin de Launfal’s face was hard and grave. ‘I shall tell you what emboldened us to make the offer. It was the rumour about you that said you only kill monsters that represent a danger. A real danger. Not an imagined one, stemming from ignorance or prejudice. Permit me to say that the succubus doesn’t threaten or harm anybody. It haunts people’s dreams. From time to time . . . And bedevils a little . . .’

‘But exclusively adults,’ Peyrac-Peyran added quickly.

‘The ladies of Toussaint,’ said Geralt looking around, ‘would not be happy to learn of this conversation. The duchess likeways.’

‘We agree absolutely with you,’ mumbled Palmerin de Launfal. ‘Discretion is recommended in every respect. One should let sleeping bigots lie.’

‘Open me an account in one of the local dwarven banks,’ Geralt said slowly and softly. ‘And astonish me with your generosity. I nonetheless warn you that I’m not easily astonished.’

‘And we shall nonetheless do our best,’ promised Peyrac-Peyran proudly.

They exchanged farewell bows.

Regis, who had naturally heard everything with his vampirish hearing, returned.

‘Now,’ he said without a smile, ‘you may also naturally claim that that was an involuntary reaction and an inexplicable impulse. But you’ll be hard pressed to explain away the open bank account.’

Geralt looked somewhere high up, far away, above the tops of the cypresses.

‘Who knows,’ he said, ‘perhaps we’ll spend a few days here, after all. Bearing in mind Milva’s ribs, perhaps even more than a few days. Perhaps a few weeks? So it won’t hurt if we gain financial independence for that time.’

*

‘Hence the account at the Cianfanellis’,’ nodded Reynart de Bois-Fresnes. ‘Well, well. If the duchess learned about this there would certainly be a reshuffle, a new distribution of patents of nobility. Ha, perhaps I would be promoted? I give my word, I truly regret not having the makings of an informer. Tell me about the famous feast I was so looking forward to. I so wished to be at that banquet, to eat and drink! But they sent me abroad, to the watchtower, in the cold, foul weather. Eh, what a blight, the doom of a knight . . .’

‘The great and grandiosely heralded feast,’ began Geralt, ‘was preceded by serious preparations. We had to find Milva, who’d hidden in the stables, and convince her that the fate of Ciri and almost the entire world depended on her participation in the banquet. We almost had to force her into a dress. Then we had to make Angoulême promise she would avoid saying “fuck” and “arse”. Once we’d finally achieved everything and intended to relax with a glass of wine, Chamberlain Le Goff appeared, smelling of icing sugar and puffed up like a swine’s bladder.’

*

‘In the given circumstances, I must stress,’ began Chamberlain Le Goff nasally, ‘that there are no inferior places at Her Grace’s table. No one has the right to feel piqued by the place assigned to him or her. We in Toussaint, nonetheless, avidly observe ancient traditions and customs, and according to those customs—’

‘Get to the point, sir.’

‘The feast is tomorrow. I must execute a seating plan according to honour and rank.’

‘Naturally,’ said the Witcher gravely. ‘I’ll tell you what’s what. The most noble of us, both in rank and honour, is Dandelion.’

‘Viscount Julian,’ said the chamberlain, putting on airs, ‘is an extraordinarily honoured guest. And thus will sit at Her Grace’s right hand.’

‘Naturally,’ the Witcher repeated, as grave as death itself. ‘And regarding us, he didn’t reveal our ranks, titles and honours, did he?’

‘He only revealed—’ the chamberlain cleared his throat ‘—that my lords and ladies are incognito on a knightly mission, and he was not able to betray its details or your true names, coats of arms and titles, since they are protected by vows.’

‘Precisely. So what’s the problem?’

‘Why, I must seat you! You are guests, and moreover the viscount’s comrades, so in any case I will place you nearer the head of the table . . . among the barons. But, of course, it cannot be that you are all equal, lords and ladies, for it is never thus that everyone is equal. If by rank or birth one of you is more superior, he ought to sit at the top table, near the duchess . . .’

‘He,’ the Witcher unhesitatingly pointed at the vampire, who was standing close by, raptly admiring a tapestry that took up almost the whole wall, ‘is a count. But hush! It’s a secret.’

‘Understood,’ the chamberlain almost choked in amazement. ‘In the given circumstances . . . I shall put him on the right of Countess Notturna, nobly born aunt of the Lady Duchess.’

‘Neither you nor the aunt will regret it.’ Geralt was poker-faced. ‘He has no equal either in comportment or in the conversational arts.’

‘I’m glad to hear it. You meanwhile, Lord of Rivia, will sit beside the Esteemed Lady Fringilla. As tradition dictates. You bore her to the Vat, you are . . . hmmm . . . her champion, as ’twere . . .’

‘Understood.’

‘Very well. Ah, Your Grace . . .’

‘Yes?’ the vampire said in surprise. He had just moved away from the tapestry, which depicted a fight between giants and cyclopes.

‘Nothing, nothing,’ smiled Geralt. ‘We’re just chatting.’

‘Aha.’ Regis nodded. ‘I don’t know if you’ve noticed, gentlemen . . . But that cyclops in the tapestry, the one with the club . . . Look at his toes. He, let’s be frank, has two left feet.’

‘Verily,’ Chamberlain Le Goff confirmed without a trace of amazement. ‘There are plenty of tapestries like that in Beauclair. The master who wove them was a true master. But he drank an awful lot. As artists do.’

*

‘It’s time we were going,’ said the Witcher, avoiding the eyes of the girls tipsy on wine who were glancing at him from the table, where they’d been amusing themselves with fortune-telling. ‘Let’s be off, Reynart. Let’s pay, mount up and ride to Beauclair.’

‘I know where you’re hurrying,’ the knight grinned. ‘Don’t worry, your green-eyed lady is waiting. It’s only just struck midnight. Tell me about the feast.’

‘I’ll tell you and we’ll ride.’

‘And we’ll ride.’

*

The sight of the table, arranged in a gigantic horseshoe, signalled emphatically that autumn was passing and winter was coming. Game in all possible forms and varieties dominated the delicacies heaped on great serving dishes and platters. There were huge

quarters of boar, haunches and saddles of venison, various forcemeats, aspics and pink slices of meat, autumnally garnished with mushrooms, cranberries, plum jam and hawthorn berry sauce. There were autumn fowls – grouse, capercaillie, and pheasant, decoratively served with wings and tails, there was roast guinea fowl, quail, partridge, garganey, snipe, hazel grouse and mistle thrush. There were also genuine dainties, such as fieldfare, roasted whole, without having been drawn, since the juniper berries with which the innards of these small birds are full form a natural stuffing. There was salmon trout from mountain lakes, there was zander, there was burbot and pike's liver. A green accent was given by raiponce, late-spring salad, which, if such a need arose, could even be dug up from under the snow.

Mistletoe took the place of flowers.

The evening's ornament was placed on a large silver tray in the middle, forming the centrepiece of the high table at which Duchess Anarietta and the most distinguished guests were seated. Among truffles, flowers cut from carrots, quartered lemons and artichoke hearts lay a huge sturgeon, and on its back was a whole roast heron, standing on one leg, holding a gold ring in its upraised beak.

'I vow on the heron,' cried Peyrac-Peyran, the baron with the bull's head in his arms whom the Witcher knew well, standing and lifting up his goblet. 'I vow on the heron to defend knightly honour and the virtue of ladies and I vow never, ever to yield the field to anyone!'

The oath was rewarded with thunderous applause. And the eating began.

'I vow on the heron!' yelled another knight, with bushy whiskers pointing pugnaciously upwards. 'I promise to defend the borders and Her Grace Anna Henrietta to the last drop of my blood! And in order to prove my loyalty, I vow to paint a heron on my shield and fight incognito for a year, concealing my name and arms, calling myself the Knight of the White Heron! I wish Her Grace good health!'

'Good health! Happiness! Viva! Long live Her Grace!'

Anarietta thanked them with a faint nod of her head, decorated with a diamond-encrusted tiara. She had so many diamonds on her that she could have scratched glass just by passing. Beside her sat Dandelion, smiling foolishly. A little further

away, between two matrons, sat Emiel Regis. He was dressed in a black, velvet jacket, looking like a vampire. He was waiting on the ladies and entertaining them with his conversation. They listened with fascination.

Geralt took the platter with the zander garnished with parsley and served Fringilla Vigo, who sat on his left, and was dressed in a gown of mauve satin and a gorgeous amethyst necklace, which sat prettily on her breast. Fringilla, watching him from beneath her black eyelashes, raised her goblet and smiled enigmatically.

'Your good health, Geralt. I'm glad they put us together.'

'Don't count your chickens,' he replied with a smile, for he was actually in decent humour. 'The feast has only just begun.'

'On the contrary. It has lasted long enough for you to have complimented me. How long must I wait?'

'You are enchantingly beautiful.'

'Slowly, slowly, with restraint!' She laughed – he would have sworn – entirely sincerely. 'At this rate I'm afraid to think where we might end up by the end of the banquet. Start with . . . Hmm . . . Say that I have a tasteful dress and that mauve suits me.'

'Mauve suits you. Although I confess I like you most in white.'

He saw a challenge in her emerald eyes. He was afraid to take it up. He was in such good humour.

Cahir and Milva had been seated opposite. Cahir was sitting between two very young and ceaselessly twittering noblewomen, perhaps the barons' daughters. The archer, meanwhile, was accompanied by an older, gloomy knight with a pockmarked face, who was as quiet as a stone.

A little further away, meanwhile, sat Angoulême, calling the tune – and making a racket – among some young knights errant.

'What's this?' she yelled, picking up a silver knife with a rounded end. 'Without a point? Are they afraid we'll start stabbing each other or what?'

'Such knives,' explained Fringilla, 'have been used in Beauclair since the times of Duchess Carolina Roberta, Anna Henrietta's grandmamma. It infuriated Caroberta when during banquets the guests used the knives to pick their teeth. And you can't pick your teeth with a knife with a rounded end.'

‘You cannot,’ agreed Angoulême, contorting her face roguishly. ‘Luckily they’ve also given us forks!’

She pretended to put the fork in her mouth, but stopped on seeing Geralt’s menacing look. The young knightling on her right chuckled shrilly. Geralt picked up a dish of duck in aspic and served Fringilla. He saw Cahir doing his uttermost to satisfy the barons’ daughters’ whims, while they gazed at him. He saw the young knights buzzing around Angoulême, vying with each other to pass her dishes and chuckling at her foolish jokes.

He saw Milva crumbling bread, staring at the tablecloth.

Fringilla seemed to read his thoughts.

‘She’s done poorly, your taciturn companion,’ she whispered, leaning towards him. ‘Why, it can happen when a seating plan is being drawn up. Baron de Trastamara isn’t blessed with courtliness. Or eloquence.’

‘Perhaps that’s better,’ Geralt said softly. ‘A courtier drooling graciousness would’ve been worse. I know Milva.’

‘Are you sure?’ She glanced at him swiftly. ‘You aren’t measuring her according to your own standards, are you? Which, incidentally, are quite cruel.’

He didn’t reply, but instead served her, pouring her wine. And decided it was high time to clear up a few matters.

‘You’re a sorceress, aren’t you?’

‘I am,’ she admitted, masking her surprise extremely deftly. ‘How did you know?’

‘I can sense the aura,’ he said without going into details. ‘And I’m skilled.’

‘To be quite clear,’ she said a moment later, ‘it wasn’t my intention to deceive anybody. I have no obligation to flaunt my profession or put on a pointed hat and black cloak. Why use me to frighten children? I have the right to remain incognito.’

‘Undeniably.’

‘I’m in Beauclair because the largest, best-stocked library in the known world is here. Apart from university libraries, naturally. But universities are jealous of giving access to their shelves, and here I’m a relation and good friend of Anarietta and can do as I wish.’

‘I envy you.’

‘During the audience, Anarietta hinted that the book collection may conceal a clue which may be useful to you. Don’t be put off by her theatrical gushiness. That’s just the way she is. And it really is likely that you’ll find something in the library. Why, it’s quite probable. It’s enough to know what to look for and where.’

‘Indeed. Nothing more.’

‘The enthusiasm of your answers truly lifts my spirits and encourages me to talk.’ She narrowed her eyes slightly. ‘I can guess the reason. You don’t trust me, do you?’

‘A little more grouse, perhaps?’

‘I vow on the heron!’ A young knight from the end of the horseshoe stood up and blindfolded himself with a sash given him by the lady sitting next to him. ‘I vow not to take off this sash until the marauders from the Cervantes pass are entirely wiped out.’

The duchess gave her acknowledgement with a gracious nod of her diamond-sparkling head.

Geralt hoped Fringilla wouldn’t continue on the subject. He was mistaken.

‘You don’t believe me and you don’t trust me,’ she said. ‘You’ve given me a doubly painful blow. You don’t only doubt that I sincerely want to help, but neither do you believe I can. Oh, Geralt! You’ve cut my pride and lofty ambition to the quick.’

‘Listen—’

‘No!’ She raised her knife and fork as though threatening him. ‘Don’t try to apologise. I can’t bear men who apologise.’

‘What kind of men *can* you bear?’

She narrowed her eyes, and continued to hold her cutlery like daggers about to strike.

‘The list is long,’ she said slowly. ‘And I don’t want to bore you with the details. I merely state that men who are ready to go to the end of the world for their beloved, dauntlessly, scorning risk and danger, occupy quite a high position. And those that don’t quit, even though there seems to be no chance of success.’

‘And the other positions on the list?’ he blurted out. ‘The other men to your taste? Also madmen?’

‘And what is true manliness—’ she tilted her head playfully ‘—if not class and recklessness blended together in the correct proportions?’

‘Lords and ladies, barons and knights!’ shouted Chamberlain Le Goff loudly, standing up and raising a gigantic cup in both hands. ‘In the given circumstances I shall take the liberty of offering a toast: to Her Enlightened Ladyship, Duchess Anna Henrietta.’

‘Health and happiness!’

‘Hurrah!’

‘Long live the duchess! Vivat!’

‘And now, lords and ladies . . . .’ The chamberlain put the cup down and nodded solemnly towards the liveried servants. ‘Now . . . The Magna Bestia!’

An enormous roast on a dish, filling the hall with its marvellous aroma, was carried in by four servants on something resembling a sedan chair.

‘The Magna Bestia!’ roared the revellers as one. ‘Hurrah! The Magna Bestia!’

‘What bloody beast is that?’ Angoulême expressed her anxiety loudly. ‘I’m not going to eat it until I find out what it is.’

‘It’s an elk,’ Geralt explained. ‘A roast elk.’

‘Not just any elk,’ said Milva, after clearing her throat. ‘That bull weighed seven hundredweight.’

‘With a fine six-point rack. Seven hundredweight and forty pounds,’ gruffly commented the tight-lipped baron sitting beside her. They were the first words he’d uttered from the start of the banquet.

Perhaps it would have been the beginning of a conversation, but the archer blushed, fixed her gaze on the tablecloth and resumed her crumbling of bread.

But Geralt had taken Fringilla’s words to heart.

‘Did you, my lord baron,’ he asked, ‘bring down that magnificent bull?’

‘Not I,’ said the tight-lipped baron. ‘My son-in-law. He’s an excellent shot. But that’s a male topic, if I may say so . . . I beg for forgiveness. One shouldn’t bore the ladies . . .’

‘With what bow?’ asked Milva, still staring at the tablecloth. ‘No doubt nothing weaker than a seventy-pounder.’

‘A laminate. Layers of yew, acacia and ash, glued together with sinews,’ the baron slowly responded, visibly surprised. ‘A double-bent zefar. Seventy-five pounds draw.’

‘And the draw length?’

‘Twenty-nine inches.’ The baron was speaking slower and slower and he seemed to be spitting out each word.

‘A veritable ballista,’ Milva said calmly. ‘You could down a stag at even a hundred paces with a bow like that. If the archer was genuinely able.’

‘Aye,’ wheezed the baron, as though somewhat piqued. ‘I can hit a pheasant from five and twenty paces, if I may say so.’

‘From a score and five,’ Milva raised her head, ‘I can hit a squirrel.’

The baron, disconcerted, gave a slight cough and quickly served the archer with food and drink.

‘A good bow,’ he muttered, ‘is half the success. But no less important as the quality, if I may say so, of the shot. So you see, my lady, according to me an arrow—’

‘Good health to Her Grace Anna Henrietta! Good health to Viscount Julian de Lettenhove!’

‘Cheers! *Vivant!*’

‘. . . and she fucked him!’ Angoulême finished another foolish anecdote. The young knights roared with laughter.

The barons’ daughters, called Queline and Nique, listened to Cahir’s tales open-mouthed, their eyes sparkling and their cheeks flushed. At the top table the entire upper aristocracy were listening to Regis’s disquisitions. Only isolated words reached Geralt’s ears – despite his witcher’s hearing – but he worked out that the talk was of spectres, strigas, succubuses and vampires. Regis waved a silver fork and demonstrated that the best remedy against vampires is silver, a precious metal the barest touch of which is absolutely fatal to them. And garlic, asked the ladies? Garlic is also effective, admitted Regis, but socially troublesome, since it stinks awfully.

The band on the gallery played fiddles and pipes, and the acrobats, jugglers and fire-eaters showed off their artistry. The

jester tried to amuse the guests, but what chance did he have against Angoulême? Then a bear tamer appeared with a bear, which – to general delight – did a dump on the floor. Angoulême became morose and subdued – it was difficult to compete with something like that.

The pointy-nosed duchess suddenly fell into a fury, and one of the barons fell out of favour and was escorted to the tower for some imprudent word. Few – apart from those directly involved – seemed bothered by the matter.

'You won't be leaving here in a hurry, you doubter,' said Fringilla Vigo, swinging her glass. 'Although you'd leave at once if you could, nothing will come of it.'

'Don't read my thoughts, please.'

'I'm sorry. They were so strong I couldn't help it.'

'You've no idea how many times I've heard that.'

'You've no idea how much I know. Eat some artichokes, please, they're good for you, good for the heart. The heart's a vital organ in a man. The second most important.'

'I thought the most important things were class and recklessness.'

'The qualities of the spirit ought to go hand in hand with the attributes of the body. From that comes perfection.'

'No one's perfect.'

'That's not an argument. One ought to try. Do you know what? I think I'll have those hen grouse.'

She cut the bird up on her plate so quickly and violently it made the Witcher shudder.

'You won't be leaving here in a hurry,' she said. 'Firstly, you have no reason to. Nothing's threatening you—'

'Nothing at all, indeed,' he interrupted, unable to stop himself. 'The Nilfgaardians will take fright at the stern note issued by the ducal chancellery. And even if they risked it they would be driven from here by the knights errant taking vows on the heron with their eyes blindfold.'

'You're not in danger,' she repeated, paying no attention to his sarcasm. 'Toussaint is generally regarded as an insignificant fairy-tale duchy, ridiculous and unreal, and in a state of permanent

intoxication and unending bacchic joy owing to the production of wine. It isn't really treated seriously by anybody, but enjoys privileges. After all, it supplies wine, and without wine, as everyone knows, there's no life. For which reason no agents, spies or secret services operate in Toussaint. And there's no need for an army, it's enough to have blindfolded knights errant. No one will attack Toussaint. I can see from your face I haven't thoroughly convinced you?'

'Not thoroughly.'

'Pity,' Fringilla squinted. 'I like doing things thoroughly. I don't like anything that's incomplete, and neither do I like half measures. Or anything left unsaid. Thus I will add: Fulko Artevelde, the Prefect of Riedburne, thinks you're dead. He was informed by fugitives that the druidesses burned you all alive. Fulko is doing what he can to cover up the issue, which bears the hallmarks of a scandal. It's in his interest to do so; he has his career in mind. Even when he finds out you're alive it'll be too late. The version he gave in his reports will be binding.'

'You know a great deal.'

'I've never concealed that. So the argument about being pursued by Nilfgaard can be eliminated. And there aren't any other arguments in favour of a rapid departure.'

'Interesting . . .'

'But true. One can leave Toussaint via four mountain passes, leading towards the four points of the compass. Which pass will you choose? The druidesses told you nothing and refused to cooperate. The elf from the mountains has vanished . . .'

'You really do know a great deal.'

'We've already established that.'

'And you wish to help me.'

'But you reject that help. You don't believe in the sincerity of my intentions. You don't trust me.'

'Listen, I—'

'Don't explain yourself. And eat some more artichokes.'

Someone else had made a vow on the heron. Cahir was paying the barons' daughters compliments.

Angoulême, now tipsy, could be heard throughout the entire

hall. The tight-lipped baron, excited by the discourse on bows and arrows, had begun to dance attendance on Milva.

'Please, won't you try some wild boar, miss. Oh, if I may say so . . . There are fields of crops on my estates dug up by whole herds of them, if I may say so.'

'Oh.'

'You can come across some fine animals, three-hundredweight specimens . . . Height of the season . . . If, miss, you'd express a desire . . . We could, so to speak, go hunting together . . .'

'We shan't be staying here so long.' Milva looked strangely enquiringly at Geralt. 'For we have more serious tasks than hunting, if you excuse me, sir.

'Although,' she added quickly, seeing that the baron was looking gloomy, 'I would most eagerly go hunting game with Your Lordship if there is time.'

The baron's face lit up at once.

'If not the chase,' he declared enthusiastically, 'then at least I must invite you to my residence. I will show you my antler, trophy, pipe and sabre collections, so to speak . . .'

Milva fixed her eyes on the tablecloth.

The baron seized a tray of fieldfares, served her and then filled her wine glass.

'Forgive me,' he said. 'I am no courtier. I don't know how to entertain. I'm pretty wretched at courtly discourse.'

'I was raised in the forest.' Milva cleared her throat. 'I esteem silence.'

Fringilla found Geralt's hand under the table and squeezed it hard. Geralt looked her in the eyes. He couldn't guess what was hidden in them.

'I trust you,' he said. 'I believe in the sincerity of your intentions.'

'You aren't lying?'

'I swear on the heron.'

*

The town sentry must have had a few too many Yuletide tipples, for he was swaying. He banged his halberd against a signboard and loudly, though incoherently, announced it was ten of the clock, although it was actually well after midnight.

'Go to Beauclair by yourself,' Reynart de Bois-Fresnes said unexpectedly as soon as they'd left the tavern. 'I'm staying in town. Until tomorrow. Farewell, Witcher.'

Geralt knew the knight had a lady-friend in town whose husband travelled a lot on business. They'd never talked about it, for men don't talk about such matters.

'Farewell, Reynart. Deal with the skoffin. Don't let it go off.'

'There's a frost.'

There was a frost. The narrow streets were empty and tenebrous. The moonlight shone on the roofs, gleamed brilliantly on the icicles hanging from the eaves, but didn't reach the streets. Roach's horseshoes rang on the cobblestones.

Roach, thought the Witcher, heading towards Beauclair Palace. *A shapely chestnut mare, a present from Anna Henrietta. And Dandelion.*

He spurred his horse on. He was in a hurry.

*

After the feast everybody met for breakfast, which they had become accustomed to taking in the servants' hall. They were always welcome there, God only knew why. Something hot was always found for them, straight from the saucepan, skillet or spit, and there was always bread, dripping, bacon, cheese and pickled mushrooms. A jug or two of some white or red produce of the famous local vineyards was never lacking.

They always went there. Since they had arrived at Beauclair two weeks before. Geralt, Regis, Angoulême and Milva. Only Dandelion broke his fast elsewhere.

'They serve him his dripping and scratchings in bed!' commented Angoulême. 'And they pay obeisance to him!'

Geralt was inclined to believe it was like that. And that day he decided to investigate.

*

He found Dandelion in the knights' hall. The poet was wearing a crimson beret, as big as a loaf of sourdough rye bread, and a matching doublet richly embroidered with golden thread. He was sitting on a curule seat with his lute in his lap and reacting with careless nods to the compliments of the ladies and courtiers surrounding him.

Anna Henrietta, fortunately, wasn't in sight. So Geralt without hesitation broke protocol and went boldly into action. Dandelion saw him at once.

'Lords and ladies,' he said pompously, waving a hand just like a real king, 'if you could leave us alone? The servants may also absent themselves!'

He clapped and before the echo had died away they were alone in the knights' hall with suits of armour, paintings, panoplies and the intense, lingering smell of the ladies' powder.

'What fun,' Geralt remarked without excessive malice. 'You shoo them away like that, do you? It must feel nice to issue orders with one lordly gesture, one clap, one regal frown. Watch as they scuttle backwards like crayfish, bending over towards you in a bow. What fun. Eh? My Lord Favourite?'

Dandelion grimaced.

'Is it about anything particular?' he asked sourly. 'Or just to talk for the sake of it?'

'Something particular. So particular, it couldn't be more so.'

'Say on, if you please.'

'We need three horses. That's for me, Cahir and Angoulême. And two unmounted packhorses. Together, three good steeds and two hacks. Hacks, well, as a last resort, mules, laden with vittles and feed. Your duchess must consider you worth that much, what? You've earned at least that, I trust?'

'There won't be a problem with it.' Dandelion, not looking at Geralt, got down to tuning his lute. 'I'm only surprised by your

haste. I'd say it surprises me to the same degree as your foolish sarcasm does.'

'My haste surprises you?'

'You'd better believe it. October is ending, and the weather is visibly worsening. Snow will fall in the passes any day now.'

'And you're surprised by my haste.' the Witcher nodded. 'But I'm glad you reminded me. Sort out some warm clothing. Some furs.'

'I thought,' Dandelion said slowly, 'that we'd sit out the winter here. That we'd stay here—'

'If you want to stay,' Geralt blurted out, 'then stay.'

'I do.' Dandelion stood up suddenly and put down his lute. 'And I will.'

The Witcher audibly sucked in air and said nothing. He looked at a tapestry depicting a fight between a titan and a dragon. The titan, standing solidly on two left legs, was trying hard to break the dragon's jaw, and the dragon looked none too pleased about it.

'I'm staying,' Dandelion repeated. 'I love Anarietta. And she loves me.'

Geralt still said nothing.

'You'll have your horses,' continued the poet. 'I'll order them to prepare you a thoroughbred mare called Roach, naturally. You'll be equipped, well-stocked with food and warmly dressed. But I sincerely advise you to wait till the spring. Anarietta—'

'Am I hearing right?' The Witcher finally regained his voice. 'Or do my ears deceive me?'

'Your intellect,' snapped the troubadour, 'is certainly blunt. I can't speak for your other senses. I repeat: we love one another, Anarietta and I. I'm staying in Toussaint. With her.'

'In what role? Lover? Favourite? Or perhaps ducal consort?'

'I'm indifferent in principle to our formal and legal status,' Dandelion admitted frankly. 'But one cannot rule anything out. Including marriage.'

Geralt was silent again, contemplating the titan fighting the dragon.

'Dandelion,' he said finally. 'If you've been drinking, sober up.

If you haven't taken a drink, do so. Then we'll talk.'

'I don't quite understand why you're talking like this.' Dandelion frowned.

'Then have a little think.'

'What about? Does my relationship with Anarietta shock you so much? Perhaps you'd like to appeal to my good sense. Skip it. I've thought the matter through. Anarietta loves me—'

'And do you know the saying "the favours of duchesses are uncertain"?' Geralt interrupted, 'Even if your Anarietta isn't flighty, and if you'll excuse the frankness she looks that way to me, then—'

'Then what?'

'Duchesses only marry musicians in fairy tales.'

'Firstly—' Dandelion puffed himself up '—even a boor like you must have heard of morganatic marriages. Must I give you examples from ancient and modern history? Secondly, it'll probably surprise you, but I'm not from the hoi-polloi. My people, the de Lettenhoves, come from—'

'I'm listening to you and I'm amazed,' Geralt interrupted again, losing his temper. 'Is my friend Dandelion really spouting such balderdash? Has my friend Dandelion really gone completely mad? Is Dandelion, whom I know as a realist, now beginning all of a sudden to live in the sphere of illusion? Open your bloody eyes, you dolt.'

'Aha,' Dandelion said slowly, tightening his lips. 'What a curious reversal of roles. I'm a blind man, and you meanwhile have suddenly become an attentive and astute observer. It was usually the other way around. And, out of interest, what don't I notice that you can see? Eh? What, according to you, should I open my eyes to?'

'For instance,' drawled the Witcher, 'the fact that your duchess is a spoiled child that has grown up into a spoiled and arrogant turkey cock. That fact she – fascinated by the novelty – has graced you with her charms, and will dump you immediately when a new busker with a newer and more beguiling repertoire comes along.'

'What you're saying is very base and vulgar. You're aware of that, I hope?'

'I'm aware of your lack of awareness. You're a lunatic, Dandelion.'

The poet said nothing and stroked the neck of his lute. Some time passed before he spoke.

'We set off from Brokilon on a deranged mission,' he began slowly. 'Taking a lunatic risk, we launched ourselves on an insane quest for a mirage without the slightest chance of success. A quest for a phantom, a daydream, an absolutely impossible ideal. We set off in pursuit like idiots, like madmen. But I didn't utter a word of complaint, Geralt. I didn't call *you* a madman. I didn't ridicule you. For you had hope and love in you. You were being guided by them on this reckless mission. I was too, as a matter of fact. But I've caught up with the mirage, and I was lucky enough that the dream came true. My mission is over. I've found what is so difficult to find. And I intend to keep it. Is that insanity? It would be insanity to give it up and let it slip through my fingers.'

Geralt was silent for as long as Dandelion had been earlier.

'Pure poetry,' he finally said. 'And it's difficult to rival you at that. I won't say another word. You've destroyed my arguments. Helped, I admit, by your quite apposite ones. Farewell, Dandelion.'

'Farewell, Geralt.'

*

The palace library really was immense. Its dimensions were at least twice those of the knights' hall. And it had a glass roof. Owing to which it was light. Although Geralt suspected it was bloody hot during the summer.

The aisles between the bookshelves were narrow and cramped so he walked cautiously, in order not to knock any books off. He also had to step over volumes piled up on the floor.

'I'm here.'

The centre of the library was lost among the books, which were arranged in piles and columns. Many were lying quite chaotically, individually or in picturesque heaps.

'Here, Geralt.'

He ventured among the canyons and ravines between the books. And found her.

She was kneeling among scattered incunables, leafing through

and categorising them. She had on a modest grey dress, hitched up a little for convenience. Geralt found the sight extremely seductive.

'Don't be horrified by the mess,' she said, wiping her brow with her forearm, because she was wearing thin, dust-stained silk gloves. 'The books are being inventoried and catalogued. But the work was stopped at my request so I could be alone in the library. I can't bear strangers' eyes on me while I'm working.'

'I'm sorry. Shall I leave?'

'*You're* not a stranger.' She narrowed her eyes slightly. 'I enjoy . . . having your eyes on me. Don't stand like that. Sit here, on the books.'

He sat down on *A Description of the World* published in folio.

'This shambles—' Fringilla indicated around her with a brisk gesture '—has unexpectedly made my work easier. I was able to get to books that are normally lying somewhere at the bottom of a heap that's impossible to shift. The ducal librarians moved the mounds – a titanic effort! – thanks to which some literary treasures and rarities saw the light of day. Look. Ever seen anything like this?'

'*Speculum Aureum*? Yes, I have.'

'I apologise, I forgot. You've seen plenty. That was meant to be a compliment, not sarcasm. And take a glance at that. It's *Gesta Regum*. We'll start with that so you'll understand who your Ciri really is, whose blood flows in her veins . . . Your expression's sourer than usual, did you know? What's the reason?'

'Dandelion.'

'Tell me.'

He did. Fringilla listened, sitting cross-legged on a pile of books.

'Well,' she sighed, after he'd finished. 'I admit I expected something of the kind. I noticed long ago that Anarietta was betraying symptoms of lovesickness.'

'Love?' he snorted. 'Or a lordly whim.'

'You seem not to believe—' she looked at him piercingly '—in sincere and pure love?'

'My beliefs,' he said, 'aren't the subject of debate and are beside the point. It's about Dandelion and his stupid—'

He broke off, suddenly losing confidence.

‘Love,’ Fringilla said slowly, ‘is like renal colic. Until you have an attack, you can’t even imagine what it’s like. And when people tell you about it you don’t believe them.’

‘There’s something in that,’ the Witcher agreed. ‘But there are also differences. Good sense can’t protect you from renal colic. Or cure it.’

‘Love mocks good sense. That’s its charm and beauty.’

‘Stupidity, more like.’

She stood up and walked towards him, taking off her gloves. Her eyes were dark and profound beneath the curtains of her eyelashes. She smelled of ambergris, roses, library dust, decayed paper, minium and printing ink, oak gall ink, and strychnine, which was being used to poison the library mice. The smell had little in common with an aphrodisiac. So it was all the stranger that it worked on him.

‘Don’t you believe,’ she said in a changed voice, ‘in sudden impulses? In unforeseen attractions? In the impacts of fireballs flying along collision trajectories? In cataclysms?’

She held out a hand and touched his arms. He touched her arms. Their faces moved closer, still hesitantly, vigilantly, as though they were afraid of scaring away some very, very timid creature.

And then the fireballs collided and a cataclysm ensued.

They fell onto a pile of folio volumes which scattered in all directions under their weight. Geralt pushed his nose into Fringilla’s cleavage, seized her powerfully and grabbed her by the knees. Various books impeded him from pulling her dress up above her waist, including *The Lives of the Prophets*, which was resplendent with intricate initials and illustrations, and *De Haemorrhoidibus*, a fascinating but controversial medical treatise. The Witcher pushed the volumes to one side, impatiently tugging at her skirt. Fringilla raised her hips enthusiastically.

Something was chafing her shoulder. She turned her head. *A Study of the Midwife’s Art*. She quickly looked the other way so as not to tempt fate. *On Hot, Sulphurous Waters.* The temperature was rising indeed. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the frontispiece of the book her head was resting on. *Remarks on Inevitable Death.* Even better, she thought.

The Witcher was fighting with her underwear. She lifted her hips, but this time gently, so it would look like an accidental movement and not provocative assistance. She didn't know him and didn't know how he reacted to women. Whether he didn't, perhaps, prefer the kind that pretend they don't know what they want, to those that do. And whether it would discourage him if her knickers were hard to take off.

The Witcher, however, wasn't betraying any signs of discouragement. On the contrary, one might say. Seeing that it was high time, Fringilla spread her legs enthusiastically and vigorously, knocking over a tower of books and fascicles, which slid down on them like an avalanche. A copy of *Mortgage Law* bound in embossed leather came to rest against her buttock and a copy of *Codex Diplomaticus* decorated with brass edgings against Geralt's wrist. Geralt assessed and exploited the situation at once, placing the bulky tome where it belonged. Fringilla squealed, because the edgings were cold. But only for a moment.

She sighed loudly, let go of the Witcher's hair, spread her arms and seized a book in each hand, her left grabbing *Descriptive Geometry*, her right *An Outline Study of Reptiles and Amphibians*. Geralt, holding her hips, knocked over another pile of books with an unwitting kick, but was nonetheless too occupied to worry about the volumes falling on him. Fringilla, moaning spasmodically, thrashed her head from side to side over the pages of *Remarks on Inevitable* . . .

The books subsided with a rustle, the sharp scent of old dust making their noses tingle.

Fringilla screamed. The Witcher didn't hear it, because her thighs were clenched against his ears. He threw off the bothersome *History of Wars* and *The Journal of All the Arts Necessary for a Happy Life*. Impatiently fighting with the buttons and fastenings of her bodice, he wandered from the south to the north, unintentionally reading the inscriptions on covers, spines, frontispieces and title pages. Under Fringilla's waist was *The Exemplary Farmer*. Under her armpit, not far from her small, charming, jauntily pert breast, *On Ineffective and Recalcitrant Shire Reaves*. Under her elbow *Economics; or, a Simple Exposition on how to Create, Divide up and Consume Wealth*.

He read *Remarks on Inevitable Death* with his mouth on her neck and his hands near *Shire Reaves* . . . Fringilla emitted a difficult

to classify sound; neither a scream, a moan nor a sigh.

The bookshelves shook, piles of books trembled and tumbled down, arranging themselves like rocky inselbergs during a severe earthquake. Fringilla screamed. A rare book, the first edition of *De larvisscenicis et Figuriscomicis*, fell from its shelf with a crash, followed by *A Collection of General Horsemanship Commands*, taking down with it John of Attre's *Heraldry*, embellished with beautiful prints.

The Witcher groaned, kicking over more volumes as he jerked a leg straight. Fringilla screamed once again, long and loudly, knocking over *Contemplations; or, Meditations for Every Day of the Year*, an interesting anonymous work which had ended up on Geralt's back for no apparent reason. Geralt trembled and read above her shoulder, learning – like it or not – that *Remarks . . .* had been written by Dr Albertus Rivus, had been published by the Academia Cintrensis, and had been printed by the master typographer Johann Froben Jr in the second year of the reign of HM King Corbett.

All was silent, save only the rustle of books slipping down and pages turning over.

What to do? thought Fringilla, touching Geralt's side and the hard corner of *Deliberations on the Nature of Things* with lazy strokes of her hand. *Should I suggest it? Or wait until he does? As long as he won't think me flighty and immodest . . .*

What will happen if he doesn't suggest it?

'Let's go and find a bed somewhere,' the Witcher suggested, a little hoarsely. 'It doesn't do to treat books like this.'

*

We found a bed, thought Geralt, letting Roach gallop down an avenue in the castle grounds. *We found a bed in the alcove in her chambers. We made love like mad things, voraciously, greedily, ravenously, as though following years of celibacy, as though storing it up for later, as though at risk of celibacy again.*

We told each other many things. We told each other very trivial truths. We told each other very beautiful lies. But those lies, although they were lies, weren't calculated to deceive.

Excited by the gallop, he steered Roach straight at a snow-covered rose bed and made the mare jump it.

We made love. And talked. And our lies became more and more mendacious.

Two months. From October to Yule.

Two month of furious, greedy, wild love.

Roach's horseshoes thudded on the flags of the courtyard at Beauclair Palace.

*

He passed through corridors quickly and soundlessly. No one saw or heard him. Not the guardsmen with halberds, killing time on their sentry duty by chatting and gossiping, nor the slumbering lackeys and pages. Even the candle flames didn't flicker when he passed by the candelabras.

He was near the palace kitchen. But he didn't go in, didn't join the company, who were inside, disposing of a small cask and something fried. He remained in the shadows, listening.

Angoulême was speaking.

'There's something bewitched about this place, this fucking Toussaint. Some kind of charm hangs over the whole valley. Especially over the palace. I was surprised at Dandelion, I was surprised at the Witcher, but now I'm nauseous and I've got a weird feeling in the pit of my stomach. Shit, I even caught myself . . . Eh, I'm not going to tell you that. Seriously, let's get out of here. Let's get out of here as fast as possible.'

'Tell that to Geralt,' said Milva. 'It's him you should tell.'

'Yes, talk to him,' said Cahir somewhat sarcastically. 'During one of those brief moments when he's free. Between the two activities he's been engaging in for two months to help him forget.'

'As for you,' snorted Angoulême, 'you're mainly available in the park, playing at hoops with the barons' daughters. Pshaw, no two ways about it, there's something bewitched about this bloody Toussaint. Regis disappears somewhere at night, aunty has her tight-lipped baron—'

‘Shut it, you brat! And don’t call me aunty!’

‘Come, come,’ Regis interjected placatingly. ‘Girls, take it easy. Milva, Angoulême. Let there be concord. United we stand, divided we fall. As Her Grace the Duchess, lady of this country, this palace, this bread, dripping and gherkins, says: *Another drop, anyone?*’

Milva sighed heavily.

‘We’ve stayed here too long! Too long, I tell you, too long we’ve sat here in idleness. It’s driving us mad.’

‘Well said,’ said Cahir. ‘Very well said.’

Geralt cautiously withdrew. Soundlessly. Like a bat.

*

He passed through corridors quickly and soundlessly. No one saw or heard him. Neither the guards, nor the liveried servants nor the pages. Not even the candle flames flickered as he passed by the candelabras. The rats heard him, raised their whiskered snouts, and stood up on their hind legs. But they didn’t take fright. They knew him.

He often went that way.

In the alcove it smelled of charms and witchcraft, ambergris and roses, and woman’s sleep. But Fringilla wasn’t asleep.

She sat up in bed, threw off the eiderdown, enthralling him with the sight and taking possession of him.

‘You’re here at last,’ she said, stretching. ‘You neglect me dreadfully, Witcher. Get undressed and come here quickly. Very, very quickly.’

*

She passed quickly and soundlessly through the corridors. No one saw or heard her. Neither the guardsmen, idly gossiping at their posts, nor the slumbering liveried servants, nor the pages. Not even the candle flames flickered as she passed by the candelabras. The rats heard her, raised their whiskered snouts, stood up on their hind

legs, and followed her with their black beady eyes. They didn't take fright. They knew her.

She often went that way.

*

There was a corridor in Beauclair Palace, and at the end a chamber, the existence of which no one knew about. Neither the current lady of the castle, the Duchess Anarietta, nor the first lady of the castle, her great-grandmamma, the Duchess Ademarta. Nor the architect, the celebrated Peter Faramond, who made extensive modifications to the building, nor the master masons who worked according to Faramond's plans and guidelines. Hell, even Chamberlain Le Goff, who was thought to know everything about Beauclair, didn't know about the existence of that corridor.

The corridor and the chamber, disguised by a powerful illusion, were known only to the palace's original elven builders. And later – when the elves had gone, and Toussaint became a duchy – to the small number of sorcerers linked to the ducal house. Including Artorius Vigo, a master of magical arcana and great specialist in illusions. And his young niece, Fringilla, who had a special talent for illusions.

Having passed quickly and noiselessly through the corridors of Beauclair Palace, Fringilla Vigo stopped in front of a fragment of wall between two columns decorated with acanthus leaves. A softly spoken spell and rapid gesture made the wall – which was illusory – vanish, revealing a corridor, apparently blind. At the end of the corridor, though, was a door, disguised by another illusion. And beyond the door a dark chamber.

Once inside, not wasting time, Fringilla launched a telecommunicator. The oval looking glass became cloudy and then cleared, lighting up the room, illuminating in the darkness the ancient, dust-laden tapestries on the walls. A large room plunged in subtle chiaroscuro, a round table with several women sitting around it appeared in the looking glass. Nine women.

'Greetings, Miss Vigo,' said Philippa Eilhart. 'What's new?'

'Nothing, unfortunately,' replied Fringilla, after clearing her throat. 'Nothing since the last telecommunication. Not a single

attempt at scanning.'

'That's bad,' said Philippa. 'Frankly speaking, we'd counted on you uncovering something. Please at least tell us . . . has the Witcher calmed down now? Are you capable of keeping him in Toussaint at least until May?'

Fringilla Vigo said nothing for some time. She didn't have the slightest intention of mentioning to the lodge that only in the last week the Witcher had called her 'Yennefer' twice, and both at a moment when in every respect she was entitled to hear her own name. But the lodge, in turn, was entitled to expect the truth. Honesty. And a legitimate conclusion.

'No,' she answered at last. 'Probably not until May. But I'll do everything in my power to keep him here as long as possible.'

***Korred**, a monster of the large Strigiformes family (q.v.), also called by local people a corrigan, rutterkin, rumpelstiltskin, fidgeter or mesmer. One thing can be said about him; he is dreadfully beastly. He is such a devil's spawn and scoundrel, such a bitch's tail, that we shall not write anything about his appearance or habits, since in sooth I tell you: we shall not waste breath on the whoreson.*

Physiologus

CHAPTER FOUR

An odour that was a mixture of the smells of old wooden panelling, melting candles and ten kinds of perfume hung in the columned hall of Montecalvo Castle. Ten specially selected blends of scent used by the ten women seated at a round oak table in armchairs carved in the shape of sphinxes' heads.

Fringilla Vigo regarded Triss Merigold, was sitting opposite her in a light blue dress buttoned high up to the neck. Beside Triss, remaining in the shadows, sat Keira Metz. Her large, eye-catching earrings of many-facetted citrines sparkled every now and then with a thousand reflections.

'Please continue, Miss Vigo,' urged Philippa Eilhart. 'We're in a hurry to learn the end of the story. And to take urgent steps.'

Philippa – exceptionally – wasn't wearing any jewellery apart from a large sardonyx cameo brooch pinned to her vermilion dress. Fringilla had already heard the rumour and knew whose present the cameo brooch had been, and whose profile it depicted.

Sheala de Tancarville, sitting beside Philippa, was all in black, diamonds twinkling subtly. Margarita Laux-Antille wore heavy gold without stones on claret-coloured satins, while Sabrina Glevissig had her favourite onyxes – matching the colour of her eyes – in her necklace, earrings and rings.

Nearest to Fringilla sat the two elves – Francesca Findabair and Ida Emean aep Sivney.

The Daisy of the Valleys was, as usual, regal, though today neither her coiffure nor her crimson dress were extraordinarily splendid and the red of her diadem and necklace was that of modest – though tasteful – garnets, not rubies. Ida Emean, meanwhile, was dressed in muslins and tulles in autumn tones, so delicate and gauzy that they swayed and undulated like anemones even in the barely perceptible drafts triggered by the movement of the centrally heated air.

As usual of late, Assire var Anahid's modest but distinguished elegance aroused admiration. The Nilfgaardian sorceress wore a single emerald cabochon in a gold setting on a gold chain resting in the high décolletage of her close-fitting, dark-green dress. Her

manicured fingernails, painted very dark green, gave the composition a flavour of truly magical extravagance.

'We're waiting, Miss Vigo,' reminded Sheala de Tancarville. 'Time's passing.'

Fringilla cleared her throat.

'December came,' she began her story. 'Yule came, then the New Year. The Witcher calmed down sufficiently to stop mentioning Ciri in every conversation. The expeditions against monsters that he regularly undertook seemed utterly to absorb him. Well, perhaps not quite utterly . . .'

She paused. It seemed to her she could detect a flash of hatred in Triss Merigold's azure eyes. But it might just have been the gleam of flickering candle flame. Philippa snorted, playing with her brooch.

'Don't overdo the modesty, Miss Vigo. This is a closed circle. A circle of women who know what, apart from pleasure, sex can serve. We all use that tool when the need arises. Please go on.'

'Even if during the day he maintained the appearance of secretiveness, superiority and pride,' continued Fringilla, 'at night he was completely in my power. He told me everything. He paid homage to my femininity, which considering his age was extremely generous, I must admit. And then he fell asleep. In my arms, with his mouth on my bosom. Searching for a surrogate for the maternal love he never experienced.'

This time, she was certain, it wasn't the gleam of candlelight. *Very well, I pray you, envy me*, she thought. *Envy me. There's plenty to envy*.

'He was,' she repeated, 'completely in my power.'

*

'Come back to bed, Geralt. The sky's still bloody grey!'

'I'm meeting someone. I have to ride to Pomerol.'

'I don't want you to ride to Pomerol.'

'I'm meeting someone. I've given my word. The manager of the vineyard will be waiting for me by the gate.'

‘This monster hunting of yours is stupid and pointless. What are you trying to prove by killing another monster from the caverns? Your masculinity? I know better ways. Come on, back to bed. You aren’t going to any Pomerol. At least not so quickly. The steward can wait, and anyway, what is a steward? I want to make love with you.’

‘Forgive me. I don’t have time. I’ve given my word.’

‘I want to make love with you!’

‘If you want to join me for breakfast, start getting dressed.’

‘I don’t think you love me, Geralt. Don’t you love me anymore? Answer me!’

‘Put on that grey and pearl dress, the one with the mink trimming. It suits you very much.’

*

‘He was completely under my spell, he fulfilled my every wish,’ repeated Fringilla. ‘He did everything I demanded of him. That’s how it was.’

‘And we believe you,’ said Sheala de Tancarville, extremely dryly. ‘Please continue.’

Fringilla coughed into her fist.

‘The problem was his troop,’ she went on. ‘That strange assemblage he called a company. Cahir Mawr Dyffryn aep Ceallach, who watched me and flushed with effort trying to remember me. But he couldn’t recall, because when I stayed at Darn Dyffra, his grandparents’ family castle, he was six or seven. Milva, an apparently swashbuckling and haughty girl, and whom I happened to catch crying twice hiding in a corner of the stable. Angoulême, a flighty whelp. And Regis Terzieff-Godefroy. A character I was unable to fathom. That entire gang had an influence on him I couldn’t eradicate.’

Very well, very well, she thought, *don’t raise your eyebrows so high, don’t sneer. Wait. That’s not the end of the story yet. You’re yet to hear of my triumph.*

‘Every morning,’ she continued, ‘the whole company would meet in the kitchen in the basement of Beauclair Palace. The royal

chef was fond of them, God knows why. He always cooked something up for them, so ample and tasty that breakfast usually lasted two, and occasionally even three, hours. Geralt and I ate with them many times. Which is how I know what absurd conversations they used to have.'

*

Two hens, one black, the other speckled, were walking around the kitchen, stepping timidly on their clawed feet. Glancing at the company breaking their fast, the hens pecked crumbs from the floor.

The company had gathered in the palace kitchen, as they did every morning. The royal chef was fond of them, God knows why, and always had something tasty for them. Today it was scrambled eggs, sour rye soup, stewed aubergine, rabbit forcemeat, goose breasts and sausage with beetroot, with a large circle of goat's cheese on the side. They all ate briskly and in silence. Apart from Angoulême, who was talking nonsense.

'And I tell you we should set up a brothel here. When we've done what we have to do, let's return and open a house of ill repute. I've looked around in town. There's everything here. There are ten barber's shops alone, and eight apothecaries. But there's only one knocking shop and it's more like a seedy shithouse than a proper cathouse, I tell you. There's no competition. We'll open a luxury bordello. We'll buy a big house with a garden—'

'Angoulême, have mercy.'

'—just for respectable punters. I'll be the madam. I tell you, we'll make a fortune and live like kings. Finally they'll elect me councillor, and then I won't let you die for sure, because when they elect me, I'll elect you and before you can say Jack Robinson—'

'Angoulême, we've asked. There, eat some bread and forcemeat.'

It was quiet for a while.

'What are you hunting today, Geralt? Tough job?'

'Eyewitnesses give conflicting descriptions.' The Witcher raised his head from his plate. 'So it's either a pryskirnik, i.e. a fairly hard job, or a drelichon, i.e. a fairly hard job, or a nazhempik, i.e. a

fairly easy one. It might turn out the job's extremely easy, because they last saw the monster before Lammas last year. It might have bolted from Pomerol over the hills and far away.'

'I hope it has,' said Fringilla, gnawing at a goose bone.

'And how's Dandelion doing?' the Witcher suddenly asked. 'I haven't seen him for such a long time that I get all my information about him from lampoons sung in the town.'

'We aren't any better off,' smiled Regis with pursed lips. 'All we know is that our poet is on such intimate terms with Lady Duchess Anarietta that she's allowed him, even before witnesses, to use quite a familiar *cognomen*. He calls her Little Weasel.'

'That's very apt!' Angoulême said with her mouth full. 'That lady duchess really does have a weaselly nose. Not to mention her teeth.'

'No one's perfect.' Fringilla narrowed her eyes.

'How very true.'

The hens, the black and the speckled one, had become audacious enough to begin pecking at Milva's boots. The archer drove them away with a brisk kick and an oath.

Geralt had been scrutinising her for some time. Now he made up his mind.

'Maria,' he said gravely, almost harshly, 'I know our conversations can't be considered serious or our jokes sophisticated. But you don't have to pull such sour faces. What's the matter?'

'Something must be the matter,' said Angoulême. Geralt silenced her with a fierce look. Too late.

'What do you know?' Milva stood up suddenly, almost knocking over her chair. 'What do you know, eh? The Devil take you! You can kiss my arse, all of you, get it?'

She grabbed her cup from the table, drained it and smashed it on the floor without a second thought. And ran out, slamming the door.

'Things are serious—' Angoulême began a moment later, but this time the vampire silenced her.

'The matter is very serious,' he confirmed. 'I hadn't expected such an extreme reaction from our archer. One usually reacts like that when one is jilted, not when one jilts another.'

‘What the bloody hell are you talking about?’ said Geralt, annoyed. ‘Eh? Perhaps someone will finally explain what this is all about?’

‘It’s about Baron Amadis de Trastamara.’

‘The tight-lipped hunter?’

‘The very same. He proposed to Milva. Three days ago on a hunting trip. He’d been inviting her to go hunting for a month . . .’

‘One hunt—’ Angoulême flashed her teeth impudently ‘—lasted two days. With the night spent in his hunting lodge, get it? I swear—’

‘Shut up, girl. Speak, Regis.’

‘He formally and ceremoniously asked for her hand. Milva declined, it appears, in quite a harsh way. The baron, though he looks level-headed, was upset by the rejection, sulked like a jilted stripling and immediately left Beauclair. And since then Milva has been walking around downcast.’

‘We’ve been here too long,’ muttered the Witcher. ‘Too long.’

‘Now who’s talking?’ said Cahir, who had said nothing up until then. ‘Who’s talking?’

‘Forgive me.’ The Witcher stood up. ‘We’ll talk about it when I return. The steward of Pomerol vineyard is waiting for me. And punctuality is part of the witchers’ code.’

*

After Milva’s abrupt exit and the Witcher’s departure the rest of the company ate in silence. The two hens, one black, the other speckled, walked around the kitchen, stepping timidly on their clawed feet.

‘I have a small problem . . .’ said Angoulême, raising her eyes towards Fringilla from over the plate she was wiping with a crust.

‘I understand,’ nodded the sorceress. ‘It’s nothing dreadful. When was your last period?’

‘What do you mean?’ Angoulême leaped to her feet, frightening the chickens. ‘It’s nothing of the sort. It’s something completely different!’

‘Tell me.’

‘Geralt wants to leave me here when he goes back on the road.’

‘Oh.’

‘He says,’ Angoulême snapped, ‘that he can’t put me at risk, and similar rubbish. And I want to go with him—’

‘Oh.’

‘Don’t interrupt me, will you? I want to go with him, with Geralt, because it’s only when I’m with him I’m not afraid that One-Eyed Fulko will catch me. And here in Toussaint—’

‘Angoulême,’ Regis interrupted her, ‘your words are in vain. Madam Vigo is listening, but can’t hear. Only one thing horrifies her: the Witcher leaving.’

‘Oh,’ Fringilla repeated, turning her head towards him and screwing up her eyes. ‘What are you hinting at, Mr Terzieff-Godefroy? The Witcher leaving? And when might that be? If one might ask?’

‘Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow,’ the vampire replied in a soft voice. ‘But one day, for certain. No offence intended.’

‘I don’t feel offended,’ responded Fringilla coldly. ‘If you had me in mind, naturally. Returning to you, Angoulême, I assure you that I shall discuss the matter of leaving Toussaint with Geralt. I guarantee you that the Witcher will hear my opinion on the subject.’

‘Why, naturally,’ snorted Cahir. ‘How did I know you’d say that, Madam Fringilla?’

The sorceress looked long and hard at him.

‘The Witcher,’ she said finally, ‘ought not to leave Toussaint. No one who wishes him well should encourage him to do that. Where will he have it so good as here? He’s living in the lap of luxury. He has his monsters to hunt, he’s earning a pretty penny from it. His friend and comrade is the favourite of the reigning duchess, and the duchess herself is also favourably disposed to him. Mainly owing to the succubus that was haunting people’s bedchambers. Yes, yes, gentlemen. Anarietta, like all the noble ladies of Toussaint, is inordinately well-disposed towards the Witcher. For the succubus has suddenly stopped haunting. The ladies of Toussaint have thus clubbed together to pay him a special

bonus, which they will deposit in the Witcher's account in the Cianfanellis' bank any day now. Increasing the small fortune that the Witcher has already stored up there.'

'A pretty gesture from the ladies.' Regis didn't lower his gaze. 'And a well-deserved bonus. It isn't easy to stop a succubus from haunting. You may believe me, Madam Fringilla.'

'I do. And while we're on the subject, one of the palace guards claims he saw it. At night, on the battlements of Caroberta's Tower. In the company of another spectre. Some kind of vampire. The two demons were taking a stroll, the guard swore, and they looked as though they were friends. Do you perhaps know anything about this, Mr Regis? Are you able to explain it, sir?'

'No, I'm not, madam.' Regis didn't even bat an eyelid. 'There are things in heaven and earth that even philosophers have never dreamed about.'

'Without doubt there are such things,' said Fringilla, nodding her black hair. 'Regarding, nonetheless, whether the Witcher is preparing to depart, do you know anything else? For you see, he hasn't mentioned any such plan, and he usually tells me everything.'

'Of course he does,' Cahir grunted. Fringilla ignored him.

'Mr Regis?'

'No,' the vampire said after a moment's silence. 'No, Madam Fringilla, please worry not. The Witcher doesn't show us any greater affection or confidence than you. He doesn't whisper into our ears any secrets he would keep from you.'

'Where, then—' Fringilla was as composed as granite '—do these revelations about departing come from?'

'Well, it's like our darling Angoulême's catchphrase, which brims with youthful charm.' The vampire didn't bat an eyelid this time either. 'There comes a time when you've either got to shit or free up the shithouse. In other words—'

'Spare the other words,' Fringilla interrupted sharply. 'Those charming ones will suffice.'

Silence reigned for quite some time. The two hens, the black and the speckled one, walked around pecking whatever they could. Angoulême wiped her beetroot-stained nose with her sleeve. The vampire toyed pensively with the wooden peg from the sausage.

‘Thanks to me,’ Fringilla broke the silence, ‘Geralt has come to know Ciri’s lineage, the complexities and secrets of her genealogy, known only to a few. Thanks to me he knows what he had no idea about a year ago. Thanks to me he has information, and information is a weapon. Thanks to me and my magical protection he is safe from enemy scanning, and thus also from assassins. Thanks to me and my magic his knee doesn’t hurt him now and he can bend it. Around his neck is a medallion, made by my magical art, possibly not as good as his original witcher one, but powerful anyway. Thanks to me – and only me – in the spring or summer he will be able to face his enemies in combat, equipped with information, protected, fit, prepared and armed. If anyone present here has done more for Geralt, given him more, may they step forward. I’d be happy to honour them.’

No one said anything. The hens pecked Cahir’s boots, but the young Nilfgaardian paid no attention. ‘Verily,’ he said with a sneer, ‘none of us has given Geralt more than you, m’lady.’

‘How did I know you’d say that?’

‘That’s not the point, Madam Fringilla—’ began the vampire. The sorceress didn’t let him finish.

‘What is the point then?’ she asked aggressively. ‘That he’s with me? That we are joined by affection? That I don’t want him to leave now? That I don’t want a sense of guilt to destroy him? That same sense of guilt, that atonement, which drove you all onto the road?’

Regis said nothing. Cahir didn’t speak either. Angoulême watched, clearly not understanding very much.

‘If it is written in the scrolls of destiny,’ the sorceress said after a moment, ‘that Geralt will win Ciri back, then it shall happen. Irrespective of whether the Witcher goes into the mountains or whether he stays in Toussaint. Destiny catches up with people. And not the other way around. Do you understand that? Do you understand that, Lord Regis Terzieff-Godefroy?’

‘Better than you think, Madam Vigo.’ The vampire twiddled the wooden peg from the sausage. ‘But for me – please forgive me – destiny isn’t a scroll written on by a Great Demiurge, nor the will of heaven, nor the inevitable verdict of some providence or other, but the result of many apparently unconnected facts, events and occurrences. I would be inclined to agree with you that destiny catches up with people . . . and not just people. But the view that it

can't be the other way around doesn't convince me. For such a view is facile fatalism, a paean praising torpor and indolence, a warm eiderdown and the beguiling warmth of a woman's loins. In short, life in a dream. And life, Madam Vigo, may be a dream, may also finish as a dream . . . But it's a dream that has to be dreamed actively. Which is why, Madam Vigo, the road awaits us.'

'Suit yourselves.' Fringilla stood up, almost as suddenly as Milva a moment earlier. 'As you wish! Blizzards, frost and destiny await you in the mountain passes. And the expiation you so sorely search for. Suit yourselves! But the Witcher shall stay here. In Toussaint! With me!'

'I think,' the vampire said calmly, 'that you are wrong, Madam Vigo. The dream that the Witcher is dreaming, I humbly submit with respect, is an enchanting and beautiful one. But every dream, if dreamed too long, turns into a nightmare. And we awake from such dreams screaming.'

*

The nine women sitting around the great round table in Montecalvo Castle were looking fixedly at Fringilla Vigo. At Fringilla, who suddenly began to stammer.

'Geralt left for the Pomerol vineyard on the morning of the eighth of January. And returned . . . at eight in the evening . . . or nine in the morning . . . I don't know . . . I'm not sure . . .'

'Organise your thoughts,' Sheala de Tancarville said gently. 'Please speak more coherently, Madam Vigo. And if part of the story discomfits you, you may simply pass over it.'

*

The speckled hen, treading cautiously on its clawed feet, was walking around the kitchen. The smell of chicken broth was in the air.

The door slammed open. Geralt rushed into the kitchen. He had a bruise and a purple and red scab on his windburned face.

'Come on, company, get packed,' he announced without

unnecessary introductions. ‘We’re riding out! In an hour, and not a moment longer, I want to see you all on the hillock outside the town, by that post. Packed, in the saddle, ready for a long ride and a difficult one.’

That was enough. It was as though they’d been waiting for this news for a long time, as though they’d been in readiness for a long time.

‘I’ll be ready in a flash!’ yelled Milva, leaping up. ‘I’ll be ready in half an hour!’

‘I will too.’ Cahir stood up, discarded a spoon and looked closely at the Witcher. ‘But I’d like to know what it is. A whim? A lovers’ tiff? Or are we really leaving?’

‘We really are. Angoulême, why are you making faces?’

‘Geralt, I—’

‘Don’t worry, I’m not leaving you. I’ve changed my mind. You need looking after, my girl, I can’t let you out of my sight. To horse, I said, get packed and fasten on your saddlebags. And singly, so as not to raise suspicion, outside the town, by the post on the hillock. We’ll meet there in an hour.’

‘Without fail, Geralt!’ yelled Angoulême. ‘At fucking last!’

In the blink of an eye all that was left in the kitchen were Geralt and the speckled hen. And the vampire, who went on calmly slurping chicken broth and dumplings.

‘Are you waiting for a special invitation?’ the Witcher asked coldly. ‘Why are you still sitting here? Rather than loading up Draakul the mule? And saying goodbye to the succubus?’

‘Geralt,’ Regis said calmly, giving himself a second helping from the tureen. ‘I need as long to say goodbye to the succubus as you do to your raven-haired beauty. Assuming you have any intention of saying goodbye to her. And just between you and I, you can send the youngsters to get packed by shouting, hastening and making a fuss. I deserve something else, if only for reasons of age. A few words of explanation, please.’

‘Regis—’

‘An explanation, Geralt. The quicker you begin the better. Yesterday morning, in accordance with your agreement, you met the steward of Pomerol vineyard at the gate . . .’

*

Alcides Fierabras, the black-bearded steward of the Pomerol vineyard he'd met in The Pheasantry on Yule Eve, was waiting for the Witcher at the gate, with a mule, and he in turn was dressed and equipped as though planning to journey far, far away, to the ends of the earth, beyond the Solveiga Gate and the Elskerdeg pass.

'It's close, but as a matter of fact it isn't,' he responded to Geralt's sour remark. 'You are, sire, a visitor from the wide world. Our little Toussaint may seem a backwater to you, you think you can toss a hat from one border to the other, and a dry one, to boot. Well, you're mistaken. It's quite a long way to Pomerol vineyard, which is where we're headed, and if we arrive by noon it'll be a success.'

'So it's a mistake,' the Witcher said dryly, 'for us to be setting off so tardily.'

'Well, maybe it is.' Alcides Fierabras glowered at him and blew into his whiskers. 'But I knew not that you were the kind who was inclined to start at daybreak. For that's rare among grand lords.'

'I'm not a grand lord. Let's be off, steward, sir, let's not waste time on idle chatter.'

'You took the words right out of my mouth.'

They took a shortcut through the town. At first Geralt wanted to protest, afraid of getting stuck in the familiar crowded backstreets. But Steward Fierabras, it turned out, knew better both the town and the times when the streets wouldn't be crowded. They rode quickly and without difficulty.

They entered the town square and passed the scaffold. And the gallows, displaying a hanged man.

'A perilous thing,' the steward nodded, 'to make rhymes and sing airs. Particularly in public.'

'Judgements are harsh here,' said Geralt, realising what it was about. 'Elsewhere you're pilloried at most for a lampoon.'

'Depends who the lampoon's about,' commented Alcides Fierabras soberly. 'And on the rhymes. Our Lady Duchess is good and endearing, but when she's irritated . . .'

‘You can’t stifle a song, as a friend of mine says.’

‘Not a song. But a singer you can, sir.’

They crossed the town and left through the Coopers’ Gate straight into the valley of the Blessure, whose rapids were briskly splashing and foaming. The snow in the fields was only in furrows and hollows, but it was quite cold.

They were passed by a detachment of knights, heading no doubt towards the Pass of Cervantes, to the border watchtower of Vedette. Suddenly all they could see were colourful gryphons, lions, hearts, lilies, stars, crosses, chevrons and other heraldic trifles painted on shields and embroidered on cloaks and caparisons. Hooves drummed, pennants flapped, and a song resounded about the fortunes of a knight and his beloved who married another instead of waiting for him.

Geralt followed the detachment with his eyes. The sight of the knights errant reminded him of Reynart de Bois-Fresnes, who’d just returned from service and was recuperating in the arms of his townswoman, whose husband, a merchant, didn’t return morning or night, probably having been held up somewhere on his journey by swollen rivers, forests full of beasts and other turmoil of the elements. The Witcher wouldn’t have dreamed of tearing Reynart away from his lover’s embrace, but sincerely regretted not postponing the contract with Pomerol vineyard to a later date. He’d grown fond of the knight and missed his company.

‘Let’s ride, Master Witcher.’

‘Let us ride, Master Fierabras.’

They rode upstream along the highway. The Blessure wound and meandered, but there was an abundance of small bridges so they didn’t have to go out of their way.

Steam belched from the nostrils of Roach and the mule.

‘What do you think, Mr Fierabras, will the winter last long?’

‘There were frosts at Samhain. And the saying goes, “When at Samhain there’s ice, dress warm and nice”.’

‘I see. And your vines? Won’t the winter damage them?’

‘It’s been colder.’

They rode on in silence.

‘Look there,’ said Fierabras, pointing. ‘There in the valley lies

the village of Fox Holes. Pots grow in the fields there, wonder of wonders.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Pots. They grow in the bosom of the earth, just like that, a pure trick of nature, without any human help at all. Like spuds or turnips grow elsewhere, in Fox Holes pots grow. Of all shapes and kinds.'

'Indeed?'

'As I live and breathe. For which reason Fox Holes has an agreement with the village of Dudno in Maecht. Because there, so the stories go, the earth bears forth pot lids.'

'Of all shapes and kinds?'

'Precisely, Master Witcher.'

They rode on. In silence. The Blessure sparkled and foamed on the rocks.

*

'And look over yonder, Master Witcher, the ruins of the ancient burgh of Dun Tynne. That burgh was the witness to dreadful scenes, if one is to believe the stories. Walgerius, who they called the Cuckold, killed his faithless wife, her lover, her mother, her sister and her brother. Cruelly and bloodily. And then sat down and cried, no one knows why . . .'

'I've heard about that.'

'Have you been here before?'

'No.'

'Ah. Meaning the story has travelled widely.'

'Precisely, Master Steward.'

*

'And that slender tower, beyond that burgh, over there?' The Witcher pointed. 'What is it?'

‘Over there? That’s a temple.’

‘To which godhead?’

‘Who’d remember that?’

‘Very true. Who would?’

*

Around noon they saw the vineyard, hillsides gently falling towards the Blessure, bristling with evenly pruned vines, now misshapen and woefully leafless. At the top of the highest hill, lashed by the wind, were the soaring towers, squat keep and barbican of Pomerol Castle.

Geralt was interested to see that the road leading to the castle was well-used, no less furrowed by hooves and wheel rims than the main highway. It was evident that people often turned off the highway towards Pomerol Castle. He stopped his questions until he noticed at the foot of the castle a dozen or so wagons with horses and covered in tarpaulins, sturdy and well-made vehicles used for transporting goods long distances.

‘Merchants,’ explained the steward when asked. ‘Wine merchants.’

‘Merchants?’ Geralt was surprised. ‘How’s that? I thought the mountain passes were covered in snow, and Toussaint cut off from the world. How could the merchants get here?’

‘There are no bad roads for a merchant,’ said steward Fierabras gravely. ‘At least not for those who treat their trade seriously. They observe the principle, Master Witcher, that since the end is justified, the means must be found.’

‘Indeed,’ Geralt said slowly. ‘An apposite principle worthy of imitation. In any situation.’

‘Without doubt. But in truth, some of the traders have been stuck here since autumn, unable to leave. But they don’t lose heart. They say, “Why, who cares, in the spring of the year we’ll be here first, before the competition shows up.” With them they call it positive thinking.’

‘It would be hard to fault that principle either,’ nodded Geralt. ‘One thing still interests me, Master Steward. Why do the merchants

stay here, in the middle of nowhere, and not in Beauclair? Isn't the duchess keen on putting them up? Perhaps she disdains merchants?'

'Not at all,' answered Fierabras. 'The Lady Duchess always invites them, while they graciously decline. And stay among the vineyards.'

'Why?'

'Beauclair, they say, is naught but feasts, balls, junkets, boozing and amour. A fellow, they say, only grows idle and stupid, and wastes time, instead of thinking about trade. And one should think about what's really important. About the goal guiding us. Without let up. Not distract your thinking on mere bagatelles. Then, and only then, is the intended goal achieved.'

'Indeed, Mr Fierabras,' the Witcher said slowly. 'I'm content with our shared journey. I've gained a great deal from our conversations. Truly a great deal.'

*

Contrary to the Witcher's expectations they didn't ride to Pomerol Castle, but a little further, to a prominence beyond the valley, where another castle rose, somewhat smaller and much more neglected. The castle was called Zurbarrán. Geralt was thrilled at the prospect of the upcoming work. Zurbarrán, dark and toothed with crumbling crenellations, looked the epitome of an enchanted ruin, and was no doubt teeming with witchcraft, marvels and monsters.

Inside, in the courtyard, instead of marvels and monsters he saw around a dozen people preoccupied with tasks as enchanted as rolling barrels, planing planks and nailing them together. It smelled of fresh timber, fresh lime, stale cat, sour wine and pea soup. The pea soup was served out soon after.

Made hungry by the journey, the wind and the cold, they ate briskly and in silence. They were accompanied by steward Fierabras's subordinate, introduced to Geralt as Szymon Gilka. They were served by two fair-haired women with plaits two ells long. They both sent the Witcher such suggestive glances he decided to hasten to his work.

Szymon Gilka hadn't seen the monster. He only knew of its

appearance second-hand.

‘It was as black as pitch, but when it crawled across the wall, the bricks could be seen through it. Like jelly it was, see, Master Witcher, or some sort of snot, if you’ll excuse me. And it had long thin limbs, and a great number of them, eight or even more. And Yontek stood, stood and watched until at last he had a brainwave and shouted out loud “Die, perish!” and then threw in an exorcism: “Croak, you bastard, by God!” Then the beastie hop, hop, hop! Hopped away and that’s all we saw of it. Bolted into the cave mouth. Then the lads said, “If there’s a monster, give us a bonus for toiling in dangerous conditions, and if you don’t we’ll complain to the guild.” And I says, your guild can kiss my—’

‘When was the monster first seen?’ Geralt interrupted.

‘’Bout three days since. Bit before Yule.’

‘You said—’ the Witcher looked at the steward ‘—before Lammas.’

Alcides Fierabras blushed in the places not covered by his beard. Gilka snorted.

‘Aye, aye, Master Steward, if you want to steward you should come here more often and not just polish a chair with your arse in your office in Beauclair. That’s what I think—’

‘I’m not interested in what you think,’ interrupted Fierabras. ‘We’re talking about the monster.’

‘But I’ve already said it. Everything what happened.’

‘Weren’t there any victims? Was no one attacked?’

‘No. But last year a farmhand disappeared without trace. Some say a monster dragged him into the chasm and finished him off. Others, meanwhile, say it weren’t no monster, but that the farmhand made a cowardly escape off his own bat, because of debts and alley money and main tents. Because he, mark you, played the bones hard, and on top of that was shafting the miller’s daughter, and that miller’s daughter rushed to the courts, and the courts ordered the farmhand to pay main tents—’

‘Did the monster attack anyone else?’ Geralt unceremoniously interrupted his discourse. ‘Did anyone else see it?’

‘No.’

One of the serving women, pouring Geralt more of the local

wine, brushed his ear with her breast, then winked encouragingly.

'Let's go,' said Geralt quickly. 'No point idling time away talking. Take me to these cellars.'

*

Fringilla's amulet, unfortunately, didn't live up to the hopes pinned on it. Geralt didn't believe for a moment that the polished chrysoprase mounted in silver would replace his witcher's wolf medallion. In any case, Fringilla hadn't given any such promises. She had assured him, however – with great conviction – that after melding with the psyche of the wearer the amulet was capable of various things, including warning of danger.

Nonetheless, either Fringilla's spells hadn't worked, or Geralt and the amulet differed in the matter of what constituted danger. The chrysoprase perceptibly twitched when, as they walked to the cellars, they crossed the path of a large, ginger cat sauntering across the courtyard with its tail in the air. Indeed, the cat must have received some kind of signal, for it fled, meowing dreadfully.

When, though, the Witcher went down into the cellars it kept vibrating annoyingly, but in dry, well-ordered and clean vaults where the only danger was the wine in huge barrels. Someone who had lost their self-control and was lying with their mouth open under the spigot would be in danger of serious over-drinking. And nothing else.

The medallion didn't twitch, however, when Geralt abandoned the service part of the cellars and descended down a series of steps and drifts. The Witcher had worked out long before that there were ancient mines under most of the vineyards in Toussaint. When the vines had been planted and started to bear fruit and generate better profits, exploitation of the mines must have ceased, and the mines abandoned, their corridors and galleries partly modified into wine cellars and stores. Pomerol and Zurbarrán castles stood over a disused slate mine. It was riddled with drifts and holes, and a moment's inattention would have been enough for one to end up at the bottom of one of them with a compound fracture. Some of the holes were covered by rotten planks covered with slate powder and thus hardly differed from the floor. An incautious step onto something like that would have been dangerous – so the medallion

ought to have given him a warning. It didn't.

It also didn't give a warning when a vague, grey shape sprang out of a heap of slate waste about ten paces in front of Geralt, scratched the mine floor with its claws, pranced, howled piercingly, then uttered a squeal and a snicker, before tearing off down the corridor and ducking into one of the niches gaping in the wall.

The Witcher swore. The magical trinket reacted to ginger cats, but not to gremlins. He'd have to talk to Fringilla about that, he thought, as he approached the opening into which the creature had vanished.

The amulet twitched powerfully.

About time, he thought. But right away he pondered matters more deeply. The medallion couldn't have been that stupid, after all. The standard, favourite tactic of the gremlin was to flee and then slash its pursuer from an ambush with a surprise blow of its sickle-sharp talons. A gremlin might be waiting there in the darkness and the medallion had signalled it.

He waited a long time, holding his breath, intently focusing his hearing. The amulet lay placid and inert on his chest. A musty, disagreeable stench drifted from the hole. It was deadly silent. And no gremlin could have endured being quiet for so long.

Without a second thought he entered the hole on hands and knees, scraping his back against the jagged rock. He didn't get far.

Something rustled and cracked, the floor gave way, and the Witcher tumbled downwards along with a few hundredweight of sand and stones. Fortunately, it didn't last long, and there wasn't a bottomless chasm under him but an ordinary corridor. He flew like shit off his shovel and smashed with a crunch at the foot of a pile of rotten wood. He shook the dirt from his hair and spat sand, swearing very coarsely. The amulet was twitching ceaselessly, fluttering on his chest like a sparrow inside his jacket. The Witcher stopped just short of tearing it off and flinging it away. First of all, Fringilla would have been livid. Second of all, the chrysoprase was supposed to have other magical abilities. Geralt hoped they would be less unreliable.

When he tried to stand up, he laid a hand on a rounded skull. And realised that what he was lying on wasn't wood at all.

He stood up and quickly inspected the pile of bones. They belonged to people. At the moment of their deaths they had all been

manacled and were most probably naked. The bones were crushed, with bite marks. The victims might not have been alive when they were being bitten. But he couldn't be certain.

He was led out of the drift by a long corridor, which headed onwards as straight as a die. The slate wall had been worked to a smooth finish. It no longer looked like a mine.

He suddenly emerged into an immense cavern whose ceiling vanished into the darkness. In the centre of the cavern was a huge, black, bottomless hole, over which was suspended a dangerously fragile-looking stone bridge.

The jingle of water dripping from the walls echoed. Coldness and unidentifiable stenches drifted up from the chasm. The amulet hung motionless. Geralt set foot on the bridge, intent and focused, trying hard to stay well away from the crumbling balustrade.

There was another corridor on the far side of the bridge. He noticed rusted cressets in the smoothly carved walls. There were also niches, some of which contained small sandstone figures, but the ceaseless dripping of water had melted and eroded them into amorphous lumps. There were also tiles bearing reliefs set into the walls. The tiles were made of more a durable material so the reliefs were still recognisable. Geralt made out a woman with crescent horns, a tower, a swallow, a wild boar, a dolphin and a unicorn.

He heard a voice.

He stopped, holding his breath.

The amulet twitched.

No. It wasn't an illusion, it wasn't the murmur of shifting slate or the echo of dripping water. It was a human voice. Geralt shut his eyes and looked hard. Searching for the source.

The voice, the Witcher could have sworn, was coming from another niche, from behind another small figure, also eroded, but not enough to remove its shapely female curves. This time the medallion did its job. It flashed, and Geralt suddenly saw a reflection of metal in the wall. He grasped the eroded woman in a powerful embrace and twisted hard. There was a grating, and the entire niche revolved on steel hinges, revealing a spiral staircase leading upwards.

The voice again sounded from the top of the stairs. Geralt didn't think twice.

At the top he found a door that opened smoothly and without any grating. Beyond the door was a tiny vaulted room. Four enormous brass pipes with their ends flared like trumpets protruded from the wall. A chair stood in the middle between the trumpet-like openings, and on the chair sat a skeleton. On its pate it had the remains of a biretta slumped down beyond its teeth. It was wearing the rags of fine garments, around its neck was a golden chain, and on its feet curled-toed cordovan slippers, much gnawed by rats.

The sound of a sneeze erupted from one of the horns, so loud and unexpected that the Witcher started. Then someone blew their nose and the sound – intensified by the brass tube – was simply unbearable.

'Bless you,' the pipe sounded. 'Why, how your nose is running, Skellen.'

Geralt shoved the skeleton off the chair, not forgetting to remove and pocket the golden chain. Then he sat down at the surveillance post. At the end of the horn.

*

One of the men being eavesdropped on had a deep, rumbling bass voice. When he spoke, the brass tube vibrated.

'Why, how your nose is running, Skellen. Where did you catch such a chill? And when?'

'Not worth mentioning,' answered the man with the runny nose. 'I caught the damned illness and now it won't subside. As soon as it lets up, it returns. Even magic doesn't help.'

'Perhaps you ought to change your sorcerer?' came another voice, grating like a rusty old hinge. 'For at the moment that Vilgefortz can't boast of much success, can he? I'd say—'

'Leave it,' interjected someone speaking with characteristic long-drawn-out syllables. 'That wasn't why we organised this meeting, here, in Toussaint. At the world's end.'

'At the end of the bloody world!'

'This world's end,' said the man with the cold, 'is the only country I know that doesn't possess its own security service. The only corner of the empire that isn't crawling with Vattier de

Rideaux's agents. They regard this endlessly merry and fuddled duchy as ridiculous, and no one takes it seriously.'

'Little countries like this,' said the one who stretched out his syllables, 'have always been a paradise for spies, and favourite locations for rendezvous. So they also attract counter-intelligence and narks, diverse professional snoopers and eavesdroppers.'

'Perhaps it was like that long ago. But not during the distaff governments, that have prevailed in Toussaint for almost a hundred years. I repeat, we are safe here. No one will track us down or eavesdrop on us. We can, in the guise of merchants, calmly discuss matters so vital to Your Ducal Majesties. So vital to your private fortunes and estates.'

'I despise self-interest, it's as simple as that!' said the one with the grating voice, annoyed. 'And I'm not here for self-interest! I'm concerned only with the good of the empire. And the good of the empire, gentlemen, is a strong dynasty! It will be detrimental and most evil for the empire if some mongrel, rotten fruit of bad blood, the spawn of the corporally and morally sick northern kinglets, ascends to the throne. No, gentlemen. I, de Wett of the de Wetts, shall not look on passively, by the Great Sun, at something like this! Particularly since my daughter had almost been promised—'

'Your daughter, de Wett?' roared the thundering bass. 'What am I to say? I, who supported that pup Emhyr in the fight against the usurper? Indeed, the cadets set off from my residence to storm the palace! Afterwards, the little sneak looked benignly at my Eilan, smiled, paid her compliments, while he was squeezing her tittles behind a curtain, I happen to know. And now what . . . A fresh empress? Such an affront? Such an outrage? The Emperor of the Eternal Empire, who prefers a stray from Cintra to the daughters of ancient houses! What? He's on the throne by my grace, and he dares insult my Eilan? No, I will not abide that!'

'Nor I!' shouted another voice, high and gushing. 'He also maligned me! He discarded my wife for that Cintran stray!'

'As luck would have it,' said the man who drawled his syllables, 'the stray has been dispatched to the next world. So it would appear from Lord Skellen's account.'

'I listened to that account attentively,' said the grating-voiced man, 'and I've come to the conclusion that nothing is certain apart from that the stray vanished. If it has vanished it may reappear once more. It has vanished and reappeared several times since last

year! Indeed, Lord Skellen, you have disappointed us greatly, it's as simple as that. You and that sorcerer, Vilgefortz!'

'This is not the time, Joachim! Not the time to accuse and blame each other, driving a wedge into our unity. We must be a strong, unified force. And a decisive one. For it's not important if the Cintran is alive or not. An emperor who has once abused the ancient families with impunity will do it again! The Cintran is no more? Then he's liable in a few months to present us with an empress from Zerrikania or Zangvebar! No, by the Great Sun, we shall not allow it!'

'We shall not allow it, it's as simple as that! Well said, Ardal! He has dashed the hopes of the Emreis family. Every moment Emhyr is on the throne he damages the empire, simple as that. And there *is* someone to put on the throne. Young Voorhis . . .'

A loud sneeze and then the sound of someone blowing their nose boomed out.

'A constitutional monarchy,' said the sneezer. 'It's high time for a constitutional monarchy, for a progressive political system. And afterwards democracy . . . The government of the people . . .'

'Imperator Voorhis,' repeated the deep voice with emphasis. 'Imperator Voorhis, Stefan Skellen. Who will be married to my Eilan or one of Joachim's daughters. And then I, as the Grand Chancellor of the Crown, and de Wett as the Marshal of Internal Affairs. Unless, as an advocate of some hoi-polloi, you declare your resignation from the title and the position. What?'

'Let's leave aside historical processes,' said the one with the cold, in a conciliatory tone. 'Nothing can stop them anyhow. But for today, Your Grace Grand Chancellor aep Dahy, if I have any reservations about Prince Voorhis it's chiefly because he is a man of iron character, proud and unyielding, whom it is difficult to sway.'

'If one may say something,' said the drawling voice. 'Prince Voorhis has a son, little Morvran. He is a much better candidate. Firstly, he has a more compelling right to the throne, both on the spear and the distaff side. Secondly, he's a child, on whose behalf a council of regents shall govern. Which means us.'

'Foolishness! We shall cope with his father too! We shall find a way!'

'We could plant my wife on him!' suggested the gushing one.

‘Be silent, Lord Broinne. Now is not the time. Gentlemen, it behoves us to debate something else, it’s as simple as that. For I would like to observe that Emhyr var Emreis still reigns.’

‘I’ll say,’ agreed the man with the cold, trumpeting into a handkerchief. ‘He lives and reigns, is well in body and in mind. The second, in particular, cannot be questioned after he expelled from Nilfgaard both Your Graces and your armies – which may have been loyal to you. How do you plan to stage a coup, Duke Ardal, when at any moment you may have to go into battle at the head of the East Army Group? And by now Duke Joachim should probably also be with his army and the Verden Special Operations Group.’

‘Give the acerbity a miss, Stefan Skellen. And don’t make faces that only you think make you look like your new paymaster, the sorcerer Vilgefortz. And know this, Tawny Owl, since Emhyr suspects something, it is you and Vilgefortz who shoulder the blame. Admit it, you’d like to capture the Cintran and trade her to gain favour with Emhyr, wouldn’t you? Now that the girl is dead, there’s nothing to trade with, is there? Emhyr will tear you apart with horses, simple as that. You must accept it with humility. You, and the sorcerer you’ve allied with against us!’

‘We must all accept it, Joachim,’ interjected the bass. ‘It’s time to face facts. We aren’t at all in a better position than Skellen. The circumstances have put us all in the same boat.’

‘But it was Tawny Owl who put us in that boat! We were supposed to act in secret, and now what? Emhyr knows everything! Vattier de Rideaux’s agents are hunting Tawny Owl throughout the empire. And we’ve been sent to war to get rid of ourselves, quite simply!’

‘I’d be pleased about that,’ said the drawling one. ‘I’d take advantage of it. Everyone has had enough of this current war, I can assure you, gentlemen. The army, the common folk, and above all merchants and entrepreneurs. News of a cessation of hostilities will be greeted throughout the empire with great joy, irrespective of the result. And you, gentlemen, as commanders of the armies, have an influence on the result of the war permanently within arm’s reach, so to speak, don’t you? What could be easier than to don a laurel wreath in the event of the victory that ends the war? Or, in the event of defeat, to step forward as men of the moment, intercessors of the negotiations that’ll put an end to the bloodshed?’

‘True,’ said the one with the grating voice a moment later. ‘By

the Great Sun, it's true. You talk sense, Lord Leuvaarden.'

'By sending you to the front,' said the bass, 'Emhyr put a noose around his own neck.'

'Emhyr is still alive, Your Grace,' said the gushing one. 'Is alive and well. Let's not sell the bear's skin before catching the bear.'

'No,' said the bass. 'First let's kill the bear.'

There was a long silence.

'Assassination, then. Death.'

'Death.'

'Death!'

'Death! It's the only solution. As long as he's alive, Emhyr has supporters. When he dies, everyone will support us. The aristocracy will be on our side, for we are the aristocracy and the aristocracy's strength is in its solidarity. A significant part of the army will be with us, particularly the part of the officer corps that remembers Emhyr's purges after the defeat at Sodden. And the people will be on our side—'

'Because the people are ignorant, stupid and easily manipulated,' finished Skellen, blowing his nose. 'It's enough to shout "Hurrah!", make a speech from the steps of the senate, open the prisons and lower taxes.'

'You are absolutely right, Count,' said the one who extended his syllables. 'Now I know why you clamour so for democracy.'

'I warn you, gentlemen,' grated the one called Joachim, 'that it won't go off without a hitch. Our plan depends on Emhyr dying. And we can't close our eyes to the fact that Emhyr has many henchmen, has a corps of internal troops, and a fanatical guard. It won't be easy to hack our way through the Impera Brigade, and they – let's not delude ourselves – will fight to the last man.'

'And here,' declared Skellen, 'Vilgefortz can offer us his help. We won't have to besiege the palace or fight our way through the "Impera". The issue will be solved by one assassin with magical protection. As it was in Tretogor just before the rebellion of the mages on Thanedd.'

'King Radovid of Redania.'

'That's right.'

‘Does Vilgefortz have such an assassin?’

‘He does. In order to prove our reliability, gentlemen, I’ll tell you who it is. The sorceress Yennefer, who we’re holding in prison.’

‘In prison? I heard that Yennefer was Vilgefortz’s accomplice.’

‘She’s his prisoner. She will carry out the assassination like a golem, bewitched, hypnotised and programmed. And then commit suicide.’

‘A bewitched hag doesn’t especially suit me,’ said the one who drew out his syllables, and his reluctance made him draw them out even more. ‘Better would be a hero, an ardent idealist, an avenger —’

‘An avenger,’ Skellen interrupted. ‘That fits perfectly here, Lord Leuvaarden. Yennefer will be avenging the harm caused her by the tyrant. Emhyr tormented and caused the death of her ward, an innocent child. That cruel dictator, that deviant, instead of taking care of the empire and the people, persecuted and tortured a child. For that he won’t escape vengeance . . .’

‘I very much approve,’ Ardal aep Dahy declared.

‘I do, too,’ grated Joachim de Wett.

‘Splendid!’ gushed the Count of Broinne. ‘For outraging other men’s wives the tyrant and degenerate will receive his just deserts. Splendid!’

‘One thing.’ Leuvaarden drawled out his syllables. ‘In order to establish trust, Count Stefan, please reveal to us Lord Vilgefortz’s current place of abode.’

‘Gentlemen, I . . . I’m forbidden . . .’

‘It will be a guarantee. A safeguard of your sincerity and devotion to the cause.’

‘Don’t be afraid of betrayal, Stefan,’ added aep Dahy. ‘None of those present here will betray us. It’s a paradox. Under other conditions perhaps among us there’d be one who would buy his life by betraying the others. But all of us know only too well that we won’t buy anything with perfidy. Emhyr var Emreis doesn’t forgive. He is incapable of forgiving. He has a lump of ice in place of his heart. Which is why he must die.’

Stefan Skellen didn’t hesitate for long.

‘Very well,’ he said. ‘Let it be a safeguard of my sincerity.

Vilgefortz is hiding in . . .'

*

The Witcher, sitting at the openings of the trumpets, clenched his fists so hard they hurt. He pricked up his ears. And racked his memory.

*

The Witcher's doubts regarding Fringilla's amulet were misplaced and were dispelled in a flash. When he entered the large cavern and approached the stone bridge above the black chasm, the medallion jerked and fluttered on his neck, now not like a sparrow, but like a large, strong bird. A rook, for example.

Geralt froze. The amulet calmed down. He didn't make the smallest movement, in order that not a single rustle or even loud breath would confuse his ears. He waited. He knew that on the other side of the chasm, beyond the bridge, was whatever was lurking in the darkness. He couldn't rule out that something might also be hiding behind his back, and that the bridge was meant to be a trap. He had no intention of being caught in it. He waited. Until something happened.

'Greetings, Witcher,' he heard. 'We've been waiting here for you.'

The voice emerging from the gloom sounded strange. But Geralt had heard voices like that before, and he knew them. The voices of creatures not accustomed to communicating using speech. Able to use the apparatus of the lungs, diaphragm, windpipe and voice box, these creatures weren't in complete control of their articulatory apparatus, even when the construction of their lips, palates and tongues were quite similar to those of humans. The words spoken by creatures like that, apart from their strange accent and intonation, were full of sounds unpleasant to the human ear – from hard and nastily barking to hissing and slimily soft.

'We've been waiting for you,' repeated the voice. 'We knew you'd come, lured by rumours. That you'd crawl in here, under the ground, to stalk, pursue, torment and murder. You won't leave here

now. You won't see the sun you've come to love so much again.'

'Show yourself.'

Something moved in the darkness on the far side of the bridge. In one place the gloom seemed to thicken and assume a more or less human form. The creature, it seemed, never remained in the same position or place for a moment, but shifted with the help of swift, nervous and shimmering movements. The Witcher had seen such creatures before.

'A korred,' he stated coldly. 'I might have expected somebody like you here. It's a wonder I haven't happened upon you before.'

'Well, well.' Derision sounded in the restless creature's voice. 'It's dark, but he recognised me. And do you recognise him? And him? And him?'

Three more creatures emerged from the darkness, as noiselessly as ghosts. One of them, lurking behind the korred's back, was also humanoid in shape and general appearance, but was shorter, more hunched and more simian. Geralt knew it was a kilmulis.

The two other monsters, as he had rightly suspected, were skulking in front of the bridge, ready to cut off his retreat if he stepped onto it. The first, on the left, scrabbled its claws like a huge spider, stopped moving and shuffled its numerous legs. It was a pryskirnik. The last creature, roughly resembling a candelabra, seemed to slip straight out from the cracked slate wall. Geralt couldn't guess what it was. A monster like that didn't feature in any witcher tomes.

'I don't want to fight,' he said, counting a little on the fact that the creatures had begun by talking instead of simply leaping on his back from the darkness. 'I don't want to pick a fight with you. But if it comes to it I'll defend myself.'

'We've taken that into account,' hissed the korred. 'Which is why there are four of us. Which is why we lured you here. You've driven us to a dog's life, O roguish witcher. The most beautiful holes in this part of the world, a wonderful place for wintering. We've been wintering here almost since the dawn of time. And now you've come here hunting, you good-for-nothing. Chasing us, stalking us, killing us for money. We're putting an end to it. And to you too.'

'Listen, korred—'

‘Be polite,’ the creature snapped. ‘I can’t stand boorishness.’

‘How should I address—’

‘Mister Schweitzer.’

‘And so, Mister Schweitzer,’ continued Geralt, apparently obediently and meekly, ‘it’s like this. I came here, I admit, as a witcher, with a witcher task. I suggest we pass over the matter. Something has occurred in these vaults, however, which has changed the situation diametrically. I’ve learned something extremely important to me. Something that may change my entire life.’

‘And what results from that?’

‘I must immediately get onto the surface.’ Geralt was a model of calm and patience. ‘I must immediately set off on a long journey, without a moment’s delay. A road which may turn out to be one from which I won’t return. I doubt if I’ll ever be back in these parts —’

‘You want to buy your life like that, witcher?’ hissed Mr Schweitzer. ‘Nothing doing. Your begging is in vain. We have you in our grasp and we won’t let you out of it. We’ll kill you not just for our own sake, but for the sake of our other comrades. For our freedom and your freedom, so to speak.’

‘I won’t just never return here,’ Geralt continued patiently, ‘but I shall cease my witcher activities. I shall never kill any of you again—’

‘You lie! You lie from fear!’

‘But—’ Geralt wasn’t to be interrupted this time either ‘—I must, as I’ve said, get out of here right away. So you have two alternatives to choose from. Firstly, you’ll believe in my sincerity, and I leave you here. Or secondly, I leave here over your dead bodies.’

‘Or thirdly,’ the korred rasped, ‘you’ll be the dead body.’

The Witcher’s sword rasped as he drew it from the scabbard on his back.

‘Not the only one,’ he said unemotionally. ‘Certainly not the only one, Mister Schweitzer.’

The korred was silent for some time. The kilmulis was rocking and rasping behind his back. The pryskirnik was bending and

straightening its limbs. The candelabra was changing its shape. Now it looked like a misshapen Christmas tree with two huge glowing eyes.

'Give us some proof,' the korred said at last, 'of your sincerity and good will.'

'What?'

'Your sword. You claim you'll give up being a witcher. A witcher is his sword. Throw it into the chasm. Or break it. Then we'll let you out.'

For a moment Geralt stood without moving. The water dripping from the walls and ceiling could be heard in the silence. Then slowly, without hurrying, he jammed his sword vertically and deeply into a rocky cleft. And broke the blade with a powerful blow of his boot. The blade shattered with a whine whose echo sounded in the caverns.

Water dripped from the walls, dribbling down them like tears.

'I can't believe it,' the korred said slowly. 'I can't believe anyone would be that stupid.'

They all fell on him, instantly, without any shouting, noises or commands. Mister Schweitzer was the first to lope across the bridge, his claws extended and baring fangs that wouldn't have shamed a wolf.

Geralt let him come closer, then twisted his hips and slashed, hacking through his throat and lower jaw. The next moment he was on the bridge and cutting open the kilmulis with a powerful blow. He crouched and fell to the ground, just in time, and the attacking candelabra flew over his head, barely scratching his jacket with its talons. The Witcher dodged away from the pryskirnik, from its thin legs flashing like scythes. A blow from one of them hit him on the side of the head. Geralt danced, making a feint and encircling himself with a sweeping slash. The pryskirnik leaped again, but missed. It crashed against the barrier and smashed it, tumbling into the chasm with a hail of stones. Until that moment it hadn't emitted the merest sound, but now it howled as it hurtled into the chasm. The howling gradually faded.

They attacked him from two sides – from one the candelabra, from the other the kilmulis, which, although wounded and gushing blood, had managed to stand up. The Witcher jumped onto the balustrade of the bridge, felt shifting stones grinding against each

other and the whole bridge shuddering. He balanced, slipped out of reach of the candelabra's clawed feet and found himself behind the kilmulis's back. The kilmulis didn't have a neck, so Geralt slashed it in the temple. But the monster's skull was like iron, so he had to hack it a second time. He lost too much time doing it.

He was hit in the head, the pain exploded in his skull and eyes. He whirled around, defending himself with a parry, feeling blood pouring from under his hair, trying hard to understand what had happened. He dodged another blow of the claws and understood. The candelabra had changed shape – it was now attacking with its improbably extended legs.

That had a flaw. Now its centre of gravity and balance was disrupted. The Witcher ducked under the legs, drawing closer. The candelabra, seeing what was afoot, fell on its back like a cat, sticking out its rear legs, which were just as taloned as its fore legs. Geralt jumped over it, slashing mid-leap. He felt the blade cut flesh. He hunched up, turned and cut once more, dropping to his knee. The creature screamed and threw its head forward violently, savagely snapping its massive teeth just in front of the Witcher's chest. Its huge eyes shone in the darkness. Geralt shoved it back with a powerful blow of the sword pommel and cut from close range, removing half its skull. Even without that half the strange creature, which didn't feature in any witcher tomes, still snapped its teeth for a good few seconds. Then it died, with a terrible, almost human sigh.

The korred was twitching convulsively in a pool of blood.

The Witcher stood over it.

'I cannot believe,' he said, 'that someone could be so stupid as to be taken in by such a simple illusion as the one with the broken sword.'

He wasn't certain if the korred was conscious enough to understand. But actually he didn't care.

'I warned you,' he said, wiping off the blood that was pouring down his cheek. 'I warned you I had to get out of here.'

Mister Schweitzer trembled violently, wheezed, whistled and gnashed his teeth. Then fell silent and stopped moving.

Water dripped from the walls and ceiling.

*

‘Are you satisfied, Regis?’

‘I am now.’

‘In that case . . .’ The Witcher stood. ‘Go on. Run off and pack. And be quick.’

‘It won’t take me very long. *Omnia mea mecum porto*.’

‘What?’

‘I have very little luggage.’

‘So much the better. Outside the town in half an hour.’

‘I’ll be there.’

*

He’d underestimated her. She caught him in the act. He only had himself to blame. Rather than rushing, he could have ridden around the back of the palace and left Roach in the larger stables there, the one for the errant knighthood, staff and servants, and where his company also kept their horses. He hadn’t done that, but had used the ducal stables owing to haste and habit. And he might have guessed there would be somebody in the stable who would inform on him.

She was walking from stall to stall, kicking the straw. She was wearing a short lynx-skin coat, a white satin blouse, a black equestrian skirt and high boots. The horses snorted, sensing the anger emanating from her.

‘Well, well,’ she said on seeing him, flexing the riding crop she was holding. ‘We’re bolting! Without saying goodbye. For the letter which is probably lying on my table is no farewell. Not after what we had. I imagine some extremely important arguments explain and justify your behaviour.’

‘They do. Sorry, Fringilla.’

‘“Sorry, Fringilla”,’ she repeated, sneering furiously. ‘How curt, how economical, how unpretentious, with such attention to style. The letter you left for me, I’m absolutely certain, is doubtless edited

just as elegantly. Without excess lavishness as regards ink.'

'I must ride,' he uttered. 'You can guess why. And for whose sake. Please forgive me. I intended to flee stealthily and silently, because . . . I didn't want you to try and come after me.'

'Your fears were groundless,' she drawled, bending the crop. 'I wouldn't have gone after you even if you'd asked me, grovelling at my feet. Oh, no, Witcher. Ride alone, die alone, freeze alone in the mountain passes. I have no obligations towards Ciri. And towards you? Do you know how many have begged for what you had? And for what you're now contemptuously rejecting, tossing away?'

'I'll never forget you.'

'Oh,' she hissed. 'You don't know how much I feel like making sure you really won't. Even if not using magic, then using this whip!'

'You won't do it.'

'You're right, I won't. I wouldn't be able to. I shall behave as befits a scorned and spurned lover. Classically. I shall walk away with my head high. With dignity and pride. Swallowing back the tears. Then I'll howl into a pillow. And then I'll bed another!'

By the end she was almost screaming.

He said nothing. Neither did she.

'Geralt,' she said finally, in quite a different voice. 'Stay with me.

'I think I love you,' she said, seeing he was delaying his answer. 'Stay with me. I implore you. I've never asked anyone nor thought I ever would. But I ask you.'

'Fringilla,' he answered after a while. 'You're a woman a man can only dream about. My fault, my only fault, is that I don't have the nature of a dreamer.'

'You are,' she said a moment later, biting her lip, 'like an angler's hook, which once it's stuck in, can only be pulled out with blood and flesh. Well, I've only got myself to blame. I knew what I was doing, playing around with a dangerous toy. Luckily, I also know how to cope with the effects. In that respect I have an advantage over the rest of the female species.'

He didn't comment.

'In any case,' she added, 'a broken heart, although it hurts

greatly, a lot more than a broken arm, heals much, much more quickly.'

He didn't comment that time, either. Fringilla contemplated the bruise on his cheek.

'How was my amulet? Does it work well?'

'It's quite simply wonderful. Thank you.'

She nodded.

'Where are you riding to?' she asked in a completely different voice and tone. 'What did you find out? You know where Vilgefortz is hiding, don't you?'

'Yes. Don't ask me to tell you where that is. I won't.'

'I'll buy that information. Quid pro quo.'

'Oh, yes?'

'I have information,' she repeated, 'that is valuable. And to you quite simply invaluable. I'll sell it to you in exchange for—'

'For peace of mind,' he finished, looking her in the eyes. 'For the trust I placed in you. A moment ago there was talk of love. And now we're starting to talk of trade?'

She was silent for a long while. Then she hit her boot violently, hard, with the riding crop.

'Yennefer,' she quickly recited, 'the one whose name you called me several times in the night, in moments of ecstasy, never betrayed you, nor Ciri. She was never an accomplice of Vilgefortz. In order to rescue Cirilla, she fearlessly took an exceptional risk. She suffered a defeat, and fell into Vilgefortz's hands. She was certainly tortured into the attempts at scanning that took place last autumn. It's not known if she's alive. I don't know any more. I swear.'

'Thank you, Fringilla.'

'Now go.'

'I trust you,' he said, without moving. 'And I shall never forget what was between us. I trust you, Fringilla. I won't stay with you, but I think I loved you too . . . In my own way. Please keep utterly secret what you are about to find out. Vilgefortz's hideout is in—'

'Wait,' she interrupted. 'You'll tell me later, you'll disclose it later. Now, before you leave, say goodbye to me. The way you

ought to say goodbye. Not with paltry letters, not with mumbled apologies. Say goodbye to me the way I desire.'

She took off her lynx fur coat and tossed it down on a pile of straw. She violently tore off her blouse, beneath which she was naked. She fell onto the fur, pulling him after her, onto her. Geralt caught her by the nape of her neck, lifted up her skirt, and suddenly realised there would be no time to take his gloves off. Fringilla was fortunately not wearing gloves. Or knickers. Even more fortunately she wasn't wearing spurs either, for soon after the heels of her riding boots were literally everywhere. It doesn't bear thinking what might have happened had she been wearing spurs.

When she screamed he kissed her. Stifling the scream.

The horses, scenting their furious passion, neighed, stamped and thumped against their stalls until hay and dust fell from the ceiling.

*

'Rhys-Rhun citadel, in Nazair, by Lake Muredach,' Fringilla Vigo ended triumphantly. 'That's where Vilgefortz's hide-out is. I got it out of the Witcher before he rode away. We have enough time to overtake him. He has no chance of getting there before April.'

The nine women gathered in the columned chamber of Montecalvo Castle nodded, favouring Fringilla with looks of great appreciation.

'Rhys-Rhun,' repeated Philippa Eilhart, baring her teeth in a predatory smile and playing with the sardonyx cameo brooch fastened to her dress. 'Rhys-Rhun in Nazair. Well, see you soon, Master Vilgefortz . . . See you soon!'

'When the Witcher gets there,' hissed Keira Metz, 'he'll find rubble which by then won't even be stinking of ash.'

'Or dead bodies.' Sabrina Glevissig smiled enchantingly.

'Well done, Miss Vigo,' nodded Sheala. 'Over three months in Toussaint . . . But it was probably worth it.'

Fringilla Vigo's eyes swept over the sorceresses sitting at the table. Over Sheala, Philippa and Sabrina Glevissig. Over Keira Metz, Margarita Laux-Antille and Triss Merigold. Over Francesca

Findabair and Ida Emean, whose eyes, ringed with garish elven makeup, expressed absolutely nothing. Over Assire var Anahid, whose eyes expressed anxiety and concern.

'It was,' she admitted.

Quite sincerely.

*

The sky slowly changed from dark blue to black. An icy gale blew among the vineyards. Geralt fastened his wolf-skin cloak and wrapped a woollen scarf around his neck. And felt wonderful. As usual, love expressed had raised him up to the peak of his physical, psychological and moral powers, had erased all traces of doubt, and his thinking was clear and intense. He only regretted he would be deprived of that wonderful panacea for a long time.

The voice of Reynart de Bois-Fresnes startled him out of his reverie.

'Bad weather's coming,' said the knight errant, looking eastwards, from where the gale was blowing. 'Make haste. If snow comes with that wind, if it catches you on the Malheur pass, you'll be stuck in a trap. And then pray for a thaw to all the gods you venerate, know and understand.'

'We understand.'

'The Sansretour will guide you for the first few days. Keep to the river. You'll pass a trapper's manufactory and reach a place where a right-bank tributary flows into the Sansretour. Don't forget: a right-bank tributary. Its course will indicate the way to the Malheur pass. Should you with God's will conquer Malheur, don't hurry too much, for you'll still have the Sansmerci and Mortblanc passes ahead of you. Should you conquer both of them, you'll descend into the Sudduth valley. Sudduth has a warm microclimate, almost like Toussaint. Were it not for the poor soil they would plant vines there.'

He broke off, embarrassed by the reproachful gazes.

'Indeed,' he hemmed. 'To the point. At the mouth of the Sudduth lies the small town of Caravista. My cousin, Guy de Bois-Fresnes, lives there. Visit him and mention me. Should it turn out my cousin's died or gone insane, remember the direction of your

journey is the Mag Deira plain, the valley of the River Sylte. Further on, Geralt, it's according to the maps you copied at the town cartographer's. Since we're on the subject of cartography, I don't exactly understand why you asked me about some castles or other —'

'Better forget about that, Reynart. Nothing like that took place. You heard nothing, saw nothing. Even if they torture you. Understand?'

'I do.'

'A rider,' warned Cahir, getting his unruly stallion under control. 'A rider's galloping towards us from the palace.'

'If there's only one,' Angoulême grinned, stroking the battle-axe hanging from her saddle, 'it's small beer.'

The rider turned out to be Dandelion, riding like a bat out of hell. Astonishingly the horse turned out to be Pegasus, the poet's gelding, which didn't like galloping and was not in the habit of doing so.

'Well,' said the troubadour, panting as though *he* had been carrying the gelding and not the other way around. 'Well, I made it. I was afraid I wouldn't catch you.'

'Just don't say you're finally riding with us.'

'No, Geralt.' Dandelion lowered his head. 'I'm not. I'm staying here in Toussaint with my Little Weasel. I mean with Anarietta. But I couldn't not say farewell to you. Or wish you a safe journey.'

'Thank the duchess for everything. And make excuses as to why it's so sudden and without a farewell. Explain it somehow.'

'You took a knightly vow and that's that. Everybody in Toussaint, including the Little Weasel, will understand, and here . . . Have it. Let it be my contribution.'

'Dandelion.' Geralt took a heavy pouch from the poet. 'We aren't suffering from a shortage of money. It's not necessary . . .'

'Let it be my contribution.' Repeated the troubadour. 'Cash always comes in useful. And besides, it isn't mine, I took those ducats from the Little Weasel's private coffer. Why are you looking like that? Women don't need money. I mean what for? They don't drink, they don't play dice, and they're bloody women themselves. Well, farewell! Be off, because I'll burst into tears. And when it's all over you're to stop by Toussaint on your way back and tell me

everything. And I want to hug Ciri. Do you promise, Geralt?'

'I promise.'

'So, farewell.'

'Wait.' Geralt wheeled his horse around and rode closer to Pegasus. He took a letter surreptitiously from his bosom. 'Make sure this letter reaches—'

'Fringilla Vigo?'

'No. Dijkstra.'

'Are you serious, Geralt? And how do you propose I do it?'

'Find a way. I know you will. And now farewell. Give us a hug, you old fool.'

'Give us a hug, comrade. I'll be looking out for you.'

They watched him ride away and saw him trotting towards Beauclair.

The sky darkened.

'Reynart.' The Witcher turned around in the saddle. 'Ride with us.'

'No, Geralt,' replied Reynart de Bois-Fresnes a moment later. 'I'm errant. But not asinine.'

*

There was unusual excitement in the great columned chamber of Montecalvo Castle. The subtle chiaroscuro of candelabras that usually predominated there was replaced by the milky brightness of a huge, magical screen. The image on the screen shimmered, flickered and vanished, intensifying the excitement and tension. And anxiety.

'Ha,' said Philippa Eilhart, smiling predatorily. 'Pity I can't be there. A little action would do me good. And a little adrenaline.'

Sheala de Tancarville looked at her sarcastically, but didn't say anything. Francesca Findabair and Ida Emean magically stabilised the image, and enlarged it to fill the entire wall. They clearly saw black mountain peaks against a dark blue sky, stars reflecting in the surface of a lake, and the dark and angular shape

of a castle.

'I still can't be sure,' said Sheala, 'if it wasn't a mistake to entrust the command of the strike force to Sabrina and young Metz. They broke Keira's ribs on Thanedd, she may want to get revenge. And Sabrina . . . Why, she loves action and adrenaline a little too much. Right, Philippa—'

'We've discussed that already.' Philippa cut her off, and her voice was as acidic as plum pickle. 'We've established what there was to establish. No one will be killed without an absolute need. Sabrina and Keira's force will enter Rhys-Rhun as quiet as mice, on tiptoe, hush-hush. They'll take Vilgefortz alive, without a single scratch, without a single bruise. We agreed on that. Although I still think we ought to make an example. So that those in the castle who survive the night will awake screaming to the end of their days when they dream of this night.'

'Revenge,' said the sorceress from Kovir, 'is the delight of mediocre, weak and petty minds.'

'Perhaps,' agreed Philippa, with an apparently indifferent smile. 'But that doesn't stop it being a delight.'

'Let's drop it.' Margarita Laux-Antille raised a goblet of sparkling wine. 'I suggest we drink to the health of Madam Fringilla Vigo, thanks to whose efforts Vilgefortz's hide-out was discovered. Solid, exemplary work indeed, Madam Fringilla.'

Fringilla bowed, responding to the salutes. She noticed something like mockery in Philippa's black eyes, and dislike in the azure gaze of Triss Merigold. She couldn't decipher the smiles of Francesca and Sheala.

'They are beginning,' said Assire var Anahid, pointing at the magical image.

They settled themselves more comfortably. Philippa dimmed the lights with a spell in order for them to see better. They saw swift, black shapes peeling off from the rocks, as silent and agile as bats. Saw them flying low and then plummeting onto the battlements and machicolations of Rhys-Rhun Castle.

'I probably haven't had a broom between my legs for a century,' murmured Philippa. 'I'll soon forget how to fly.'

Sheala, staring at the screen, quietened her with an impatient hiss.

Fire flashed briefly in the windows of the black castle complex. Once, twice, thrice. They knew what it was. The bolted doors and hasps splintered asunder under the impact of ball lightning.

'They're inside,' said Assire var Anahid softly. She was the only one not observing the screen on the wall, but was staring at a crystal ball on the table. 'The strike force is inside. But something's not right. Not how it's meant to be . . .'

Fringilla felt the blood flowing from her heart to her belly. She now knew what wasn't right.

'Madam Glevissig,' reported Assire, 'is opening the direct telecommunicator.'

The space between the columns in the hall suddenly lit up. In the materialising oval they saw Sabrina Glevissig in male attire, her hair tied on her forehead with a chiffon scarf and her face blackened with stripes of camouflage pigment. Behind the sorceress's back could be seen dirty stone walls, and on them shreds of rags, once tapestries. Sabrina extended a gloved hand hung with long strands of cobwebs towards them.

'The only thing there's plenty of here,' she said, gesticulating wildly, 'is this! Just this! Bloody hell, what stupidity . . . What a fiasco . . .'

'Make yourself clearer, Sabrina!'

'Make what clearer?' yelled the Kaedwenian witch. 'What could be clearer here? Can't you see? This is Rhys-Rhun Castle! It's empty! Empty and dirty! It's a sodding empty ruin! There's nothing here! Nothing!'

Keira Metz emerged from behind Sabrina's shoulder, looking like a hellish fiend in her facial camouflage.

'There isn't and there hasn't been anyone in this castle,' she said calmly, 'for at least fifty years. For fifty years there hasn't been a living soul here, not counting the spiders, rats and bats. We made the landing in completely the wrong place.'

'Have you made sure it isn't an illusion?'

'Do you take us for children, Philippa?'

'Listen, both of you.' Philippa Eilhart nervously ran her fingers through her hair. 'Tell the mercenaries and novices they were on manoeuvres. Pay them and return. Return at once. And put a brave

face on it, do you hear? Put a brave face on it!'

The oval of the communicator went out. Only the image on the wall screen remained. Rhys-Rhun Castle against the black sky, twinkling with stars. And the lake, with the stars reflected in it.

Fringilla Vigo looked down at the table. She felt as though the pounding blood would soon burst her cheeks.

'I . . . really,' she said at last, unable to bear the silence in the columned hall of Montecalvo Castle. 'I . . . really don't under-stand . . .'

'But I do,' said Triss Merigold.

'That castle . . .' said Philippa deep in thought, not paying any attention to her comrades. 'That castle . . . Rhys-Rhun . . . will have to be destroyed. Utterly annihilated. And when legends and tales begin to be made up about this whole debacle, it will be necessary to subject them to scrupulous censorship. Do you understand what I mean, ladies?'

'Only too well,' nodded Francesca Findabair, who had been silent up until that moment. Ida Emean, also silent, took the liberty of making quite an ambiguous snort.

'I . . .' Fringilla Vigo still seemed stunned. 'I truly can't comprehend . . . how it could have happened . . .'

'Oh,' said Sheala de Tancarville after a very long silence. 'It's nothing serious, Miss Vigo. No one's perfect.'

Philippa snorted softly. Assire var Anahid sighed and raised her eyes towards the plafond.

'After all,' added Sheala, pouting her lips, 'it's befallen all of us at some time. Each of us, sitting here, has been cheated, taken advantage of, and made a laughing stock of by some man, at some time.'

‘I love you, I’m charmed by your lovely form:
And if you’re not willing, I’ll have to use force.’
‘Father, my Father, he’s gripped me at last!
The Erlkönig’s hurting me, holding me fast! –

Johann Wolfgang Goethe

Everything has been, everything has happened. And everything has already been written about.

Vysogota of Corvo

CHAPTER FIVE

A scorching, stuffy afternoon fell on the forest, and the lake surface, which had been as dark as jade shortly before, now flashed gold and lit up with reflections. Ciri had to shield her eyes with her hand. The glare reflected in the water blinded her, and she felt pain in her eyeballs and temples.

She rode through the lakeside thicket and urged Kelpie into the lake, deep enough for the water to reach above the mare's knees. The water was so clear that even from the height of the saddle Ciri could see the colourful mosaic of the bottom, the mussels and the swaying, feathery pond weed in the shadow cast by the horse. She saw a small crayfish striding proudly among the pebbles.

Kelpie whinnied. Ciri jerked the reins and rode into the shallows, but not onto the bank, because it was sandy and covered in rocks, and that ruled out riding fast. She led the mare right to the water's edge so she could walk on the hard gravel at the bottom. And almost at once urged Kelpie into a trot. She was as fleet as a real trotter, trained not to be ridden but to pull a gig or a landau. But she soon found that trotting was too slow. A kick of Ciri's heels and a shout urged the mare into a gallop. They raced among splashes of water flying all around, sparkling in the sun like drops of molten silver.

When she saw the tower, she didn't slow down yet not even the merest snort was audible in Kelpie's breathing, and her gallop was still light and effortless.

She hurtled into the courtyard at full speed, with a clatter of hooves, and pulled the mare up so suddenly that for a moment Kelpie's horseshoes slid over the flags with a long-drawn-out grinding sound. She stopped just before the elf-women waiting at the foot of the tower. Right in front of their noses. She felt satisfaction, for two of them, usually unmoving and dispassionate, now stepped back involuntarily.

'Never fear,' she snorted. 'I won't ride you down! Unless I mean to.'

The elves recovered quickly, their faces once more smoothed

by calm, and nonchalant indifference returned to their eyes.

Ciri dismounted, or rather flew from the saddle. There was defiance in her eyes.

'Bravo,' said a fair-haired elf with a triangular-shaped face, emerging from the shadow under an arcade. 'A nice display, Loc'hlaith.'

He had greeted her like that the first time, when she had entered the Tower of the Swallow and found herself among the blooming spring. But that was long ago and things like that had stopped making any impression on her at all.

'I'm no Lady of the Lake,' she barked. 'I'm a prisoner here! And you're my gaolers! And I may as well speak bluntly! There you go!' She threw the reins to one of the elves. 'The horse needs rubbing down. Water her when she cools. And above all she must be looked after!'

The fair-haired elf smiled slightly.

'Indeed,' he said, watching the elf-women wordlessly lead the mare to the stable. 'You're a wronged prisoner here, and they are your harsh gaolers. It's quite plain.'

'Let them have a taste of their own medicine!' She stood akimbo, stuck up her nose and looked him boldly in the eyes, which were pale blue like aquamarines and quite gentle. 'I'm treating them as they treat me! And a prison's a prison.'

'You astonish me, Loc'hlaith.'

'And you treat me like a fool. And you haven't even introduced yourself.'

'I apologise. I am Crevan Espane aep Caomhan Macha. I am, if you know what it means, Aen Saevherne.'

'I do.' She looked at him with an admiration that she was unable to hide in time. 'A Knowing One. An elven sorcerer.'

'I could be called that. For convenience I use the alias Avallac'h, and you may address me as such.'

'Who told you—' she became sullen '—that I wish to address you at all? Knowing One or not, you're a gaoler, and I'm—'

'—a prisoner,' he finished sarcastically. 'You mentioned it. A badly treated prisoner to boot. You're probably forced to take rides around here, you wear a sword on your back as a punishment,

likewise the elegant and quite rich apparel, so much more elegant and clean than what you arrived here in. But in spite of these dreadful conditions you haven't given in. You get your revenge for the harm you've received with brusqueness. With great courage and enthusiasm you also smash looking glasses which are works of art.'

She blushed, very cross with herself.

'Oh,' he said quickly, 'you may smash looking glasses to your heart's content. After all, they're only objects, and who cares if they were made seven hundred years ago? Would you like to promenade with me along the lake shore?'

The wind that rose slightly tempered the heat. Furthermore, the tall trees and the tower cast shadows. The water in the bay was a dull green; densely garlanded by water lilies and piled up with spherical yellow flowers, it almost resembled a meadow. Moorhens, gargling and nodding their red beaks, cruised briskly among the leaves.

'That mirror . . .' Ciri mumbled, twisting a heel in the wet gravel. 'I'm sorry about that. I lost my temper. And that's that.'

'Ah.'

'They disrespect me. Those elf-women. When I talk to them they pretend they can't understand. And when they do talk to me, they speak incomprehensibly on purpose. They humiliate me.'

'You speak our tongue fluently,' he explained calmly. 'But it's still a foreign language to you. Besides, you use *hen llinge*, and they use *ellylon*. The differences are slight, but do nonetheless exist.'

'I understand *you*. Every word.'

'When I talk to you I use *hen llinge*. The language of the elves from your world.'

'And you?' She turned around. 'What world are you from? I'm not a child. It's enough to look up at night. There isn't a single constellation I know. This world isn't mine. It isn't my place. I entered it by accident. And I want to leave. To get away.'

She bent over, picked up a stone and made a movement as though meaning to throw it absent-mindedly into the lake, towards the moorhens. She abandoned her plans under his gaze.

'Before I've ridden a furlong,' she said, not hiding her resentment, 'I'm at the lake. And I can see the tower. Regardless of which direction I ride, when I turn around there's always the lake

and the tower. Always. There's no way of getting away from it. So it's a prison. Worse than a dungeon, than an oubliette, than a chamber with a barred window. Do you know why? Because it's more humiliating. *Ellylon* or not, it angers me when I'm sneered at and shown disrespect. Yes, yes, there's no sense making faces. You've also slighted me, you also mock me. And you're surprised that I'm furious?'

'As a matter of fact I am.' He opened his eyes wide. 'Inordinately.'

She sighed and shrugged.

'I entered the tower long ago,' she said, trying to stay calm. 'I happened upon another world. You were waiting for me, sitting and playing the pipes. You were even astonished at how long I'd delayed my arrival. You called me by my name, and only afterwards began that "Lady of the Lake" nonsense. Then you vanished without a word of explanation. Leaving me in prison. Call it what you like. I call it spiteful and malicious contempt.'

'Zireael, it's only been eight days.'

'Ah,' she scowled. 'You mean I'm lucky? Because it might have been eight weeks? Or eight months? Or eight . . .'

She fell silent.

'You've strayed far from Lara Dorren,' he said softly. 'You've lost your inheritance, you've lost the bond with your blood. No wonder the women don't understand you, nor you them. You don't just talk differently, you *think* differently. With quite different frames of reference. What is eight days or eight weeks? Time means nothing.'

'Very well!' she screamed in anger. 'I agree I'm not a wise elf, I'm a stupid human. To me time does mean something. I count the days, I even count the hours. And I've reckoned that many of both the first and the second have passed. I don't want anything from you now, I'll make do without explanations, it doesn't bother me why it's spring here, why there are unicorns here, and different constellations in the night sky. I'm not at all interested how you know my name and how you knew I'd turn up here. I only want one thing. To return home. To my world. To people! People who think like me! Using the same frames of reference!'

'You'll return to them. In some time.'

‘I want to go now!’ she yelled. ‘Not in some time! For time here is an eternity! What right do you have to hold me here? Why can’t I leave this place? I came here myself! Of my own will! You don’t have any right!’

‘You came here yourself,’ he calmly confirmed. ‘But not of your own will. You were led here by destiny, helped a little by us. For you have been long awaited. Very long. Even according to our reckoning.’

‘I don’t understand any of that.’

‘We’ve waited long.’ He paid no attention to her. ‘Fearing but one thing: whether you’d be able to enter here. You were. You proved your blood, your lineage. And that means that your place is here, not among the Dh’oine. You are the daughter of Lara Dorren aep Shiadhal.’

‘I am Pavetta’s daughter! I don’t even know who your Lara is!’

He snorted, but very slightly, almost imperceptibly.

‘In that case,’ he said, ‘it’d be best if I explained to you who “my” Lara is. Since time is short, I’d prefer to begin the explanations en route. But why, for the sake of a foolish demonstration you’ve almost run the mare into the ground—’

‘Into the ground? Ha! You don’t yet know how much that mare can endure. Where are we going?’

‘If you permit I’ll also explain that en route.’

*

Ciri halted Kelpie, who was now wheezing, recognising that a breakneck gallop was senseless and of no use at all.

Avallac’h hadn’t lied. Here, on open ground, on meadows and moors dotted with menhirs, the same force was active as around Tor Zireael. You could try riding at full speed in any direction, but after a furlong or so an invisible force made you ride around in a circle.

Ciri patted the wheezing Kelpie on her neck, and looked at the small group of elves who rode at an easy pace. A moment earlier, when Avallac’h had finally told her what they wanted from her, she had launched into a gallop, to escape from them, to leave them as

far as possible behind her – they and their impudent, unthinkable task.

Now, though, they were in front of her again. At a distance of more or less a furlong.

Avallac'h hadn't lied. There was no escape.

The only good thing the gallop had brought was that it had cooled her head, chilled her rage. She was now much calmer. But nonetheless she was still shaking with anger.

What a mess I'm in, she thought. *Why did I go into the Tower?*

She shuddered, thinking back. Recalling Bonhart riding after her across the ice on his grey horse, muzzle foaming.

She shuddered even more intensely. And calmed down.

I'm alive, she thought, looking around. *It's not the end of the battle. Death will end the fight, everything else only interrupts it. They taught me that at Kaer Morhen.*

She urged Kelpie to a walk and then, seeing the mare was gamely raising her head, to a trot. She rode down an avenue of menhirs. The grass and heather reached her stirrups.

She quite quickly caught up with Avallac'h and the three elf-women. The Sage, smiling slightly, turned his aquamarine eyes enquiringly on her.

'Please, Avallac'h.' She cleared her throat. 'Tell me it was a dismal joke.'

Something like a shadow passed over his face.

'I'm not accustomed to joking,' he said. 'And since you consider it a joke, I'll take the liberty repeating it with due gravity: we want to have your child, O Swallow, daughter of Lara Dorren. Only when you bear it will we permit you to leave here, to return to your world. The choice, naturally, is yours. I presume your reckless dash helped you to reach a decision. What is your answer?'

'My answer is no,' she replied firmly. 'Categorically and absolutely no. I don't agree and that's that.'

'Tough luck,' he shrugged. 'I admit I am disappointed. But why, it's your choice.'

'How can you demand something like that at all?' she cried in a trembling voice. 'How could you dare? By what right?'

He looked at her calmly. Ciri also felt the gaze of the elf-women on her.

'I believe,' he said, 'that I told you the story of your family in detail. You seemed to understand. Thus your question astonishes me. We have the right to demand, and we can, O Swallow. Your father, Cregennan, took a child from us. You will give us one back. You will repay the debt. It seems just and logical to me.'

'My father . . . I don't remember my father, but he was called Duny. Not Cregennan. I've already told you!'

'And I replied that those few ridiculous human generations are meaningless to us.'

'But I don't want to!' yelled Ciri so loudly that the mare skittered beneath her. 'I don't want to, understand? I don't waaaant tooooooo! The thought of a bloody parasite being implanted in me is sickening. I feel nauseous when I think that that parasite will grow inside me, that—'

She broke off, seeing the faces of the elf-women. Two of them expressed boundless astonishment. The third boundless odium. Avallac'h coughed meaningfully.

'Let's ride on a little and talk in private,' he said coolly. 'Your views, O Swallow, are a little too radical to be expressed in front of witnesses.'

She did as he asked. They rode on silence for a long while.

'I'll escape from you.' Ciri spoke first. 'You won't keep me here against my will. I escaped from the Isle of Thanedd, I escaped from the Trappers and the Nilfgaardians, I escaped from Bonhart and Tawny Owl. And I'll escape from you. I'll find a way to outwit your witchcraft.'

'I thought,' he replied a moment later, 'that you cared more about your friends. About Yennefer. And Geralt.'

'You know about that?' she gasped in amazement. 'Well, yes. True. You are a Knowing One! So you ought to know I'm thinking about them. There, in my world, they're in danger now, at this moment. And yet you want to imprison me here . . . Well, for at least nine months. You see for yourself I don't have a choice. I understand it's important for you – a child, that Elder Blood – but I cannot. I simply cannot.'

The elf said nothing for a while. He rode so close he was

touching her knee.

'The choice, as I said, belongs to you. You ought, however, to know something. It would be dishonest to conceal if from you. You can't escape from here, O Swallow. So if you refuse to cooperate you will stay here forever, and will never see your friends or your world again.'

'That's despicable blackmail!'

'If, though,' he continued, unconcerned by her yelling, 'you agree to what we ask, we'll prove to you that time is meaningless.'

'I don't understand.'

'Time passes differently here than there. If you do us this favour, we shall return the favour. We shall enable you to regain the time you will lose among us here. Among the Folk of the Alder.'

She said nothing, her eyes fixed on Kelpie's black mane. *Use delaying tactics*, she thought. As Vesemir said in Kaer Morhen *when they're about to hang you, ask for a glass of water. You never know what might happen before they bring it.*

One of the elf-women suddenly screamed and whistled.

Avallac'h's horse neighed, and danced on the spot. The elf brought it under control and shouted something to the elf-women. Ciri saw one of them draw a bow from a leather quiver hanging from her saddle. She stood up in the stirrups and shielded her eyes with a hand.

'Keep calm,' said Avallac'h sharply. Ciri gasped.

Some unicorns were galloping over the moor about two hundred paces from them. An entire herd, at least thirty head.

Ciri had seen unicorns before. Sometimes, particularly at dawn, they came up to the lake at the foot of the Tower of the Swallow. They had never let her approach them, though. But had vanished like ghosts.

The leader of the herd was a great stallion with a strange, reddish coat. He suddenly stopped, neighed piercingly and reared up. He trotted on his hind hooves, waving his fore hooves in the air in a way that would have been absolutely impossible for any horse.

Ciri noted in amazement that Avallac'h and the three elf-women were humming, singing in chorus some strange, monotonous tune.

Who are you?

She shook her head.

Who are you? The question sounded again in her skull, pounded in her temples. The elves' song suddenly rose a tone in pitch. The ruddy unicorn neighed and the entire herd answered in kind. The earth trembled as they galloped away.

The song of Avallac'h and the elf-women broke off. Ciri saw the Knowing One furtively wiping the sweat from his brow. The elf glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, understanding that she had seen.

'Not everything here is as pretty as it looks,' he said dryly. 'Not everything.'

'Are you afraid of unicorns? But they're wise and friendly.'

He didn't answer.

'I heard,' she went on, 'that elves and unicorns loved one another.'

He turned his head.

'Then accept,' he said coldly, 'that what you saw was a lovers' tiff.'

She didn't ask any more questions.

She had enough of her own concerns.

*

The tops of the hills were decorated by cromlechs and dolmens. The sight of them reminded Ciri of the stone near Ellander, beside which Yennefer taught her what magic is. *That was so long ago*, she thought. *Ages . . .*

One of the elf-women shouted again. Ciri glanced to where she was pointing. Before she had time to note that the herd being led by the ruddy stallion had returned, the second elf-woman shouted. She stood up in the stirrups.

Another herd emerged from the opposite side, from behind a hill. The unicorn leading it was bluish-grey and dappled.

Avallac'h quickly said a few words. It was the *ellylon* language

that Ciri found so difficult, but she understood, particularly since the elf-women reached for their bows in unison. Avallac'h turned his face towards Ciri, and she felt a buzzing growing in her head. It was a buzzing quite similar to what a conch shell emits when pressed to the ear. But much stronger.

'*Do not resist*,' she heard a voice. '*Do not fight. I must leap, I must transport you to another place. You are in mortal danger*.'

A whistle and a long, drawn-out cry reached them from far away. And a moment later the earth shuddered under iron-shod hooves.

Riders emerged from behind the hill. An entire troop.

The horses were wearing caparisons, the riders crested helmets, and the cloaks around their shoulders fluttered in the gallop. Their vermilion-amaranth-crimson colour brought to mind the glow of a fire in the sky illuminated by the blaze of the setting sun.

A whistling and a cry. The horsemen raced towards them en masse.

Before they had ridden half a furlong the unicorns had vanished. They disappeared, leaving a cloud of dust behind them.

*

The riders' leader, a black-haired elf, sat on a dark bay stallion as huge as a dragon. It was adorned, like all the horses in the troop, in a caparison embroidered with dragon's scales, and wore on its head a truly demonic horned bucranium. Like all the elves, the black-haired one wore beneath his cloak of a myriad shades of red a mail shirt made of unbelievably tiny rings, thanks to which it fit his body snugly, like knitted woollen cloth.

'Avallac'h,' he said, saluting.

'Eredin.'

'You owe me a favour. You will pay it back when I demand it.'

'I'll pay it back when you demand it.'

The black-haired elf dismounted. Avallac'h also dismounted, gesturing to Ciri to do the same. They walked up the hill between

white rocks with peculiar shapes covered in spindle and dwarf shrubs of flowering myrtle.

Ciri looked at them. They were of equal height, meaning they were both extremely tall. But Avallac'h's face was gentle, while the black-haired elf's face brought to mind a bird of prey. *Fair and black*, she thought. *Good and evil. Light and dark . . .*

'Zireael, let me introduce you to Eredin Bréacc Glas.'

'I'm pleased to meet you.' The elf bowed and Ciri returned the bow. Not very gracefully.

'How did you know,' Avallac'h asked, 'that we were in danger?'

'I had no idea.' The elf scrutinised Ciri. 'We patrol the plain, for news has got out that the one-horns have become anxious and aggressive. No one knows why. I mean, now I know why. It's because of her, naturally.'

Avallac'h neither confirmed nor denied it. Meanwhile, Ciri countered the black-haired elf's gaze with a haughty expression. For a moment they looked at each other, neither of them wanting to be the first to look away.

'So that's the supposed Elder Blood,' remarked the elf. 'Aen Hen Ichaer. The inheritance of Shiadhal and Lara Dorren? One isn't inclined to believe it. For it's simply a young Dh'oine. A human female.'

Avallac'h said nothing. His face was motionless and indifferent.

'I assume you aren't mistaken,' the black-haired elf continued. 'Why, I take it for granted, for you, as rumour has it, never err. Hidden deep in this creature is the Lara gene. Yes, when one examines her more closely, one can see certain traits testifying to the young one's lineage. She indeed has something in her eyes that brings to mind Lara Dorren. Doesn't she, Avallac'h? Who, if not you, is more entitled to judge?'

Avallac'h didn't speak this time either. But Ciri noticed a faint blush on his pale face. She was very surprised. And pondered it.

'Summing up—' the black-haired elf grimaced '—there is something precious, something beautiful, in this little Dh'oine female. I see it. And I have the impression I've seen a gold nugget in a pile of compost.'

Ciri's eyes flashed furiously. Avallac'h slowly turned his head.

'You talk just like a human, Eredin,' he said slowly.

Eredin Bréacc Glas bared his teeth in a smile. Ciri had seen teeth like that before: very white, very small and very inhuman, as straight as a die, and lacking canines. She'd seen teeth like that on the dead elves lying in a row in the courtyard of the Kaedwen watchtower. She had delighted in teeth like that on Iskra. But the teeth in Iskra's smile looked pretty, while on Eredin they were ghastly.

'Does this lass,' he said, 'who is trying hard to kill me with her stare, already know the reason she's here?'

'Indeed.'

'And is prepared to cooperate?'

'Not completely.'

'Not completely,' he repeated. 'Ha, that's not good. Since the nature of the cooperation demands that it be complete. It's simply not possible if it's less than complete. And, because we are separated from Tir ná Lia by half a day's ride, it'd be worth knowing where we stand.'

'Why be impatient?' Avallac'h pouted his lips slightly. 'What can we gain by haste?'

'Eternity.' Eredin Bréacc Glas became serious. Something shone briefly in his green eyes. 'But that's your speciality, Avallac'h. Your speciality and your responsibility.'

'You have spoken.'

'Indeed I have. And now forgive me, but duty calls. I'll leave you an escort, for safety. I advise you to overnight here, on this hill. If you set off tomorrow at daybreak, you'll be in Tir ná Lia at the right time. *Va faill*. Aha, one more thing.'

He leaned over, broke and then tore off a twig of flowering myrtle. He brought it close to his face, then handed it to Ciri.

'My apologies,' he said briefly, 'for the hasty words. *Va faill, luned*.'

He walked away quickly and a moment later the earth shuddered beneath hooves, as he rode off with the entire troop.

'Just don't tell me,' she growled, 'that I would have to . . . That

it's him . . . If it's him, then I'll never, ever.'

'No,' Avallac'h slowly corrected her. 'It's not him. Be calm.'

Ciri brought the myrtle up to her face. In order for him not to see the excitement and fascination that had seized her.

'I am calm.'

*

The dry thistles and heather of the steppe were replaced by lush green grass and damp ferns. The marshy ground was yellow and violet with buttercups and lupins. Soon they saw a river, which although it was crystal clear had a brown tinge. It smelled of peat.

Avallac'h was playing various lively tunes on his pipes. Ciri, glum, was thinking intensely.

'Who,' she finally said, 'is to be the father of the child that matters so much to you? Or perhaps it is of no importance?'

'It is important. Am I to understand you've made your decision?'

'No, you aren't. I'm simply clearing up certain matters.'

'May I help? What do you want to know?'

'You know very well what.'

They rode on in silence for a time. Ciri saw some swans sailing elegantly down the river.

'The child's father,' Avallac'h spoke calmly and to the point, 'will be Auberon Muircetach. Auberon Muircetach is our . . . How do you say . . . Our highest leader?'

'King? King of all the Aen Seidhe?'

'Aen Seidhe, the People of the Hills, are the elves of your world. We are Aen Elle, the Folk of the Alder. And Auberon Muircetach is indeed our king.'

'The Alder King?'

'One could call him that.'

They rode on in silence. It was very warm.

'Avallac'h.'

‘Yes.

‘If I agree, then afterwards . . . Later . . . will I be free?’

‘You’ll be free and may go wherever you wish. Assuming you don’t decide to stay. With the child.’

She snorted contemptuously, but said nothing.

‘So you’ve decided?’ he asked.

‘I’ll decide when we arrive.’

‘We have arrived.’

Ciri saw the palaces from behind the weeping willows which hung down towards the water like green curtains. She had never seen anything like them in her entire life. The palaces, although built of marble and alabaster, were like fragile bowers. They seemed so delicate, light and airy, as though they weren’t buildings but apparitions of buildings. Ciri expected at any moment that the wind would blow and the little palaces would vanish along with the mist rising from the river. But when the wind blew, when the mist vanished, when the willow branches moved and ripples appeared on the river, the little palaces didn’t vanish and had no intention of vanishing. They only gained in beauty.

Ciri looked in admiration at the little terraces, at the little towers resembling water lilies sticking up from water, at the little bridges suspended above the river like festoons of ivy, at the staircases, steps, balustrades, at the arcades and cloisters, at the peristyles, at the tall and short columns, at the large and small domes, at the slender pinnacles and towers resembling asparagus spears.

‘Tir ná Lia,’ Avallac’h said softly.

The closer they went, the more the beauty of the place seized her powerfully by the heart, more powerfully squeezed her throat, making tears well up in the corners of her eyes. Ciri looked at the fountains, at the mosaics and terracotta, and at the sculptures and monuments. At lacy constructions of whose purpose she couldn’t conceive. And at constructions she was certain served no purpose. Beside aesthetics and harmony.

‘Tir ná Lia,’ repeated Avallac’h. ‘Have you ever seen anything like it?’

‘I have.’ She felt the pressure on her throat. ‘I once saw something like this. In Shaerrawedd.’

Now it was the elf's turn to say nothing for a long while.

*

They crossed over the river on an openwork bridge, which seemed so fragile that Kelpie danced and snorted a long time before she was brave enough to step on it.

Although agitated and tense, Ciri looked around attentively, not wanting to overlook anything, no sight that the fairy-tale city of Tir ná Lia offered. Firstly, she was simply consumed by curiosity, and secondly she couldn't stop thinking about escaping and so looked out watchfully for an opportunity.

She saw long-haired elves in close-fitting jerkins and short cloaks embroidered with fanciful leaf-shaped motifs walking on small bridges and terraces, along avenues and peristyles, on balconies and cloisters. She saw coiffured and provocatively made-up elf-women in gauzy dresses or in outfits resembling male costume.

Eredin Bréacc Glas greeted them outside the portico of one of the palaces. At his curt order, small, grey-attired elves swarmed around, quickly and silently taking care of their horses. Ciri looked on somewhat amazed. Avallac'h, Eredin and all the other elves she had met before were extremely tall. She had to crane her neck to look them in the eye. The small grey elves were much shorter than her. *A different race*, she thought. *A race of servants. Even here, in this fairy-tale world, there must be someone to do the work for the idle*.

They entered the palace. Ciri gasped. She was an infanta of royal blood, raised in palaces. But she had never seen such marble and malachite, such stuccos, floors, mosaics, mirrors and candelabras. She felt uncomfortable, awkward in that dazzling interior, out of place, dusty, sweaty and unwashed after her journey.

Avallac'h, quite the opposite, wasn't at all concerned. He brushed his breeches and boots with a glove, ignoring the fact that the dust was settling on a looking glass. Then he tossed his gloves grandly to the grey elf-woman bowing before him.

'Auberon?' he asked curtly. 'Is he waiting?'

Eredin smiled.

‘Yes. He’s in a great hurry. He demanded that the Swallow go to him immediately, without a moment’s delay. I talked him out of it.’

Avallac’h raised his eyebrows.

‘Zireael,’ Eredin explained very calmly, ‘ought to go to the king free of cares, unburdened, rested, composed and in a good mood. A bath, a new outfit, hairstyle and makeup will ensure that good mood. Auberon will probably be able to hold out that long, I think.’

Ciri sighed deeply and looked at the elf. She was positively amazed at how kind he seemed. Eredin smiled, revealing his even teeth.

‘Only one thing arouses my reservations,’ he declared. ‘And that is the aquiline glint in our Swallow’s eyes. Our Swallow is flashing her eyes left and right, quite like a stoat looking for holes in a cage. The Swallow, I see, is still far from unconditional surrender.’

Avallac’h didn’t comment. Ciri, naturally, didn’t either.

‘I’m not surprised,’ continued Eredin. ‘It cannot be any other way, since it’s the blood of Shiadhal and Lara Dorren. But listen to me very attentively, Zireael. There is no escape from here. There is no possibility of breaking Geas Garadh, the Spell of the Barrier.’

Ciri’s gaze said clearly that she wouldn’t believe it until she had tested it.

‘Even if you were by some miracle to force the Barrier—’ Eredin didn’t take his eyes off her ‘—then know that it would mean your doom. This world only looks pretty. But it carries death, particularly to the inexperienced. Even magic can’t heal a wound from a one-horn’s spike.

‘Know also,’ he continued, not waiting for a comment, ‘that your wild talent won’t help you at all. You won’t make the leap, so don’t even try. And even if you managed, know that my Dearg Ruadhri, my Red Riders, can catch up with you even in the abyss of times and places.’

She didn’t quite understand what he was talking about. But it puzzled her that Avallac’h had suddenly become sullen and was frowning, very evidently unhappy about Eredin’s speech. As though Eredin had said too much.

‘Let us go,’ he said. ‘Come this way, Zireael. We’ll hand you over to the ladies. It’s necessary for you to look beautiful. The first impression is most important.’

*

Her heart was pounding in her breast, the blood thrummed in her temples, her hands were shaking a little. She brought them under control by clenching her fists. She calmed herself with the help of deep breaths. She loosened her shoulders, and moved her neck, stiff with nervousness.

She observed herself once again in the large looking glass. The sight didn’t especially please her. Her hair, still damp from bathing, was trimmed and combed so it at least partly concealed her scar. Her makeup nicely emphasised her eyes and mouth, the silver-grey skirt slit to halfway up her thigh, and black waistcoat with sheer blouse of pearl crepe looked very presentable. The silk scarf around her neck highlighted it all compellingly.

Ciri adjusted and straightened the scarf, then reached between her thighs and adjusted what was necessary. And she had on some truly sensational things beneath the skirt – panties as delicate as gossamer and stockings almost reaching the panties, which in some incredible way stayed up without garters.

She reached for the handle. Hesitantly, as though it wasn’t a handle but a sleeping cobra.

Spet! she thought involuntarily in the elven tongue, *I’ve fought against men with swords. I’ll take on one man with . . .*

She closed her eyes and sighed. And entered the chamber.

There was no one inside. A book and a carafe lay on the malachite table. There were strange reliefs on the walls, which were draped with heavy curtains and flowery tapestries. In one corner stood a statue. In another a four-poster bed. Her heart began to pound again. She swallowed.

She saw a movement out of the corner of one eye. Not in the chamber. On the terrace.

He was sitting there, turned towards her in half-profile.

Although by now somewhat aware that among elves

everything looked different to what she was accustomed to, Ciri experienced a slight shock. All the time the king had been talked about, God knows why, she had had in mind Ervyll of Verden, whose daughter-in-law she had almost once become. Thinking about that king, she saw a large man immobilised by rolls of fat, breath stinking of onions and beer, with a red nose and bloodshot eyes visible above an unkempt beard. Holding a sceptre and orb in his swollen hands, flecked with liver spots.

But a completely different king was sitting by the balustrade of the terrace.

He was very slim, and it was also apparent that he was very tall. His hair was as ashen as hers, shot with snow-white streaks, long, and falling down onto his shoulders and back. He was dressed in a black velvet jerkin. He was wearing typical elven boots with numerous buckles running all the way up the leg. His hands were slender and white, with long fingers.

He was busy blowing bubbles. Holding a small bowl of soapy water and a straw, which he was blowing through. The iridescent, rainbow bubbles floated down towards the river.

She cleared her throat softly.

King Alder turned his head. Ciri was unable to suppress a gasp. His eyes were extraordinary. As bright as molten lead, bottomless. And full of unimaginable sadness.

‘Swallow,’ he said. ‘Zireael. Thank you for agreeing to come.’

She swallowed, not knowing at all what to say. Auberon Muircetach put the straw to his lips and sent another bubble into space.

She locked her fingers in order to stop them trembling, cracking her knuckles. Then she nervously combed her hair. The elf was apparently only paying attention to the bubbles.

‘Are you anxious?’

‘No,’ she lied arrogantly. ‘I’m not.’

‘Are you hurrying somewhere?’

‘Indeed I am.’

She must have put a little too much nonchalance into her voice, and felt she was balancing on the edge of good manners. But the elf wasn’t paying attention. He blew a huge bubble through the

end of the straw, making it resemble a cucumber by rocking it. He admired his handiwork for a long time.

'Would I be a nuisance if I asked you where you're in such a rush to get to?'

'Home!' she snapped, but at once corrected herself, adding in a calm tone. 'To my world.'

'To what?'

'To my world!'

'Ah. Forgive me. I'd have sworn you said "To my quirk". And I was indeed very amazed. You speak our language splendidly, but you could still work on your pronunciation and accent.'

'Is my accent important? After all, you don't need me for conversation.'

'Nothing should stop us striving for excellence.'

Another bubble sprang up at the end of the straw. When it broke away it drifted up and burst as it touched a willow branch. Ciri gasped.

'So you're in a hurry to get back to your world,' Auberon Muircetach said a moment later. 'To yours! Indeed, you humans aren't overly blessed with humility.'

He dipped the straw in the bowl, and with a seemingly careless blow encircled himself in a swarm of rainbow bubbles.

'Humans,' he said. 'Your hirsute forebear on the spear side appeared in the world much later than the hen. And I've never heard of any hens laying claim to the world . . . Why are you fidgeting and hopping on the spot like a little monkey? What I'm saying ought to interest you. After all, it's history. Ah, let me guess. History doesn't interest you and bores you.'

A huge iridescent bubble floated towards the river. Ciri said nothing, biting her lip.

'Your hirsute forebear,' the elf continued, stirring the mixture with the straw, 'quickly learned how to use his opposable thumb and rudimentary intelligence. With their help he did various things, usually as amusing as they were woeful. That is, I meant to say that if the things your forebear did hadn't been woeful, they would have been amusing.'

Another bubble, and, immediately after, a second and a third.

‘We, the Aen Elle, were little concerned what foolishness your ancestor got up to. We, unlike our cousins, the Aen Seidhe, left that world long ago. We chose another, more interesting universe. For at that time – you’ll be astonished by what I say – one could move quite freely between the worlds. With a little talent and skill, naturally. Beyond all doubt you understand what I have in mind.’

Ciri was dying of curiosity, but remained stubbornly silent, aware that the elf was teasing her a little. She didn’t want to make his task any easier.

Auberon Muircetach smiled and turned around. He had on a golden necklace, a badge of office called a *torc’h* in the Elder Speech.

‘*Mire, luned.*’

He blew softly, moving the straw around nimbly. Instead of one large bubble, as before, several of them hung from the end.

‘A bubble beside a bubble, and another beside another,’ he crooned. ‘Oh, that’s how it was, that’s how it was . . . We used to say to ourselves, what’s the difference, we’ll spend some time here, some time there, so what if the Dh’oine insist on destroying their world along with themselves? We’ll go somewhere else . . . To another bubble . . .’

Ciri nodded and licked her lips under his burning gaze. The elf smiled again, shook the bubbles, blew once again, this time creating a single large bunch from a myriad of small bubbles joined to each other at the end of the straw.

‘The Conjunction came—’ the elf raised the straw, hung with bubbles ‘—and even more worlds were created. But the door is closed. It is closed to all apart from a handful of chosen ones. And time is passing. The door ought to be opened. Urgently. It’s imperative. Do you understand that word?’

‘I’m not stupid.’

‘No, you aren’t.’ He turned his head. ‘You can’t be. For you are Aen Hen Ichaer, of the Elder Blood. Come closer.’

When he reached out his hand towards her she clenched her teeth involuntarily. But he only touched her forearm, and then her hand. She felt a pleasant tingling. She dared to look into his extraordinary eyes.

‘I didn’t believe it when they said it,’ he whispered. ‘But it’s

true. You have Shiadhal's eyes. Lara's eyes.' She lowered her gaze. She felt insecure and foolish.

The Alder King rested his elbow on the balustrade and his chin on his hand. For a long time, he seemed only to be interested in the swans swimming in the river.

'Thank you for coming,' he finally said, without turning his head. 'And now go away and leave me alone.'

*

She found Avallac'h on the terrace by the river just as he was boarding a boat in the company of a gorgeous elf-woman with straw-coloured hair. The elf-woman was wearing lipstick the colour of pistachios and flecks of golden glitter on her eyelids and temples.

Ciri was about to turn around and walk away when Avallac'h stopped her with a gesture. And invited her into the boat with another. Ciri hesitated. She didn't want to talk in front of witnesses. Avallac'h said something quickly to the elf-woman and blew her a kiss. The elf-woman shrugged and went away. She only turned around once, to show Ciri with her eyes what she thought of her.

'If you could, refrain from comment,' said Avallac'h when she sat down on the bench nearest the bow. He also sat down, took out his pipes and played, utterly unconcerned about the boat. Ciri looked around apprehensively, but the boat was sailing perfectly down the centre of the current, not deviating by even an inch towards the steps, pillars and columns extending into the water. It was a strange boat. Ciri had never seen one like it, even on Skellige, where she had spent a long time examining everything that was capable of floating on the water. It had a very high, slender prow, carved in the shape of a key. It was very long, very narrow and very unstable. Indeed, only an elf could sit in something like that and play his pipes instead of holding the tiller or the oars.

Avallac'h stopped playing.

'What troubles you?'

He heard her out, watching her with a strange smile.

'You're saddened,' he stated rather than asked. 'Saddened, disappointed, but above all indignant.'

‘Not at all! I’m not!’

‘And you shouldn’t be.’ The elf became serious. ‘Auberon treated you with reverence, like a born Aen Elle. Don’t forget, we, the Alder Folk, never hurry. We have time.’

‘He told me something quite different.’

‘I know what he told you.’

‘And what it’s all about, do you also know that?’

‘Indeed.’

She had already learned a great deal. Not by sighing, not even by flickering an eyelid, did she betray her impatience or anger, when once again he put the pipes to his mouth and played. Melodiously, longingly. For a long time.

The boat glided along and Ciri counted the bridges passing over their heads.

‘We have,’ he said right after the fourth bridge, ‘more than serious grounds to suppose that your world is in danger of destruction. By a climactic cataclysm of immense scale. As a scholar you have certainly encountered Aen Ithlinne Speath, Ithlinne’s Prophecy. There is talk of the White Frost in the prophecy. According to us it concerns extensive glaciation. And because it so happens that ninety per cent of the land of your world is in the northern hemisphere, this glaciation may endanger the existence of most living creatures. They will simply perish from the cold. Those that survive will fall into barbarism, will destroy each other in merciless battles for food, or become prey to predators insane with hunger. Remember the text of the prophecy: The Time of Contempt, the Time of the Battle Axe, the Time of the Wolfish Blizzard.’

Ciri didn’t interrupt, fearing he would begin playing again.

‘The child that matters so much to us,’ continued Avallac’h, fiddling with the pipes, ‘the descendant and bearer of the Lara Dorren gene, the gene that was specially constructed by us, may save the denizens of that world. We have reason to believe that the descendant of Lara – and of you, naturally – will possess abilities a thousandfold more powerful than that which we, the Knowing Ones, possess. And which you possess in rudimentary form. You know what this is about, don’t you?’

Ciri had come to learn that in the Elder Speech such rhetorical devices, although apparently questions, not only did not demand,

but quite simply did not brook, a response.

'In short,' Avallac'h continued, 'it concerns the possibility of transferring between worlds not only oneself, one's own – indeed – insignificant person. It concerns the opening of Ard Gaeth, the great and permanent Gateway, through which everyone would pass. We managed to do it before the Conjunction, and we want to achieve it now. We will evacuate from the dying world the Aen Seidhe residing there. Our brothers, to whom we owe it to help. We wouldn't be able to live with the thought that we had abandoned anything. And we shall rescue, evacuate from that world, everyone who is in danger. Everyone, Zireael. Humans too.'

'Really?' She couldn't hold it back. 'Dh'oine too?'

'Dh'oine too. Now you see for yourself how important you are, how much depends on you. How important a thing it is for you to remain patient. How important a thing it is for you to go to Auberon this evening and stay all night. Believe me, his behaviour wasn't a demonstration of enmity. He knows that this isn't an easy matter for you, that he might hurt and discourage you by being importunately hasty. He knows a great deal, O Swallow. I don't doubt you've noticed.'

'I have,' she snapped. 'I've also noticed that the current has borne us quite far from Tir ná Lia. Time to take up the oars. Which I can't see here, as a matter of fact.'

'Because there aren't any.' Avallac'h raised an arm, twisted his hand and snapped his fingers. The boat stopped. It rested for a while in place, and then began to move against the current.

The elf made himself more comfortable, put his pipes to his lips and gave himself over entirely to his music.

*

In the evening the Alder King entertained her to supper. When she entered, rustling silk, he invited her to the table with a gesture. There were no servants. He served her himself.

The supper consisted of over a dozen kinds of vegetables. There were mushrooms, boiled and simmered in a sauce. Ciri had never eaten mushrooms like them before either. Some of them were as white and thin as dainty leaves, tasted delicate and mild, and

others were brown and black, fleshy and aromatic.

Auberon was also generous with the rosé wine. Seemingly light, it went to her head, relaxed her, and loosened her tongue. The next thing she knew she was telling him things she never thought she would.

He listened. Patiently. And then, when she suddenly remembered why she was there. She turned gloomy and fell silent.

'As I understand it—' he served her quite new mushrooms, greenish and smelling of apple pie '—you think that destiny connects you to this Geralt?'

'Precisely so.' She raised a cup now marked with numerous smudges of lipstick. 'Destiny. He, I mean Geralt, is linked to me by destiny, and I am to him. Our destinies are conjoined. So it would be better if I went away from here. Right away. Do you understand?'

'I confess that I don't quite.'

'Destiny!' She took a sip. 'A force which it's better not to get in the way of. Which is why I think . . . No, no thank you, don't serve me any more, please, I've eaten so much I think I'll burst.'

'You mentioned thinking.'

'I think it was a mistake to lure me here. And force me to . . . Well, you know what I mean. I must get away from here, and hurry to help him . . . Because it's my destiny—'

'Destiny,' he interrupted, raising his glass. 'Predestination. Something that is inevitable. A mechanism which means that a practically unlimited number of unforeseeable events must end with the same result and no other. Is that right?'

'Certainly!'

'Then whence and wherefore do you wish to go? Drink your wine, enjoy the moment, delight in life. What is to come will come, if it's inevitable.'

'Like hell. It's not that easy.'

'You're contradicting yourself.'

'No, I'm not.'

'You're contradicting your contradiction, and that's a vicious circle.'

‘No!’ She tossed her head. ‘You can’t just sit and do nothing! Nothing comes by itself!’

‘Sophistry.’

‘You can’t waste time unthinkingly! You might overlook the right moment . . . That one right, unique moment. For time never repeats itself.’

‘Permit me.’ He stood up. ‘Look at that, over there.’

On the wall he was pointing at was a protruding relief portraying an immense, scaly snake. The reptile, curled up in a figure of eight, was sinking its great teeth into its own tail. Ciri had once seen something like it, but couldn’t remember where.

‘There,’ said the elf. ‘The ancient snake Ouroboros. Ouroboros symbolises eternity and is itself eternal. It is the eternal going away and the eternal return. It is something that has no beginning and no end.

‘Time is like the ancient Ouroboros. Time is fleeting moments, grains of sand passing through an hourglass. Time is the moments and events we so readily try to measure. But the ancient Ouroboros reminds us that in every moment, in every instant, in every event, is hidden the past, the present and the future. Eternity is hidden in every moment. Every departure is at once a return, every farewell is a greeting, every return is a parting. Everything is simultaneously a beginning and an end.

‘And you too,’ he said, not looking at her at all, ‘are at once the beginning and the end. And because we are discussing destiny, know that it is precisely *your* destiny. To be the beginning and the end. Do you understand?’

She hesitated for a moment. But his glowing eyes forced her to answer.

‘I do.’

‘Get undressed.’

He said it so casually, so indifferently, she almost yelled in anger. Instead, she began to unfasten her waistcoat with trembling hands.

Her fingers were disobedient; the hooks and eyes, little buttons and ribbons awkward and tight. Though Ciri hurried as much as she could, wanting to get everything over as quickly as possible, the undressing lasted an annoyingly long time. But the elf

didn't give the impression of being in a hurry. As though he really had the whole of eternity at his disposal.

Who knows, she thought, *perhaps he has?*

Now, completely undressed, she shuffled from foot to foot, the floor chilling her feet. He noticed it and pointed wordlessly to the bed.

The bedclothes were made of mink. Of mink pelts sewn into great sheets. Wonderfully soft, warm and pleasantly ticklish.

He lay down beside her, fully dressed, even in his boots. When he touched her, she tensed up, involuntarily, a little angry at herself, for she had decided to act proud and impassive. Her teeth, whether she liked it or not, were chattering somewhat. His touch thrilled her, however, and his fingers taught her and commanded her. Guided her. Once she had begun to understand the suggestions so well that she was almost anticipating them, she closed her eyes and imagined it was Mistle. But she was unable to. For he was so unlike Mistle.

He instructed her with his hand. She obeyed. Willingly. Urgently.

He didn't hurry at all. He made her soften beneath his caresses like a silk ribbon. He made her moan. Made her bite her lips. Made her whole body jerk in a sudden, shocking spasm.

What he did then, she hadn't expected at all.

He stood up and walked away. Leaving her aroused, panting and trembling.

He didn't even look back.

The blood struck Ciri's face and temples. She curled up in a ball on the mink sheets and sobbed. From rage, shame and humiliation.

*

In the morning she found Avallac'h in the peristyle behind the palace, among an avenue of statues. The statues – most peculiarly – portrayed elven children. In various – mainly playful – poses. The one Avallac'h was standing by was particularly interesting: it depicted a young elf standing on one leg with its face contorted in

anger, fists clenched.

Ciri couldn't tear her gaze away for a long time, and she felt a dull ache in her belly. Only when urged by Avallac'h did she tell him everything. In general terms and stammering.

'He,' Avallac'h said gravely after she had finished, 'has watched the smokes of Samhain more than six hundred times. Believe me, Swallow, that is a lot even for the Alder Folk.'

'What do I care?' she snapped. 'I made an agreement! You must have learned from the dwarves, your comrades, what a contract is? I'm keeping my side of it! I'm giving myself! What do I care that he can't or doesn't want to? What do I care if it's senile impotence, or if I don't attract him? Perhaps Dh'oine repulse him? Perhaps like Eredin he only sees in me a nugget in a heap of compost?'

'I hope . . .' Avallac'h's face, exceptionally, changed and contorted. 'I hope you didn't say anything like that to him?'

'No, I didn't. Though I felt like it.'

'Beware. You don't know what you're risking.'

'It's all the same to me. I entered into a contract. Take it or leave it! Either you keep your side of the bargain, or we nullify the contract and I'll be free.'

'Beware, Zireael,' he repeated, pointing at the statue of the upset child. 'Don't be like this one here. Consider every word. Try to understand. And if you don't understand something, don't act rashly under any circumstances. Be patient. Remember, time means nothing.'

'Yes, it does!'

'Please, don't be an unruly child. I repeat again: be patient with Auberon. Because he's your only chance of regaining your freedom.'

'Really?' she almost screamed. 'I'm beginning to have my doubts! I'm beginning to suspect you of cheating me! That you've all cheated me—'

'I promised you—' Avallac'h's face was as lifeless as a stone statue '—you will return to your world. I've given my word. Doubting someone's word is a serious insult to the Aen Elle. In order to keep you from doing it, I suggest we end this conversation.'

He was about to go, but she barred his way. His aquamarine eyes narrowed and Ciri understood she was dealing with a very, very, dangerous elf. But it was too late to withdraw.

'That's very much in the elven style,' she hissed like a viper. 'To insult someone and then not let them get even.'

'Beware, O Swallow.'

'Listen.' She lifted her head proudly. 'Your Alder King won't fulfil the task, that's more than clear. It isn't important if he's the problem or if I am. That's trivial and meaningless. But I want to fulfil the contract. And get it over with. Let someone else impregnate me to beget the child you care so much about.'

'You don't know what you're talking about.'

'And if I'm the problem—' she didn't change her tone or expression '—it means you're mistaken, Avallac'h. You lured the wrong person to this world.'

'You don't know what you're talking about, Zireael.'

'If, though,' she screamed, 'you're all repulsed by me, use the hinny breeders' method. What, don't you know? You show the stallion a mare, and then you blindfold it and put the jenny in front of it.'

He didn't even deign to reply. He passed her by unceremoniously and walked off along the avenue of statues.

'Or you, perhaps?' she yelled. 'If you want I'll give myself to you! Well? Won't you sacrifice yourself? I mean, they say I've got Lara's eyes!'

He was in front of her in two paces. His hands shot towards her neck like snakes and squeezed like steel pincers. She understood that if he'd wanted to, he could have throttled her like a fledgling.

He let her go. He leaned over and looked into her eyes from close up.

'Who are you,' he asked extremely calmly, 'to dare to defile her name in such a way? Who are you to dare to abuse me with such miserable charity? Oh, I know, I see who you are. You are not the daughter of Lara. You are the daughter of Cregennan. You are a thoughtless, arrogant, selfish Dh'oine, a simply perfect representative of your race, who understands nothing, and must ruin and destroy, besmirch by touch alone, denigrate and defile by thought alone. Your ancestor stole my love from me, took her away

from me, selfishly and arrogantly took Lara from me. But I shall not permit you, O his worthy daughter, to take the memory of her from me.'

He turned around. Ciri overcame the lump in her throat.

'Avallac'h.'

A look.

'Forgive me. I behaved thoughtlessly and shabbily. Forgive me. And, if you can, forget it.'

He went over to her and embraced her.

'I've already forgotten,' he said warmly. 'No, let us not return to that ever again.'

*

When she entered the royal chambers that evening – bathed, perfumed and coiffured – Auberon Muircetach was sitting at the table, bent over a chessboard. He instructed her to sit opposite without a word.

He won in nine moves.

The second time, she played white and he won in eleven moves.

Only then did he raise his eyes, his extraordinary, clear eyes.

'Get undressed, please.'

He deserved credit for one thing – he was delicate and didn't hurry at all.

When – as before – he got up from the bed and walked away without a word, Ciri accepted it with calm resignation. But she couldn't fall asleep until almost the very break of day.

And when the windows brightened from the dawn, and she finally fell asleep, she had a very strange dream.

*

Vysogota, stooping, was cleaning duckweed from a muskrat trap.

Reeds blown by the wind rustled.

I feel guilty, Swallow. It was I who suggested the idea of this insane escapade. I showed you the way to that accursed Tower.

'Don't reproach yourself, Old Raven. Had it not been for the tower, Bonhart would have caught me. At least I'm safe here.'

You are not safe there.

Vysogota straightens up.

Behind him Ciri sees hills, bare and rounded, sticking up from the grass like the bent back of a monster lurking in ambush. A huge boulder is lying on the hill. And two figures stand beside it. A woman and girl. The wind yanks and tugs the woman's black hair.

The horizon blazes with lightning.

Chaos extends a hand towards you, daughter. O Child of the Elder Blood, O girl entangled in Movement and Change, Destruction and Rebirth. Both destined and destiny. From behind a closed door Chaos holds its talons out to you, not knowing yet if you will become its tool, or a hindrance in its plans. Not knowing if you will by chance play the role of a grain of sand in the works of the Clock of Destiny. Chaos fears you, O Child of Destiny. And wants to make you feel fear. Which is why it sends you dreams.

Vysogota stoops and cleans the muskrat trap. *But he's dead*, Ciri thinks clear-headedly. *Does that mean that in the spirit world the dead have to clean muskrat traps?*

Vysogota straightens up. The sky burns with the glow of fires behind his back. Thousands of horsemen gallop across the plain. Horsemen in red cloaks.

Dearg Ruadhri.

Listen to me carefully, Swallow. The Elder Blood you have in your veins gives you great power. You are the Master of Places and Times. You have a mighty Power. Don't let criminals and rogues take it from you and use it for dishonourable purposes. Defend yourself! Flee out of reach of their vile hands.

'That's easy to say! They've ensnared me with some kind of magical barrier or tether . . .'

You are the Master of Places and Times. You cannot be tethered.

Vysogota straightens up. Behind his back is a plateau, a rocky plain, and on it shipwrecks. Dozens of shipwrecks. And beyond

them a castle; black, ominous, toothed with battlements, rising up above a mountain lake.

They will perish without your help, O Swallow. Only you can save them.

Yennefer's mouth, cut and bloodied, moves noiselessly, gushing blood. Her violet eyes shine, burn in her face; gaunt, contorted, blackened by torture, covered by a shock of unkempt, dirty black hair. A foul-smelling puddle in a hollow of the floor, rats scurrying all around. The horrifying cold of the stone walls. The cold of shackles on her wrists, on her ankles . . .

Yennefer's hands and fingers are a mass of dried blood.

'Mummy! What have they done to you?'

A marble staircase leading downwards. A staircase with three landings.

Va'esse deireadh aep eigean . . . Something ends . . . What?

A staircase. Fire blazing in iron cressets at the bottom. Burning tapestries.

Let's go, says Geralt. Steps leading downwards. *We have to. We must. There's no other way. Just this staircase. I want to see the sky.*

His lips aren't moving. They're blue and there's blood on them. Blood, blood everywhere . . . The stairs are totally covered in blood.

There's no other way. No other way, Star-Eye.

'How?' she cries. 'How can I help them? I'm in another world! Imprisoned! And powerless!'

You cannot be imprisoned.

Everything has been written, says Vysogota. *Even this. Look beneath your feet.*

Ciri sees in horror that she's standing in a sea of bones. Among skulls, shinbones and ribs.

Only you can prevent it, Star-Eye.

Vysogota straightens up. Behind him is winter, snow, a blizzard. The wind blows and whistles. Before her, in the snowstorm, on a horse, is Geralt. Ciri recognises him, although he has a fur hat on his head, and his face is shrouded in a woollen scarf. Behind him in the blizzard loom other riders, their silhouettes

vague, so muffled up are they that there is no way to identify them.

Geralt looks straight at her. But doesn't see her. Snow falls into his eyes.

'Geralt! It's me! Here!'

He can't see her. Or hear her among the wailing of the gale.

'Geraaalt!'

It's a moufflon, says Geralt. *Only a moufflon. Let's go back*. The riders disappear, dissolving in the snowstorm.

'Geraaalt! Nooooo!'

*

She woke up.

*

Next morning she went at once to the stables without even eating breakfast. She didn't want to meet Avallac'h, didn't want to talk to him. She preferred to avoid the intrusive, curious, questioning, clinging looks of the other elves and elf-women. On every other occasion studiously indifferent, now the elves were betraying their curiosity on the subject of the royal bedchamber, and the palace walls, Ciri was certain, had ears.

She found Kelpie in her stall, found her saddle and harness. Before she managed to saddle the mare the servants were already beside her; those little grey elves, short, a head shorter than ordinary Aen Elle. They assisted her with the mare, bowing and smiling ingratiatingly.

'Thank you,' she said. 'I'd cope by myself, but thank you. It's sweet of you.'

The nearest girl smiled and Ciri shuddered.

For she had canine teeth.

Ciri was by her so fast the girl was almost dumbfounded. Ciri brushed the hair back from her ear. An ear that didn't end in a point.

‘You’re human!’

The girl – and all the others with her – knelt down on the freshly swept floor. She bowed her head. Expecting to be punished.

‘I . . .’ Ciri began, kneading the reins. ‘I . . .’

She didn’t know what to say. The girls continued to kneel. The horses nervously snorted and stamped in their stalls.

Outside, in the saddle, trotting, she still couldn’t gather her thoughts. Human girls. Working as servants, but that was unimportant. What was important was that there were Dh’oine in this world . . .

People, she corrected herself. *I’m thinking like them*.

She was startled out of her reverie by Kelpie neighing loudly and starting. She raised her head and saw Eredin.

He was sitting on his dark bay stallion, now without its demonic bucranium and most of the other battle paraphernalia. He was, though, wearing a mail shirt beneath a cloak shimmering in many shades of red.

The stallion neighed a husky welcome, shook its head and bared its yellow teeth at Kelpie. Kelpie, in accordance with the principle that one settles matters with the master and not with the servant, reached for the elf’s thigh with her teeth. Ciri jerked the reins sharply.

‘Careful,’ she said. ‘Keep your distance. My mare doesn’t like strangers. And she bites.’

‘Biters—’ the elf glared at her evilly ‘—should be tamed with an iron bit. Tight enough to draw blood. A splendid method for eradicating bad habits. In horses too.’

He jerked the stallion’s bridle so hard that the horse snorted and took several paces backwards, foam trickling from its muzzle.

‘Why the mail shirt?’ Now Ciri was glaring at the elf. ‘Are you preparing for war?’

‘Quite the opposite. I desire peace. Does your mare, apart from being skittish, have any other virtues?’

‘What kind?’

‘May I challenge you to a race?’

‘If you wish, why not.’ She stood up in the stirrups. ‘There,

towards those cromlechs—'

'No,' he interrupted. 'Not there.'

'Why not?'

'That's off limits.'

'For everyone, naturally.'

'Not everyone, naturally. Your company is too precious to us, Swallow, for us to risk being deprived of it by you or anyone else.'

'Anyone else? You can't be thinking about the unicorns?'

'I don't want to bore you with what I think. Or be frustrated by your not understanding my thoughts.'

'I don't understand.'

'I know you don't. Evolution didn't give you a sufficiently folded brain to enable you to understand. Listen, if you want a race I suggest along the river. That way. To the Porphyry Bridge, the third one along. Then across the bridge to the other side, then along the bank, downstream, finishing at the stream that flows into the river. Ready?'

'Always.'

He urged on his stallion with a cry, and the horse set off like a hurricane. Before Kelpie could start he was well ahead. He made the earth tremble, but he couldn't match Kelpie. She caught up with him quickly, even before the Porphyry Bridge. The bridge was narrow. Eredin yelled, and the stallion, incredibly, picked up speed. Ciri understand immediately what was happening. Not for all the world would two horses fit on the bridge. One had to yield.

Ciri had no intention of slowing. She pressed herself to Kelpie's mane, and the mare shot ahead like an arrow. She brushed against the elf's stirrup and hurtled onto the bridge. Eredin yelled again. The stallion reared up, hit its side against an alabaster figure, knocking it from its plinth and smashing it into pieces.

Ciri, sniggering like a ghoul, galloped across the bridge. Without looking back.

She dismounted by the stream and waited.

He trotted up a moment later. Smiling and composed.

'My compliments,' he said curtly, dismounting. 'Both to the mare and to the Amazon.'

Although she was strutting like a peacock she snorted carelessly.

‘Aha! Won’t you brutally tame us now?’

‘Not unless you permit me,’ he smiled suggestively. ‘Some mares like rough caresses.’

‘Not so long ago—’ she looked at him haughtily ‘—you compared me to compost. And now we’re talking about caresses?’

He went closer to Kelpie, stroked and patted the mare’s neck and shook his head on finding it was dry. Kelpie tossed her head and neighed at length. Eredin turned towards Ciri. *If he pats me too*, she thought, *he’ll regret it.*

‘Follow me.’

Moss-covered steps made of sandstone blocks stood alongside the stream, which flowed down from a steep, thickly wooded hillside into the river. The steps were ancient, cracked, split by tree roots. They zig-zagged upwards, occasionally crossing the stream over footbridges. All around was a forest, a wild forest, full of old ash and hornbeam, yew, maple and oak, the floor carpeted with a thicket of hazel, tamarisk and bramble. It smelled of wormwood, sage, nettles, wet stones, the spring and mould.

Ciri walked in silence, not hurrying, and controlling her breathing. She was also trying to control her nerves. She had no idea what Eredin might want from her, but she had her misgivings.

There was a stone terrace beside another cascade, falling with a roar from a rocky cleft, and on it, overshadowed by wild lilac, was an old bower, wound around with ivy and spiderwort. The ribbon of the river, roofs, peristyles and the terraces of Tir ná Lia could be seen below the crowns of the trees.

They stood a while, looking.

‘No one told me—’ Ciri was the first to interrupt the silence ‘—what that river’s called.’

‘The Easnadh.’

‘The Sigh? Pretty. And that stream?’

‘The Tuathe.’

‘The Whisper. That’s pretty too. Why did no one tell me that there are humans living in this world?’

‘Because it’s irrelevant information and totally meaningless to you. Let’s go into the bower.’

‘What for?’

‘Let’s go in.’

The first thing she noticed after entering was a bare wooden divan. Ciri felt her temples beginning to throb. *Of course*, she thought, *I should have seen that coming. I read a romance written by Anna Tiller in the temple, didn’t I? About an old king, a young queen and a pretender prince greedy for power. Eredin is ruthless, ambitious and determined. He knows that whoever has a queen is the real king, a real ruler. A real man. Whoever possesses a queen, possesses the kingdom. Here, on this couch, will begin the coup d’état . . .*

The elf sat down on a marble table, and gestured at a chair for Ciri. The view from the window seemed to interest him more than she did, and he wasn’t looking at the couch at all.

‘You’ll remain here forever,’ he said, surprising her, ‘my Amazon, as light as a little butterfly. To the end of your butterfly life.’

She was silent, looking him straight in the eye. There was nothing in those eyes.

‘They won’t let you leave,’ he repeated. ‘They won’t accept that, contrary to the prophecy and myths, you’re no one and nothing, a meaningless creature. They won’t believe it and they won’t let you leave. They hoodwinked you with a promise to ensure your submission, but they never intended to keep that promise. Never.’

‘Avallac’h gave me his word,’ she said hoarsely. ‘Allegedly it’s an insult to doubt the word of an elf.’

‘Avallac’h is a Knowing One. Knowing Ones have their own code of honour in which every second sentence there’s mention of the end justifying the means.’

‘I don’t understand why you’re telling me all this. Unless . . . you want something from me. Unless I have something you desire. And you want to bargain. Well? Eredin? My freedom for . . . for what?’

He looked at her for a long while. And she vainly searched in his eyes for some indication, some signal, some sign. Of anything.

‘You’ve no doubt managed to get to know Auberon a little,’ he

began slowly. ‘You’ve certainly noticed already that he is simply unimaginably ambitious. There are things he’ll never accept, that he’ll never concede. He’d sooner die.’

Ciri was silent, biting her lips and glancing at the couch.

‘Auberon Muircetach,’ continued the elf, ‘will never use magic or other measures which might change the current situation. And such measures exist. Good, powerful, guaranteed measures. Much more effective than the aphrodisiacs that Avallac’h’s servants saturate your cosmetics with.’

He moved his hand quickly over the dark, veined table top. When he withdrew it a tiny flacon of grey-green nephrite was lying on the table.

‘No,’ said Ciri hoarsely. ‘Absolutely not. I won’t agree to that.’

‘You didn’t let me finish.’

‘Don’t treat me like a fool. I won’t give him what’s in that flacon. You won’t use me for things like that.’

‘You draw very hasty conclusions,’ he said slowly, looking her in the eye. ‘You’re trying to outrun yourself in the race. And things like that always end with a fall. A very painful fall.’

‘I said no.’

‘Think it over well. Regardless of what the vessel contains, you always win. You always win, Swallow.’

‘No!’

With a movement just as dextrous as before, truly worthy of a conjuror, he swept the flacon from the table. Then he stayed silent for a long while, looking at the River Easnadh glinting among the trees.

‘You’ll die here, little butterfly,’ he said finally. ‘They won’t let you leave. But it’s your choice.’

‘I made a deal. My freedom for—’

‘Freedom,’ he snorted. ‘You keep talking about freedom. And what would you do if you finally regained it? Where would you make for? Get it into your head that at this moment not only places but time separate you from your world. Time passes differently here than there. Those you knew as children are now decrepit, those who were your peers died long ago.’

‘I don’t believe you.’

‘Think back to your legends. Legends about people who mysteriously disappeared and returned years later, only to gaze on the overgrown graves of their loved ones. Do you think they were fantasies, fabrications? You’re mistaken. For whole centuries people have been kidnapped, carried away by horsemen whom you call the Wild Hunt. Kidnapped, exploited, and then discarded like the shell of a sucked-out egg. But not even that will befall you, Zireael. You will die here. You won’t even have the chance of seeing your friends’ graves.’

‘I don’t believe what you’re saying.’

‘Your beliefs are your own private matter. And you chose your own fate yourself. Let’s go back. I have a request, Swallow. Would you like to consume a light meal with me in Tir ná Lia?’

For several heartbeats hunger and a reckless fascination fought in Ciri against anger, fear of poison and general antipathy.

‘With pleasure.’ She lowered her eyes. ‘Thank you for the offer.’

‘No, I thank you. Let’s go.’

As they were exiting the bower she glanced at the divan once again. And thought that Anna Tiller was actually a stupid and gushing hack.

They descended to the River Sigh slowly, in silence, amidst the aroma of mint, sage and nettle. Down the steps. Along the bank of a stream called the Whisper.

*

When that evening, perfumed, with hair still damp after an aromatic bath, she entered the royal chambers, she found Auberon on a sofa, bent over a large book. Without a word, with only a gesture, he ordered her to sit beside him.

The book was richly illustrated. To tell the truth, there was nothing in it apart from illustrations. Although she tried to play the sophisticated lady, the blood rushed to Ciri’s cheeks. She’d seen several such works in the temple library in Ellander. But they couldn’t compete with the book of the Alder King, neither in the

richness and variety of the positions, nor in the artistry of their depiction.

They looked at it for a long time, in silence.

'Please get undressed.'

This time he also got undressed. His body was slender and boyish, downright skinny like Giselher, like Kayleigh, like Reef, whom she'd seen many times when they bathed in streams or mountain lakes. But vitality exuded from Giselher and the Rats, life exuded from them, the desire to live, blazing among the silver drops of water spraying around.

But from him, from the Alder King, the cold of eternity exuded.

He was patient. Several times it seemed it was about to happen. But nothing came of it. Ciri was angry at herself, certain that it was because of her ignorance and paralysing lack of skill. He noticed and calmed her. As usual, very effectively. And she fell asleep in his arms.

But in the morning he wasn't with her.

*

The next evening, for the first time, the Alder King betrayed his impatience.

She found him hunched over the table where a looking glass framed in amber was lying. White powder had been sprinkled on it.

It's beginning, she thought.

Auberon used a small knife to gather the fisstech and form it into two lines. He took a silver tube and sniffed up the narcotic, first to the left, then to the right nostril. His eyes, usually sparkling, dimmed slightly and became cloudy, began to water. Ciri knew at once it wasn't his first dose.

He formed two fresh lines on the glass, then invited her over with a gesture, handing her the tube. *Oh, who cares*, she thought. *It'll be easier.*

The drug was extremely powerful.

A short while later they were both sitting on the bed, hugging,

and staring at the moon with their eyes watering.

Ciri sneezed.

'An uncharted night,' she said, wiping her nose with the sleeve of her silk blouse.

'Enchanting,' he corrected her, wiping an eye. 'Ensh'eass, not en'leass. You need to work on your pronunciation.'

'I will.'

'Get undressed.'

At first it seemed it would be good, that the drug would stimulate him as much as it was her. And its effect on her was to make her active and adventurous, why, she even whispered a few extremely indecent – in her opinion – words into his ear. It must have got to him a little – the effect was, hmm, tangible, and at one moment Ciri was certain it was about to happen. But it didn't. At least not all the way.

And once again he became impatient. He stood up and threw a sable fur over his shoulders. He stood like that, turned away, staring at the window and the moon. Ciri sat up and wrapped her arms around her knees. She was disappointed and cross, and at the same time she felt strangely wistful. It was doubtless the action of the powerful fisstech.

'It's all my fault,' she mumbled. 'That scar blights me, I know. I know what you see when you look at me. There's not much elf left in me. A gold nugget in a pile of compost—'

He turned around suddenly.

'You're extremely modest,' he drawled. 'I would say rather: a pearl in pig shit. A diamond on the finger of a rotting corpse. As part of your language training you can create even more comparisons. I'll test you on them tomorrow, little Dh'oine. O human creature in whom nothing, but nothing, remains of an elven woman.'

He walked over to the table, picked up the tube and leaned over the looking glass. Ciri sat as though petrified. She felt as if she'd been spat on.

'I don't come here out of love!' she barked furiously. 'I'm being held and being blackmailed, as you well know! But I'm reconciled to it, I'm doing it for—'

‘For whom?’ he interrupted heatedly, quite unlike an elf. ‘For me? For the Aen Seidhe imprisoned in your world? You foolish maid! You’re doing it for yourself. You come here for yourself and vainly try to give yourself to me. For it’s your only hope, your only chance. And I’ll tell you one more thing. Pray, pray zealously to your human idols, godheads and totems. Because it’ll either be me, or Avallac’h and his laboratory. Believe me, you wouldn’t want to end up in the laboratory and become acquainted with the alternative.’

‘It’s all the same to me,’ she said softly, huddling up in bed. ‘I’ll agree to anything, as long as I regain my freedom. To finally free myself from you. To depart. To my world. To my friends.’

‘Your friends!’ he sneered. ‘Here are your friends!’

He turned around and abruptly tossed the fisstech-strewn looking glass to her.

‘Here are your friends,’ he repeated. ‘Have a look.’

He went out, the tails of the fur flapping behind him.

At first she only saw her own, blurred reflection in the dirtied glass. But almost immediately the looking glass brightened up milkily, filled up with smoke. And then with an image.

Yennefer suspended in a chasm, back arched, with hands raised. The sleeves of her dress are like the outstretched wings of a bird. Her hair undulates, little fishes dart among it. Whole shoals of shimmering, busy little fish. Some of them are nibbling the sorceress’s cheeks and eyes. A rope runs towards the bottom of the lake from Yennefer’s leg, and the end of the rope, trapped in the sludge and waterweed, is a large basket of stones. High above, the surface of the water shines and sparkles.

Yennefer’s dress undulates in the same rhythm as the waterweed.

The surface of the looking glass, smudged with fisstech, becomes enveloped in smoke.

Geralt, glassily pale, with closed eyes, sits under long icicles extending from a rock, motionless, covered in ice and quickly being buried in snow being blown over him by a blizzard. His white hair has already become white tangles of ice, white icicles hang from his eyebrows, eyelashes and lips. The snow keeps falling and falling. The snowdrift covering Geralt’s legs grows, the fluffy piles on his

shoulders grow. The blizzard howls and whistles . . .

Ciri leapt up from the bed, and hurled the looking glass at the wall with great force. The amber frame smashed and the glass shattered into a million splinters.

She recognised, knew, remembered that kind of vision. From her earlier dreams.

'It's all false!' she yelled. 'Do you hear, Auberon? I don't believe it! It's not true! It's just your anger, which is as impotent as you are! It's your anger . . .'

She sat on the floor and burst into tears.

*

She suspected the palace walls had ears. The next day she couldn't rid herself of the ambiguous looks. She felt sneers behind her back, listened out for whispers.

Avallac'h was nowhere to be found. *He knows*, she thought, *he knows what happened and is avoiding me. In advance, before I got up, he sailed or rode somewhere far away with his gilded elf-woman. He doesn't want to talk to me, doesn't want to admit his entire plan has come to nothing.*

Eredin was nowhere to be found either. But that was to be expected. He often went riding with his Dearg Ruadhri, the Red Horsemen.

Ciri led Kelpie out of the stable and rode to the far side of the river, frantically thinking the whole time, not noticing anything around her.

To escape is what matters. It doesn't matter if all those visions were false or true. One thing is certain – Yennefer and Geralt are there in my world and my place is there, with them. I have to escape from here, escape without delay! After all, there must be a way. I entered it alone, I ought to be able to leave alone. Eredin said I have an untamed talent, and Vysogota suspected the same thing. There was no way out of Tor Zireael; I explored it thoroughly. But perhaps there is some other tower . . .

She looked into the distance, at the far-off hill, at the silhouette of the cromlech visible there. *Forbidden territory*, she

thought. *Ha, I see it's too far. The barrier probably won't allow me to go there. Not worth the effort. I'll ride upstream instead. I haven't ridden there yet.*

Kelpie neighed, tossed her head, and broke into a hard run. She wouldn't let herself be turned. Instead she trotted hard towards the hill. Ciri was so dumbstruck that for a moment she didn't react and let the mare run. Only a moment later did she yell and tug at the reins. The result was that Kelpie reared up, kicked, jerked her rump and galloped away. Continuing in the same direction.

Ciri didn't stop her, didn't try to control her. She was utterly amazed. But she knew Kelpie too well. The mare could be disobedient, but not to this extent. Behaviour like this must mean something.

Kelpie slowed to a trot. She continued straight ahead towards the hill topped with the cromlech.

More or less a furlong, Ciri thought. *At any moment the barrier will come down.*

The mare ran into the stone circle, amidst crowded, moss-covered and lopsided monoliths growing out of a thicket of thorny brambles, and stopped dead. The only thing Kelpie moved was her ears, which she pricked up attentively.

Ciri tried to rein her around and then set off. Without success. Were it not for the blood vessels throbbing on Kelpie's neck, Ciri would have sworn she was sitting not on a horse, but on a statue. Suddenly something touched her back. Something sharp, something that penetrated her clothing and pricked painfully. She didn't have time to turn around. Then a ruddy-coloured unicorn emerged from behind the rocks without the slightest noise and thrust its horn under her arm. Hard. Roughly. She felt a trickle of blood running down her side.

Yet another unicorn emerged from the other side. This one was completely white, from the tips of its ears to the end of its tail. Only its nostrils were pink, and its eyes were black.

The white unicorn approached. And slowly, very slowly, placed its head in her lap. The excitement was so powerful Ciri moaned.

I've grown, resounded in her head. *I've grown, Star-Eye. Back then, in the desert, I didn't know how to behave. Now I know.*

‘Little Horse?’ she moaned, still almost hanging from the two horns piercing her.

My name is Ihuarraquax. Do you remember me, Star-Eye? Do you remember treating me? Saving me?

He stepped back and turned around. She saw the mark of a scar on his leg. She recognised him. Remembered.

‘Little Horse! It’s you! But your coat was a different colour . . .’

I’ve grown up.

In her head came a sudden confusion, whispers, voices, cries and neighing. The horns withdrew. She noticed that the second unicorn, the one behind her back, was dappled blue-grey.

The elders are learning you, Star-Eye. They are learning you through me. Just a moment longer and they’ll be able to talk by themselves. They’ll tell you themselves what they want from you.

The cacophony in Ciri’s head burst in an eruption of savage tumult. And almost immediately abated, before it flowed into a stream of comprehensible and clear thoughts.

We want to help you escape, Star-Eye.

She was silent, though her heart pounded hard in her chest.

Where is the tremendous joy? Where are the thanks?

‘And why,’ she asked aggressively, ‘this desire to help me all of a sudden? Do you love me so much?’

We don’t love you at all. But this is not your world. This is no place for you. You cannot stay here. We don’t want you to stay.

She clenched her teeth. Although excited by the prospect, she shook her head. Little Horse – Ihuarraquax – pricked up his ears, pawed the ground with a hoof and glanced at her with his black eye. The ruddy unicorn stamped so hard the ground shook, and twisted its horn menacingly. It snorted angrily, and Ciri understood.

You don’t trust us.

‘I don’t,’ she confessed cheerfully. ‘Everybody here is playing a game of their own, and trying to exploit me in my ignorance. Why exactly should I trust you? There’s clearly no love lost between you and the elves. I saw for myself on the steppe how there was almost a fight. I can easily assume you want to use me to annoy them. I’m not fond of them either, after all they’ve imprisoned me and are

forcing me to do something I don't want to do at all. But I won't allow myself to be taken advantage of.'

The ruddy unicorn shook his head, and his horn made a threatening movement again. The blue-grey one neighed. Ciri's head thundered like the inside of a well, and the thought she picked up was unpleasant.

'Aha!' she cried. 'You're just like them! Either subservience and obedience, or death? I'm not afraid! And I won't let myself be abused!'

She felt confusion and chaos in her head again. It was some time before a clear thought emerged.

It's good, Star-Eye, that you don't like being taken advantage of. That is precisely what concerns us. That is precisely what we want to guarantee to you. To ourselves. And to the whole world. To all worlds.

'I don't understand.'

You are a dangerous weapon, a fell weapon. We can't allow that weapon to fall into the hands of the Alder King, the Fox or the Sparrowhawk.

'Who?' she stammered. 'Ah . . .'

The Alder King is old. But the Fox and the Sparrowhawk cannot seize power over Ard Gaeth, the Gateway to the Worlds. They captured it once. They lost it once. Now they can do nothing more than wander, roam among the worlds taking tiny steps, alone, like spectres, powerless. The Fox to Tir ná Béa Arainne, the Sparrowhawk and his horsemen around the Spiral. They can go no further, they don't have the strength. Which is why they dream of Ard Gaeth and power. We shall show you how they have already abused such power. We shall show you, Star-Eye, when you leave here.

'I can't leave here. They've put a spell on me. A barrier. Geas Garadh . . .'

You cannot be imprisoned. You are now Master of the Worlds.

'Like hell. I don't have any natural talent, I can't control anything. And I relinquished the Power in the desert, a year ago. Little Horse was a witness.'

In the desert you relinquished conjuring. The Power you have in your blood cannot be relinquished. You still have it. We shall teach you how to use it.

‘And isn’t it, perhaps,’ she shouted, ‘that you want to capture that power, this power over the worlds that I reputedly have?’

It is not. We do not have to capture that power. For we have always had it.

Trust them, requested Ihuarraquax. *Trust, Star-Eye.*

‘Under one condition.’

The unicorns jerked up their heads and flared their nostrils. You would have sworn sparks were shooting from their eyes. *They don’t like it*, thought Ciri, *when conditions are imposed on them. They don’t even like the sound of the word.* Spet*, I don’t know if I’m doing the right thing . . . Let’s hope it doesn’t end tragically . . .*

Speak. What is the condition?

‘Ihuarraquax will be with me.’

*

In the evening it clouded over, became close. A thick, sticky mist rose from the river. And when darkness fell over Tir ná Lia, a storm sounded with a dull, distant growl. Every now and then the glow of lightning lit the horizon.

Ciri had been ready a long time. Dressed in black, with sword on her back, anxious and tense, she waited impatiently for dusk.

She passed quietly through the empty vestibule, stole through the colonnade and onto the terrace. The River Easnadh sparkled in the darkness, willows soughed.

Distant thunder rolled across the sky.

Ciri led Kelpie out of the stable. The mare knew what was expected of her. She trotted obediently towards the Porphyry Bridge. For a moment Ciri followed her tracks, then glanced at the terrace beside which the boats stood.

I can’t, she thought. *I’ll appear before him once more. Perhaps I’ll manage to delay the pursuers by doing it? It’s risky, but there’s no other way.*

*

In the first moment she thought he wasn't there, that the royal chambers were empty. Because they were silent and lifeless.

She only noticed him after a moment. He was sitting in an armchair in the corner, a white shirt gaping open on his skinny chest. The shirt was made of stuff so fine it clung to his body as though wet.

The Alder King's face and hands were almost as white as his shirt.

He raised his eyes towards her, and there was a void in them.

'Shiadhal?' he whispered. 'I'm glad you are here. You know, they told me you had died.'

He opened his hand and something fell onto the carpet. It was the flacon of grey-green nephrite. 'Lara.' The Alder King moved his head, and touched his neck as though his royal torc'h was garrotting him. '*Caemm a me, luned*. Come to me, daughter. *Caemm a me, elaine*.'

Ciri sensed death in his breath.

'*Elaine blath, feainne wedd* . . .' he sang. '*Mire, luned*, your ribbon has come undone . . . Allow me . . .'

He tried to lift his hand, but he was unable to. He sighed deeply, raised his hand abruptly, and looked her in the eyes. This time lucidly.

'Zireael,' he said. '*Loc'hlaith*. You are indeed destiny, O Lady of the Lake. Mine too, as it transpires.

Va'esse deireadh aep eigean . . .' he said a moment later, and Ciri observed with dread that his words and movements had begun to slow down horribly.

'But,' he finished with a sigh, 'it's good that something is beginning.'

They heard a long-drawn-out peal of thunder outside the window. The storm was still far away. But it was approaching fast.

'In spite of everything,' he said, 'I very much don't want to die, Zireael. And I'm so sorry that I must. Who'd have thought it? I thought I wouldn't regret it. I've lived long, I've experienced everything. I've become bored with everything . . . but nonetheless I feel regret. And do you know what else? Come closer. I'll tell you in

confidence. Let it be our secret.'

She bent forward.

'I'm afraid,' he whispered.

'I know.'

'Are you with me?'

'Yes, I am.'

'*Va faill, luned.*'

'Farewell, O Alder King.'

She sat with him, holding his hand, until he went completely quiet and his delicate breath faded. She didn't wipe away the tears. She let them flow.

The storm was coming closer. The horizon blazed with lightning.

*

She ran quickly down the marble staircase to the terrace with the small columns, beside which the boats were rocking. She untied one, the outermost, which she had selected the evening before. She pushed off the terrace with a long mahogany pole she had had the foresight to remove from a curtain rod. She doubted whether the boat would be as obedient to her as it had to Avallac'h.

The boat glided noiselessly with the current. Tir ná Lia was quiet and dark. Only the statues on the terrace followed her with their dead gaze. Ciri counted the bridges.

The sky above the forest was lit up by a flash of lightning. A moment later there was a long grumble of thunder.

The third bridge.

Something stole across the bridge, softly, as nimble as a great black rat. The boat rocked as he jumped onto the bow. Ciri threw down the rod and drew her sword.

'And so,' hissed Eredin Bréacc Glas, 'you wish to deprive us of your company?'

He also drew a sword. In a brief flash of lightning she managed to size up the weapon. The blade was single-edged,

slightly curved. The edge of the blade was shining and undoubtedly sharp, the hilt was long and the pommel was in the shape of a circular, openwork plate. It was apparent at once that the elf knew how to use it.

He unexpectedly rocked the boat, pressing a foot down hard on the side. Ciri kept her balance with ease, and righted the boat with a powerful tilt of her body, then almost immediately tried the same trick by jumping on the side with both feet. He wobbled but kept his balance and lunged at her with his sword. She parried the blow, blocking instinctively, for she could see little. She retaliated with a rapid, low cut. Eredin parried and struck, and Ciri deflected the blow. A stream of sparks flew from the blades as though from flint and steel.

He rocked the boat again, hard, almost knocking her over. Ciri danced, balancing with arms outstretched. He retreated towards the bow and lowered his sword.

'Where did you learn that, Swallow?'

'You'd be astonished.'

'I doubt it. Was it your idea that the barrier can be overcome by sailing along the river, or did someone reveal it to you?'

'It doesn't matter.'

'It does. And let's get to the bottom of it. There are methods for doing that. Now drop your sword and we'll go back.'

'Like hell.'

'We're going back, Zireael. Auberon's waiting. Tonight, I guarantee, he'll be lively and full of vigour.'

'Like hell,' she repeated. 'He overdosed on that invigorating draught you showed me. The one you gave him. Or perhaps it wasn't for vigour at all.'

'What are you talking about?'

'He's dead.'

Eredin quickly overcame his astonishment and suddenly went for her, rocking the boat. Balancing, they traded several ferocious blows, the water carrying the resonant clang of steel.

Lightning lit up the night. A bridge slid past above their heads. One of the last bridges of Tir ná Lia. Or maybe the last?

‘You must understand, Swallow,’ he rasped, ‘that you’re only delaying the inevitable. I can’t let you leave here.’

‘Why not? Auberon’s dead. And I’m nobody and mean nothing, after all. You told me so yourself.’

‘Well, it’s true.’ He raised his sword. ‘You mean nothing. You’re a tiny clothes moth that can be crushed in the fingers into shining dust, but which, perhaps, if it’s allowed, can cut out a hole in a precious fabric. You’re a grain of pepper, despicably small, but which when inadvertently chewed spoils the most exquisite food, forces one to spit it out, when one wanted to savour it. That is what you are. Nothing. An irritating nothing.’

Lightning. In its light Ciri saw what she wanted to see. The elf raised his sword and swung, leaping onto the bench of the boat. He had the advantage of height. He was sure to win the next clash.

‘You ought not to draw a weapon on me, Zireael. It’s too late now. I won’t forgive you that. I won’t kill you, oh, no. But a few weeks in bed, in bandages, will certainly do you good.’

‘Wait. First, I want to tell you something. Disclose a certain secret.’

‘And what could you tell me?’ he snorted. ‘What can you tell me that I don’t know? What truth can you reveal to me?’

‘That you won’t fit under the bridge.’

He had no time to react, struck the bridge with the back of his head and shot forward, losing his balance completely. Ciri could have simply pushed him out of the boat, but was afraid that wouldn’t be enough, that it wouldn’t stop her being pursued. Besides, he, whether deliberately or not, had killed the Alder King. And he deserved pain for that.

She stabbed him in the thigh, right at the edge of his mail shirt. He didn’t even scream. He flew overboard and splashed into the river, the water closing over him.

She turned around and looked. It was a long time before he surfaced. Before he dragged himself out onto some marble steps descending into the river. He lay still, dripping water and blood.

‘It’ll do you good,’ she muttered. ‘A few weeks in bed in bandages.’

She grabbed the pole, and pushed off powerfully. The River Easnadh became more and more rapid. The boat was moving more

quickly. The final buildings of Tir ná Lia soon lay behind her.

She didn't look back.

First it became very dark, for the boat had passed into an old forest, among trees whose boughs touched each other over the river, forming a vault. Then it brightened up as the forest came to an end, and on both banks there were alder wetlands, reeds and bulrushes. Tussocks of weed, floating water plants and tree trunks appeared in the previously clear river. When the sky brightened up from the lightning she saw rings on the water, and after the thunder rumbled she heard the splash of startled fish. Something was splashing and plopping, squelching and smacking its lips. Several times, not far from the boat, she saw large glowing eyes. Several times the boat shuddered upon hitting something large and alive. *Not everything here is beautiful. For the unaccustomed this world means death.* She repeated the words of Eredin in her mind.

The river broadened considerably, spreading out wide. Islands and channels appeared. She let the boat float randomly, wherever the current took her. But she began to worry. What would happen if she made a mistake and took the wrong branch?

She had barely thought that when the neighing of Kelpie and a strong, mental signal from the unicorn came from the rushes by the bank.

'It's you, Little Horse!'

Hurry, Star-Eye. Follow me.

'To my world?'

First, I must show you something. The elders ordered me to.

They rode, first through a forest, then across a steppe densely furrowed with ravines and gorges. Lightning flashed, thunder bellowed. The storm was coming closer. A wind was getting up.

The unicorn led Ciri to one of the ravines.

It's here.

'What's here?'

Dismount and see.

She obeyed. The ground was uneven. She tripped. Something crunched and slipped under her foot. Lightning flashed and Ciri cried hollowly.

She was standing among a sea of bones.

The ravine's sandy slopes had subsided, probably washed away by downpours. And that revealed what had been concealed. A burial ground. A boneyard. A huge heap of bones. Shinbones, hip bones, ribs and thigh bones. And skulls.

She picked up one of them.

The lightning flashed and Ciri screamed. She understood whose remains they were.

The skull, which bore the marks of a blade, had canine teeth.

Now you understand, she heard in her head. *Now you know. They did it, the Aen Elle. The Alder King. The Fox. The Sparrowhawk. This world was not their world at all. It became their world. After they had conquered it. When they opened Ard Gaeth, having deceived and taken advantage of us, just as they have tried to deceive and take advantage of you.*

Ciri threw the skull away.

'Murderers!' she shouted into the night. 'Scoundrels.'

Thunder rolled across the sky with a clatter. Ihuarraquax neighed loudly, in warning. She understood. She leaped into the saddle, and urged Kelpie into a gallop with a cry.

Pursuers were on their trail.

*

This has happened before, she thought, gulping air as she galloped. *This has happened before. A ride like this, reckless, in the darkness, on a night full of dread, ghosts and apparitions.*

'Forward, Kelpie!'

A furious gallop, eyes watering from the speed. Lightning split the sky in two. Ciri sees alders lit up on both sides of the road. From all sides misshapen trees reach out towards her the long, knobbly arms of their boughs, snap the black jaws of their hollows, and hurl curses and threats in her tracks. Kelpie neighs piercingly, hurtles along so fast her hooves seem only to brush the earth. Ciri flattens herself against the mare's neck. Not just to minimise the drag, but also to avoid the alder branches, trying to knock or pull her from

the saddle. The branches swish, lash, and whip, trying to latch onto her clothes and hair. The misshapen trunks sway, the hollows snap and roar.

Kelpie neighs wildly. The unicorn replies. There is a snow-white dot in the gloom. It points the way.

Hurry, Star-Eye! Ride with all your might!

There are more and more alders, it's getting more and more difficult to dodge their boughs. Soon they'll bar the entire road . . .

A cry behind. The voice of the pursuers.

Ihuarraquax neighs. Ciri receives his signal. She understands its significance. She presses herself to Kelpie's neck. She doesn't have to urge her on. The mare, chased by fear, flies in a breakneck gallop.

Again a signal from the unicorn, clearer, penetrating her brain. It's an instruction, quite simply an order.

Leap, Star-Eye. You must leap. Into another place, into another time.

Ciri doesn't understand, but she fights to. She tries hard to understand, she focuses, she focuses so hard that the blood buzzes and pulses in her ears . . .

Lightning. And after it a sudden darkness, darkness soft and black, black darkness that nothing can lighten.

A buzzing in her ears.

*

The wind on her face. A cool wind. Drops of rain. The scent of pine in her nostrils.

Kelpie prances, snorts and stamps. Her neck is hot and wet.

Lightning. Soon after it thunder. In the light Ciri sees Ihuarraquax shaking his head and horn, powerfully pawing the ground with his hoof.

'Little Horse?'

I'm here, Star-Eye.

The sky is full of stars. Full of constellations. The Dragon. The

Winter Maiden. The Seven Goats. The Pitcher.

And almost just above the horizon – the Eye.

'We did it,' she gasped. 'We made it, Little Horse. This is my world!'

His signal is so clear that Ciri understands everything.

No, Star-Eye. We've fled from one world. But it still isn't your place, not your time. There are still many worlds ahead of us.

'Don't leave me alone.'

I will not. I am in debt to you. I must pay it off. Entirely.

*

Along with the growing wind, the sky darkens from the west. The clouds, coming in waves, extinguish the constellations in turn. The Dragon goes out, the Winter Maiden goes out, then the Seven Goats and the Pitcher. The Eye, which shines brightest and longest, goes out.

The line of the horizon is lit up by the short-lived brightness of lightning. Thunder rolls with a dull rumble. The wind abruptly intensifies, blowing dust and dry leaves into their eyes.

The unicorn neighs and sends a mental signal.

There's no time to lose. Our only hope is in a quick escape. To the right place, and the right time. We must hurry, Star-Eye.

I am the Master of Worlds. I am the Elder Blood.

I am of the blood of Lara Dorren, the daughter of Shiadhal.

Ihuarraquax neighs, urges them on. Kelpie echoes it with a long-drawn-out snort. Ciri puts on her gloves.

'I'm ready,' she says.

A buzzing in her ears. A flash and brightness. And then darkness.

The trial, sentence and execution of Joachim de Wett is usually ascribed by most historians to the violent, cruel and tyrannical nature of Emperor Emhyr, and neither is there any shortage either – particularly amongst authors of a literary bent – of allusive hypotheses about revenge and the settling of wholely private scores. It is high time the truth were told: the truth, which for every attentive scholar is more than obvious. Duke de Wett commanded the Verden Group in such a way that the term 'inept' is much too mild. Having against him forces twice as weak as his own, he delayed the offensive to the north, and directed all his efforts towards a fight against the Verdanian guerrillas. The Verden Group committed unspeakable atrocities against the civilian population. The result was easy to predict and was inevitable. If, in the winter, the forces of the insurgents had numbered less than half a thousand, by spring almost the entire country had risen up. King Ervyll, who had been devoted to the Empire, was eliminated, and the insurrection was led by his son, Prince Kistrin, who sympathised with the Nordlings. Having on his flank a landing force of pirates from Skellige, to the fore an offensive of Nordlings from Cidaris, and at the rear a rebellion, de Wett became entangled in piecemeal engagements, suffering defeat after defeat. In the process he delayed the offensive of the Centre Army Group – instead of, as had been planned, engaging the Nordlings' wing, the Verden Group tied down Menno Coehoorn. The Nordlings immediately exploited the situation and went on the counter-attack, breaking through the encirclement near Mayena and Maribor, and thwarting the chances of those vital forts being swiftly captured a second time.

The ineptitude and stupidity of de Wett also had a psychological significance. The myth of Nilfgaard's invincibility was broken. Scores of volunteers began to flock to the army of the Nordlings . . .

Restif de Montholon

The Northern Wars. Myths, Lies and Half-truths.

CHAPTER SIX

Jarre – what else can be said? – was very disappointed. An upbringing in a temple and his own open nature made him believe in people, in their goodness, kindness and selflessness. Not much remained of that faith.

He had already slept two nights in the open, among the remains of hay ricks, and now it looked like he would be spending a third night in a similar fashion. In every village where he asked for a bed or a piece of bread he was answered with either a weighty silence, or insults and threats from behind securely locked gates. It didn't help when he said who he was and why he was travelling.

He was very, very disappointed in people.

It was quickly growing dark. The boy marched jauntily and briskly along a path between some fields. He spotted a hay rick, resigned and downcast at the prospect of another night under the open sky. March was, admittedly, extremely warm, but it got cold at night. And very frightening.

Jarre looked up at the sky, where, as it had been every night for almost a week, the gold and red bee of a comet was visible, crossing the sky from the west to the east, dragging in its wake a flickering plait of fire. He wondered what this strange phenomenon, mentioned in many prophecies, might actually auger.

He started walking again. It was growing darker and darker. The track led downwards, into an avenue of dense undergrowth that assumed terrifying shapes in the semi-darkness. From below, where it was even darker, drifted the cold, foul smell of rotting weed and something else. Something very unpleasant.

Jarre stopped. He tried to persuade himself that what was crawling over his back and shoulders was not fear, but cold. Unsuccessfully.

A low footbridge connected the banks of a canal overgrown with osiers and misshapen willows, black and shining like freshly pared pitch. Long holes gaped in the footbridge in places where the timbers had rotted and caved in, and the handrail was broken, its spindles submerged in the water. The willows grew more thickly beyond the bridge. Although it was still a long way to the actual

night, although the distant meadows beyond the canal were still glowing with a yarn of mist hanging on the top of the grass, darkness reigned among the willows. Jarre saw the vague ruins of a building in the gloom – probably a mill, sluice or eel smokery.

I must cross that footbridge, thought the lad. *There's nothing to be done! Although I feel in my bones that something evil is lurking in the darkness, I must get to the other side of this canal. I must cross this canal, like that mythical leader or hero I read about in yellowed manuscripts in the Temple of Melitele. I'll traverse this canal and then . . . What was it? The cards will have been dealt? No, the dice will have been cast. Behind me lies my past, before me stretches my future . . .*

He stepped onto the bridge and at once knew that his sense of foreboding hadn't been mistaken. Before he even saw them. Or heard them.

'Well?' rasped one of the men who now blocked his way. 'Didn't I say? I said, just wait a tick and someone'll appear.'

'Exackly, Okultich,' another of the characters armed with clubs lisped slightly. 'Verily we'll 'ave to make you a fortune-teller or a wise-man. Well, gentle passer-by, walking all alone! Will you give us what you have of your own free will, or will it have to come to a struggle?'

'I don't have anything!' yelled Jarre at the top of his voice, although he didn't have much hope that anybody would hear and rush to help. 'I'm a poor wanderer! I don't have a groat to my name! What can I give you? This cane? These garments?'

'Not only that,' said the lisping one, and something in his voice made Jarre tremble. 'For you ought to know, poor wanderer, that in truth we, being in urgent need, were looking out for a wench. Well, night's just around the corner, no one else is coming now, so beggars can't be choosers. Grab 'im, boys!'

'I have a knife,' yelled Jarre. 'I'm warning you!'

He had a knife indeed. He'd swiped it from the temple kitchen the day before his flight and hidden it in his bundle. But he didn't reach for it. He was paralysed – and terrified – by the realisation that it was pointless and that nothing would help him.

'I have a knife!'

'Well, prithee,' sneered the lisping one, approaching. 'He has a knife. Who'd have thought it?'

Jarre couldn't run away. Terror turned his legs into two posts stuck into the ground. Adrenaline seized him by the throat like a noose.

'Hi there!' a third character suddenly shouted, in a young and strangely familiar voice. 'I think I know him! Yes, yes, I know him! Let him be, I say, he's a pal! Jarre? Do you recognise me? I'm Melfi! Hey, Jarre? Do you recognise me?'

'Yes . . . I do . . .' Jarre fought against the hideous, overwhelming, previously unfamiliar sensation with all his strength. Only when he felt a pain in his hip, which had smashed against a timber of the bridge, did he understand what the sensation was.

The sensation of losing consciousness.

*

'Oh, this is a surprise,' said Melfi. 'Why, a fluke among flukes! Why, coming across a fellow-countryman. A pal from Ellander. A mate! Eh, Jarre?'

Jarre swallowed a bite of the hard, rubbery piece of fatback that his strange company had given him and ate a bit of roasted turnip. He didn't reply, but only nodded towards the whole group of six surrounding the campfire.

'And which way are you going, Jarre?'

'To Vizima.'

'Ha! We're heading to Vizima too! Why, a fluke among flukes! What, Milton? Remember Milton, Jarre?'

Jarre didn't. He wasn't certain if he had ever seen him. As a matter of fact, Melfi was exaggerating a little in calling him a pal. He was the cooper's son from Ellander. When the two of them used to attend the temple school, Melfi would regularly and severely beat Jarre and call him a 'bastard-without-a-mother-or-father-begotten-in-the-nettles'. This went on for about a year, after which the cooper took his son out of school, since it had been proved that his offspring was only fit for barrels. Thus Melfi, rather than toiling to learn the arcana of reading and writing, toiled to whittle staves in his father's workshop. And after Jarre had completed his studies and on the strength of a recommendation from the temple became an assistant scribe in the magistrates' court, the cooper's son –

following the example of his father – bowed to him, gave him presents and declared his friendship.

'—we're going to Vizima,' Melfi continued his tale. 'To join up. All of us here, to a man, are going to join the army. These here, look, Milton and Ograbek, peasant boys, have been selected for the acreage duty, why, you know. . .'

'I do.' Jarre cast his eyes over the peasant sons, fair-haired and as alike as brothers, chewing some unrecognisable food roasted in the cinders. 'One for each two score and ten acres. The acreage levy. And you, Melfi?'

'With me,' sighed the cooper's son, 'it's like this, see: the first time the guilds had to supply a recruit my father got me out of trouble. But when poverty came, we had to draw lots a second time, because the town so decided . . . Well, you know . . .'

'I do,' nodded Jarre again. 'An additional lottery for the levy was decreed by a resolution of Ellander town council on the day of the sixteenth of January. It was necessary owing to the Nilfgaardian threat—'

'Just listen to 'im talk, Pike,' raspingly interjected the thickset and shaven-headed fellow, the one called Okultich, who had hailed him on the bridge not long before.

'Fop! Know-it-all!'

'Smart alec!' drawled another huge farmhand with a dopey smile permanently plastered onto his round face. 'Know-all!'

'Shut it, Klaproth,' slowly lisped the one called Pike, the oldest of the company, sturdy, with a drooping moustache and a shaved nape. 'Since he's a know-it-all, it's worth listening when he talks. There may be a benefit from it. Facts. And facts never harmed anyone. Well, almost never. And almost no one.'

'I'll second that,' announced Melfi. 'He, I mean Jarre, is indeed clever, knows his letters . . . A scholar! I mean he works as a court scribe in Ellander, and at the Temple of Melitele the whole book collection is under his care—'

'What then, I wonder,' interrupted Pike, staring at Jarre through the smoke and sparks, 'is a sodding court-temple librarian doing on the highway to Vizima?'

'Just like you,' said the boy, 'I'm going to join the army.'

'And what—' Pike's eyes shone, reflecting the glow like the

eyes of a real fish in the light of a torch on the bow of a boat '— what is a court-temple scholar hoping to find in the army? For he can't be going to join up. Eh? Why, any fool knows that temples are exempt from the levy, they don't have to supply recruits. And any fool knows that every single court is capable of defending its scribe and wangling him out of joining the army. So what's it all about, master clerk?'

'I'm joining the army as a volunteer,' declared Jarre. 'I'm signing up myself, of my own free will, not from the levy. Partly for personal reasons, but mainly from patriotic duty.'

The company roared with loud, thunderous, general laughter.

'Heed, boys,' Pike finally said, 'what contradictions sometimes lurk in a body. Two natures. Here we have a young shaver, it would seem, educated and worldly, and undoubtedly clever by nature on top of all that. He ought to know what's happening in the war, know who's fighting whom and who will soon utterly defeat whom. And he, as you've heard, without being forced, of his own free will, out of paterotic duty, wants to join the losing party.'

No one commented. Jarre included.

'Such a paterotic duty,' Pike finally said, 'is usually only the mark of the feeble-minded. Why, perhaps it even befits temple-court alumni. But there was talk here of some sort of personal reasons. I'm awful curious as to what those personal reasons might be.'

'They're so personal—' Jarre cut him off '—that I'm not going to talk about them. All the more so since you, good sir, are in no hurry to talk about your reasons.'

'Now heed,' said Pike a moment later. 'Were some boor to talk to me like that, he'd get a punch in the mush right off. Well, if he's a learned scribe . . . I'll forgive him . . . just this once. And say: I'm also going to join up. And also as a volunteer.'

'In order, like one of the feeble-minded, to join the losers?' It surprised Jarre himself where so much insolence had suddenly come from. 'Fleecing travellers on bridges en route?'

'He,' chortled Melfi, anticipating Pike, 'he's still mad at us for that ambush on the footbridge. Let it go, Jarre, it was only a prank! Just innocent tricks. Right, Pike?'

'Right.' Pike yawned and snapped his teeth so loud it echoed.

‘Just innocent tricks. Life is sad and glum, just like a calf being led to the slaughter. Then only tricks or pranks can cheer it up. Don’t you think so, scribe?’

‘I do. By and large.’

‘That’s good.’ Pike didn’t lower his shining eyes from him. ‘For otherwise you’d be a miserable companion for us and it would be better if you walked to Vizima by yourself. Right away, for instance.’

Jarre said nothing. Pike stretched.

‘I’ve said what I meant to say. Well, mates, we’ve fooled around, frolicked, had our fun, and now it’s time. If we’re to be in Vizima by suppertime, we ought to set off with the sun.’

*

The night was very cold, and Jarre couldn’t sleep despite his tiredness. He was curled up in a ball under his mantle, with his knees almost touching his chin. When he finally fell asleep, he slept badly, his dreams constantly waking him up. He couldn’t remember most of them. Apart from two. In the first dream, the witcher, Geralt of Rivia, was sitting beneath long icicles hanging from a rock, motionless, covered in ice and being quickly buried under drifting snow. In the other dream, Ciri was galloping on a black horse, hugging its mane, along an avenue of misshapen alders that were trying hard to seize her with their crooked boughs.

Oh, and just before dawn he dreamed of Triss Merigold. After her stay in the temple the year before the boy had dreamed about the sorceress several times. The dreams had made Jarre do things which he was very ashamed of afterwards.

This time, naturally, nothing shameful happened. It was too cold.

*

All seven of them set off in the morning, barely after the sun rose. Milton and Ograbek, the peasant sons from the acreage duty, fortified themselves by singing a soldiers’ song.

Here rides the warrior, armour glinting bright.

Flee young lass, he'll steal a kiss this night.

And wherefore not; who will stay his hand?

For his keen blade defends the motherland.

Pike, Okultich, Klaproth and Melfi the cooper's son – who had attached himself to them – were telling each other anecdotes and stories; extremely funny ones. In their opinion.

'—and the Nilfgaardian asks: "What stinks around here?" And the elf says: "Shit". Haaa, haa, haaa!'

'Ha, ha, ha, ha! And do you know this one? A Nilfgaardian, an elf and a dwarf are walking along. They look: a mouse is scampering . . .'

The longer the day went on, the more other wanderers, peasants' carts, bailiffs and small squads of marching soldiers they encountered on the highway. Some of the carts were crammed with goods. Pike's gang followed them with their noses almost touching the ground, like pointers, gathering whatever fell – here a carrot, there a potato, a turnip, occasionally even an onion. Some of the loot they cleverly put away for a rainy day, and some they greedily devoured without even interrupting their joke-telling.

'—and the Nilfgaardian goes: fluuub! And shits himself right up to the ears! Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!'

'Haa, haaa, haa! O Gods, I can't bear it . . . Shat himself . . . Haaaa, haaa, haaa!'

Jarre was waiting for an opportunity and a pretext to wander off. He wasn't keen on Pike, he wasn't keen on Okultich. He wasn't keen on the glances which Pike and Okultich were casting at the passing merchants' wagons, peasants' carts and the women and girls sitting on them. He wasn't keen on Pike's sneering tone, since he kept talking about the usefulness of signing up as a volunteer when defeat and extermination were certain and self-evident.

There was a smell of ploughed earth. And smoke. They saw the roofs of buildings in the valley, among a regular patchwork of fields, groves and fishponds gleaming like mirrors. Sometimes the distant barking of a dog, the lowing of an ox, or the crowing of a

cock reached their ears.

‘You can see these villages are wealthy,’ Pike lisped, licking his lips. ‘Tmall but fanthy.’

‘Halflings live and farm here in the valley,’ Okultich hurried to explain. ‘Everything about them’s fancy and pretty. A thrifty little nation, those midgets.’

‘Damned inhumans,’ rasped Klaproth. ‘Bloody kobolds! They farm here, and poverty and misery befalls real people because of creatures like them. Even war doesn’t harm such as them.’

‘For now.’ Pike stretched his mouth in an ugly smile. ‘Remember this village, lads. The outermoft one, among those birches, right in the forest. Remember it well. If I ever dethire to visit here again, I wouldn’t want to go astray.’

Jarre turned his head away. He pretended he couldn’t hear. That all he could see was the highway in front of him.

They walked on. Milton and Ograbek, the peasant sons from the acreage duty, sang a new song. Less soldierly. Perhaps a little more pessimistic. Which could – particularly after Pike’s earlier allusions – be considered a bad omen.

Hark and think on what I say,

I shall speak of death today,

For no matter how old you be,

You’ll not escape its misery,

Be ever mindful of your due;

Death will surely throttle you!

*

‘He,’ judged Okultich morosely, ‘must have cash. If he doesn’t have cash, may me balls be cut off.’

The individual about whom Okultich had made such a ghastly bet was a wandering trader, hurrying beside a donkey-drawn cart.

‘Dosh or no dosh,’ lisped Pike, ‘the donkey must be worth something. Hasten your steps, boys.’

‘Melfi.’ Jarre seized the cooper’s son by his sleeve. ‘Open your eyes. Can’t you see what’s being planned?’

‘Oh, they’re only jokes, Jarre.’ Melfi wrenched himself free. ‘Just jokes . . .’

The trader’s cart – it was evident from close up – was at the same time a stall, and could be set up within a few moments. The whole donkey-drawn construction was covered in garishly and picturesquely sprawling writing, in which the goods on sale included balsams and remedies, protective talismans and amulets, elixirs, magical philtres and poultices, cleaning agents, and furthermore detectors of metals, ores and truffles and fail-safe baits for fish, ducks and wenches.

The trader, a thin old man weighed down by the burden of his years, looked around, saw them, cursed and drove his donkey on. But the donkey, like all donkeys, had no intention of going any faster.

‘Fine robes on that one,’ judged Okultich quietly. ‘And we’ll certainly find a little something on the cart . . .’

‘Very well, boys,’ said Pike. ‘Chop, chop! We’ll deal with this matter while there are few witnesses on the road.’

Jarre, astonished at his courage, pulled ahead of the company in a few swift paces and turned around, standing between them and the merchant.

‘No,’ he said, fighting to get a word out of his tight throat. ‘I won’t allow it . . .’

Pike slowly opened his coat and displayed a long knife shoved into his belt, clearly as sharp as a razor.

‘Out of the road, scribbler,’ he lisped malevolently. ‘If you respect your neck. I thought you’d fit into our company, but no, your temple, I see, has made you overly sanctimonious. You stink overly of pious incense. So out of the way, for otherwise—’

‘And what’s going on here? Eh?’

Two strange shapes emerged from behind the stout and spreading willows which flanked the highway and were the most common feature of the Ismena valley’s scenery.

The two men wore waxed and upwardly twisted moustaches, colourful puffed breeches, quilted short jackets decorated with ribbons and huge, soft velvet berets with bunches of feathers. Apart

from the sabres and daggers hanging from their broad belts, the two men carried on their backs double-handed swords, probably two yards long, with hilts measuring two feet and large, curved cross guards.

These landsknechts were hopping up and down, and fastening their trousers. Neither of them made even a movement towards the hilts of their terrible swords, but in any case, Pike and Okultich immediately became more docile, and the huge Klaproth shrank like a deflated goatskin.

'We're . . . we're doing nothing . . .' lisped Pike. 'Nothing we shouldn't . . .'

'Just pranks!' squealed Melfi.

'No one's been harmed,' unexpectedly piped up the stooping trader. 'No one!'

'We,' Jarre quickly interjected, 'are going to Vizima, to join up. Perhaps you're going the same way, noble sirs?'

'Indeed we are,' the landsknecht snorted, realising at once what this was about. 'We head for Vizima. Whoever wishes may go with us. It will be safer.'

'Safer, I swear,' added the other one, knowingly, eyeing Pike up and down. 'It behoves me to add, indeed, that not long ago we saw a mounted patrol in the vicinity of the Vizimian bailiwick. They are most inclined to hang, and miserable will be the fate of any marauder whom they catch in the act.'

'And it's most good—' Pike had regained his aplomb, and grinned a gap-toothed smile '—my lords, it's good, gentlemen, that there is law and punishment for rogues, that is the correct order of things. Thus let us set off to Vizima, to the army, for our paterotic duty summons us.'

The landsknecht looked at him long and quite contemptuously, then shrugged, straightened his great sword on his back and set off down the road. His companion, Jarre, as well as the merchant with his donkey and cart set off after him, and at the rear, some distance away, shambled Pike's rabble.

'Thank you, sir knights,' the merchant said some time later, driving his donkey with a withy. 'And thank you, young master.'

'It's nothing.' The landsknecht waved a hand. 'We're accustomed to it.'

‘Various characters are drawn to the army.’ His companion looked back over his shoulder. ‘The order comes to a village or small town to supply a recruit for every five hundred acres, and sometimes that method is used to rid themselves right away of the worst sort of scoundrel. And then the roads are full of nuisances like that lot there. Well, in the army the lance-corporal’s rod will teach them obedience. Those rascals will learn discipline when they’ve run the gauntlet once or twice, faced the rows of lashes—’

‘I,’ Jarre hurried with an explanation, ‘am signing on as a volunteer, not compulsorily.’

‘Commendable, commendable.’ The landsknecht glanced at him and twisted the waxed ends of his moustaches. ‘And I see you are moulded from somewhat different clay than those men. Why are you with them?’

‘Fate brought us together.’

‘I’ve seen such chance encounters and fraternising before.’ The soldier’s voice was grave. ‘It led the fraternisers to the same gibbet. Learn a lesson from that, lad.’

‘I shall.’

*

Before the cloud-darkened sun had stood at the zenith, they reached the main road. Here a forced break in their journey awaited them. As it did a large group of wanderers who also had to stop – for the main road was packed full of marching soldiers.

‘Southwards,’ one of the landsknechts commented knowingly on the direction of the march. ‘To the front. To Maribor and Mayena.’

‘Heed their standards,’ the other one indicated with his head.

‘Redanians,’ said Jarre. ‘Silver eagles on crimson.’

‘You’ve guessed right.’ The landsknecht slapped him on the back. ‘You’re a truly smart youngster. That’s the Redanian Army, which Queen Hedwig has sent to aid us. Now we are strong in unity. Temeria, Redania, Aedirn and Kaedwen. Now we’re all allies, supporters of one cause.’

‘A bit late,’ said Pike with a pronounced sneer from behind

their backs. The landsknecht looked back, but said nothing.

‘So let’s sit down,’ suggested Melfi, ‘and give our pins a rest. There’s no end in sight of that army. It will be ages before the road frees itself up.’

‘Let’s sit down,’ said the merchant, ‘yonder, on that hill. The view will be better from there.’

The Redanian cavalry rode by and, after them, raising dust, marched crossbowmen and pavisiers. After them a column of heavy cavalry trotted past.

‘And they,’ Melfi pointed to the armoured troops, ‘are marching under different colours. They have black standards, flecked with something white.’

‘Ah, the ignorant provinces.’ The landsknecht glanced at him contemptuously. ‘They don’t know their own king’s arms. They are silver lilies, blockhead . . .’

‘Field sable with lilies argent,’ said Jarre, who all of a sudden felt a desire to prove that of all people he wasn’t from the ignorant provinces.

‘In the kingdom of Temeria’s former coat of arms,’ he began, ‘there was a lion passant. But the Temerian royal dukes used a different one. To be precise, they added an extra field to the shield, containing three lilies. Since in heraldic symbolism the lily flower is a sign of the successor to the throne, the royal son, the heir to the throne and sceptre—’

‘Sodding know-it-all,’ barked Klaproth.

‘You can shut your gob, cloth-head,’ said the landsknecht menacingly. ‘And you, lad, go on. This is interesting.’

‘And when Prince Goidemar, the son of old King Gardik, went to fight against the insurgents of the she-devil Falka, the Temerian Army, under his standard, under the emblem of the lily, fought and won decisive victories. And when Goidemar inherited the throne from his father, he established three lilies argent on a field sable as the kingdom’s coat of arms as a memento of those victories and for the miraculous escape of his wife and children from the hands of the enemy. And later King Cedric changed the state coat of arms by a special decree so that it’s a black shield aspersed with silver lilies. And the Temerian coat of arms has been like that ever since. Which you may all easily confirm for yourself, since the Temerian lancers

are riding along the main road right now.'

'You have worked it out very elegantly, young master,' said the merchant.

'Not I,' Jarre sighed, 'but John of Attre, a heraldic scholar.'

'And you are no worse schooled, I see.'

'Perfect for a recruit,' added Pike under his breath. 'To be clubbed to death under the standard of those silver lilies, for the king and Temeria.'

They heard singing. Menacing, soldierly, booming like a sea wave, like the growl of an approaching storm. Following the Temerians passed other soldiers in close and even array. Grey, almost colourless cavalrymen, over which neither standards nor pennants fluttered. A pole with a horizontal bar decorated with horses' tails and three human skulls nailed to it was being borne in front of the commanders riding at the head of the column.

'The Free Company.' The first landsknecht subtly indicated the grey riders. 'Mercenaries. Soldiers of fortune.'

'They're clearly stout-hearted,' gasped Melfi. 'Every man! And they're marching in step, as though on parade . . .'

'The Free Company,' the landsknecht repeated. 'Take a good look, O peasants and striplings, at a genuine soldier. They've been in battle before. It was they, those mercenaries, the companies of Adam Pangratt, Molla, Frontin and Abatemarco, who tipped the scales at Mayena. Thanks to them the Nilfgaardian encirclement was broken. We owe it to them that that the fortress was liberated.'

'Brave and doughty folk indeed, those mercenaries,' added the other, 'as unyielding in battle as a rock. Though the Free Company serves for coin, as you can easily mark from their song.'

The troop approached at a walk, their thunderous song sounding a strong and booming, but strangely gloomy, bitter, note.

No sceptre nor throne will win us over

We shall never be in league with kings

We are in the service of the ducat

That glitters in the sun!

Your oaths are nothing to us

We do not kiss your standards or your hands

We swear faith to the ducat

That glitters in the sun!

'Eh, to serve with them,' sighed Melfi again. 'To fight together with such as them . . . A man would know glory and spoils . . .'

'Do my eyes fail me or what?' Okultich screwed up his face. 'At the head of the second regiment . . . A woman? Do those soldiers of fortune fight under the command of a woman?'

'She's a woman,' confirmed the landsknecht. 'But not just any woman. That's Julia Abatemarco, who they call Pretty Kitty. She's some warrior! Under her command the mercenaries demolished the Black Cloaks and elven troops at Mayena, even though only twice five hundred of them assailed three thousand.'

'I've heard,' said Pike in a strange, repulsively obsequious, but at the same time malicious, tone, 'that the victory didn't count for much, that the ducats spent on the mercenaries went down the drain. Nilfgaard regrouped and gave our boys a thrashing, and a sound one. And encircled Mayena again. And perhaps they've already captured the stronghold? And perhaps they're already heading here? Perhaps they'll be here any day? Perhaps those corrupt mercenaries were bribed with Nilfgaardian gold long ago? And perhaps—'

'And perhaps,' interrupted the landsknecht, enraged, 'you want a punch in the face, you churl? Beware, for running down our army is punished by the noose! So shut your trap, while I'm in a good mood!'

'Oooh!' The bruiser Klaproth, mouth wide open, defused the situation. 'Oooh, look! Look at those funny short-arses!'

An infantry formation armed with halberds, guisarmes, battle-axes, flails and morning stars marched along the road, to the dull thud of drums, the fierce hooting of bagpipes and the shrill whistling of fifes. Dressed in fur cloaks, mail shirts and pointed pot helmets, the soldiers were indeed extremely short.

'Dwarves from the mountains,' explained the first landsknecht. 'One of the Mahakam Volunteer Foot.'

‘I thought,’ said Okultich, ‘that the dwarves weren’t with us, but against us. That those foul short-arses had betrayed us and were in league with the Black Cloaks—’

‘You thought?’ The landsknecht glanced at him piteously. ‘Using what, I wonder? If you swallowed a cockroach with your soup, dolt, you’d have more intelligence in your guts than in your head. Those marching there are one of the dwarven foot regiments that Brouver Hoog, the headman of Mahakam, has sent us as succour. Most of them have also seen action, suffered great losses, so they’ve been withdrawn to Vizima to regroup.’

‘The dwarves are a valiant folk,’ confirmed Melfi. ‘When one of them thumped me in the ear in the tavern in Ellander at Samhain it rang until Yule.’

‘The dwarven regiment is the last in the column.’ The landsknecht shaded his eyes with a hand. ‘That’s the end of the march. The road will soon be empty. Let’s prepare to set off, for it’s almost noon.’

*

‘So many military folk are marching south,’ said the seller of amulets and remedies, ‘that there’s surely going to be a great war. Great misfortune will fall on the people! Great defeats on the armies! Thousands of folk will die from fire and sword. So consider, gentlemen, that this comet, which can be seen in the sky every night, trails a fiery red tail behind it. If a comet’s tail is blue or pale, it heralds cold ailments: chills, pleurisy, phlegm and catarrh, and such aquatic misfortunes as floods, downpours or long periods of rainy weather. While a red colour indicates that it’s a comet of fevers, blood and fire, and also of the iron which springs from the fire. Dreadful, dreadful defeats will befall the people! Great pogroms and massacres will happen. As it says in the prophecy: corpses will pile up to a height of a dozen ells, wolves shall howl on the desolate ground, and men will kiss other men’s footsteps . . . Oh woe to us!’

‘Why to us?’ the landsknecht interrupted coolly. ‘The comet is flying high. It can also be seen from Nilfgaard, not to mention the Ina valley, whence, they say, Menno Coehoorn is approaching. The Black Cloaks are also looking at the sky and also see the comet.

Why, then, should we not assume that it foretells their defeat and not ours? That their corpses will be piled up?'

'That's right!' snapped the other landsknecht. 'Woe to them, to the Black Cloaks.'

'You've worked it out elegantly, gentlemen.'

'Certainly.'

*

They passed by the forest surrounding Vizima and entered meadows and pastures. Entire herds of horses were grazing there, of various kinds: cavalry, harness, and draught horses. There was next to no grass on the meadows, it being March, but there were wagons and barracks full of hay.

'See that?' Okultich licked his lips. 'Eh, fine little horses! And no one's guarding them! There for the taking—'

'Shut your trap,' hissed Pike and obsequiously directed his gap-toothed grin at the landsknechts. 'He, gentlemen, has always dreamed of serving in the cavalry, which is why he looks at those steeds so greedily.'

'In the cavalry!' snorted the first landsknecht. 'What fantasies has the churl! He'll sooner be a stable boy, gathering muck from under the horses with a pitchfork and wheeling it out on a barrow.'

'That's right, sire!'

They went on, and soon reached a causeway running beside ponds and ditches. And suddenly they saw the red tiles of the towers of Vizima castle looming over the lake above the tops of alders.

'Well, we're almost there,' said the merchant. 'Can you smell it?'

'Uurgh!' Melfi grimaced. 'What a stench! What's that?'

'Probably soldiers on the royal coin who died of hunger,' muttered Pike behind their backs, making sure the landsknechts didn't hear.

'Almost makes your eyes water, doesn't it?' laughed one of them. 'Aye, thousands of military folk have wintered here, and

military folk have to eat, and when they eat they defecate. Nature has ordered things thus and there's nothing you can do about it! And what's been shat out is carted to these ditches and dumped, without even being buried. In the winter, while the frost kept the shit frozen, you could stand it, but from the spring . . . Ugh!'

'And more and more fresh soldiers are arriving and adding to the old heap.' The other landsknecht also spat. 'And can you hear that great buzzing? It's flies. There are swarms of them, an uncommon thing for early spring! Cover your gobs with whatever you can, for they'll get into your eyes and mouths, the bastards. And briskly. The quicker we pass by, the better.'

*

They passed the ditches, but didn't manage to lose the stench. On the contrary, Jarre would have sworn that the closer to the town they were, the worse the fug was. Except it was more varied, richer in scale and hue. The military camps and tents surrounding the castle stank. The huge field hospital stank. The crowded and busy suburbs stank, the embankment stank, the gate stank, the berm stank, the small squares and streets stank, the walls of the great castle towering over the town stank. Fortunately, the nostrils quickly became accustomed and it soon made no difference to them if it was dung, or rotten meat, or cat's piss, or another field kitchen.

There were flies everywhere. They buzzed annoyingly, getting into the eyes, ears and nose. They couldn't be driven away. It was easier to squash them on the face. Or chew them up.

When they had just exited the shadow of the gatehouse, their eyes were struck by a huge mural depicting a knight with his finger aimed at them. The writing beneath the mural asked in huge letters: WHAT ABOUT YOU? HAVE YOU SIGNED UP?

'All right, all right,' mumbled the landsknecht. 'Unfortunately.'

There were plenty of similar murals. You could have said there was a mural on every wall. It was generally the knight with his finger, but there was also often a solemn Mother Country with grey hair blowing around, against a background of burning villages and babies on Nilfgaardian pikes. There were also images of elves with bloodied knives in their teeth.

Jarre suddenly looked around and found they were alone: he, the landsknechts and the merchant. There wasn't any sign of Pike, Okultich, the peasants from the draft or Melfi.

'Yes, yes,' the first landsknecht confirmed his speculation, eyeing him closely. 'Your comrades scrammed at the first opportunity, they scarpered around the first corner. And do you know what I'll tell you, lad? It's good that your paths have diverged. Don't strive for them to converge again.'

'Shame about Melfi,' muttered Jarre. 'He's a good lad at heart.'

'Everyone chooses his destiny. And you, come with us. We'll show you where to sign up.'

They entered a square in the middle of which stood a pillory on a stone platform. Townspeople and soldiers greedy for amusement were gathered around the pillory. A handcuffed convict, who had just been hit in the face with a lump of mud, spat and wept. The crowd roared with laughter.

'Hey!' yelled the landsknecht. 'Look who they've put in the stocks. Why, it's Fuson! I wonder what for?'

'For farming,' a fat burgher in a wolf skin and felt cap hurried to explain.

'For what?'

'For farming,' the fat man repeated with emphasis. 'For what he sowed.'

'Ha, now, if you'll excuse me, you've dropped a clanger like a bull dumping on a threshing floor,' laughed the landsknecht. 'I know Fuson, he's a shoemaker, the son of a shoemaker, and the grandson of a shoemaker. He's never ploughed, nor sown, nor harvested in his life. You're exaggerating, I say, with that sowing, you really are.'

'That's the bailiff's own words!' said the burgher crossly. 'He's to stand in the pillory until twilight for sowing! For the villain sowed after being goaded on by Nilfgaard and for Nilfgaardian silver pennies . . . He sowed some strange crops, in truth. Foreign, I'll warrant . . . Let me think . . . Aha! Defeatism!'

'Yes, yes!' called the vender of amulets. 'I've heard tell of it! Nilfgaardian spies and elves are spreading the plague, spoiling wells, springs and brooks with various poisons and using devil's trumpet, hemlock, lepra and defeatism.'

‘Aye,’ the burgher in the wolf skin nodded. ‘They hung two elves yesterday. Most probably for poisoning.’

*

‘Round that corner—’ the landsknecht pointed ‘—is the tavern where the conscription committee sits. A big canvas sheet is stretched out there with the Temerian lilies on it, which you know, of course, lad. You’ll find it without any difficulty. Look after yourself. May we meet again in better times, God willing. Farewell to you, too, merchant, sir.’

The merchant cleared his throat loudly.

‘Noble gentlemen,’ he said, rooting around in his chests and boxes, ‘let me, as proof of my gratitude . . . for your help. . .’

‘Don’t trouble yourself, good fellow,’ said the landsknecht with a smile. ‘We helped and that’s that, don’t mention it . . .’

‘Perhaps a miraculous ointment against lumbago?’ The merchant dug something out from the bottom of a box. ‘Perhaps a universal and reliable medicine for bronchitis, gout, paralysis, dandruff and scrofula? Perhaps a resinous balsam for bee, viper and vampire bites? Perhaps a talisman to protect you from the effects of the stare of the evil eye?’

‘And do you have, perhaps,’ the landsknecht asked seriously, ‘something to protect one from the effects of bad vittles?’

‘I do!’ beamed the merchant. ‘This is a most effective remedy made from magical roots, flavoured with aromatic herbs. Three drops after a meal should suffice. Please, take it, noble gentlemen.’

‘Thanks. Farewell, sir. Farewell to you, too, lad. Good luck!’

‘Honest, politic and courteous,’ commented the merchant, when the soldiers had disappeared into the crowd. ‘You don’t encounter such as them every day. Well, but you turned out al right too, young master. What then can I give you? An amulet against lightning? A bezoar? A turtle’s shell effective against witches’ spells? Ha, I also have a corpse’s tooth for fumigation and a bit of dried devil’s dung, it’s good to wear it in your right shoe . . .’

Jarre tore his gaze away from some people doggedly cleaning a slogan from the wall of a building: DOWN WITH THE SODDING

WAR.

‘Leave it, sir,’ he said. ‘Time I went . . .’

‘Ha,’ cried the merchant, taking a small, heart-shaped brass medallion from the box. ‘This ought to suit you, young man, it’s just right for young people. It’s a great rarity, the only one I have. It’s a magical amulet. It makes the wearer never forget his love, even though time and countless miles separate them. Look, it opens here, and inside is a leaf of thin papyrus. Suffice to write on the leaf the name of your beloved in magical red ink, which I have, and she will not forget, not change her heart, not betray you or cast you aside. Well?’

‘Hmfff . . .’ Jarre blushed slightly. ‘I don’t really know . . .’

‘What name—’ the merchant dipped a stick in the magical ink ‘—am I to write?’

‘Ciri. I mean, Cirilla.’

‘There. Take it.’

‘Jarre! What are you doing here, by a hundred devils?’

Jarre whirled around. *I had hoped*, he thought mechanically, *that I was leaving my whole past behind me, that everything would now be new. But I almost unceasingly keep bumping into old acquaintances.*

‘Mr Dennis Cranmer . . .’

A dwarf in a heavy overcoat, cuirass, iron vambraces and tall fox fur hat with a tail cast a crafty glance over the boy, the merchant and then again over the boy.

‘What are you,’ he asked again sharply, ruffling his eyebrows, beard and moustache, ‘doing here, Jarre?’

For a moment the boy considered lying, and to lend credence entangling the kind merchant into the false version. But he almost immediately rejected the idea. Dennis Cranmer, who had once served in the guard of the Duke of Ellander, enjoyed the reputation of a dwarf whom it was hard to deceive. And it wasn’t worth trying.

‘I want to join up.’

He knew what the next question would be.

‘Did Nenneke give you permission?’

He didn’t have to answer.

‘You bolted.’ Dennis Cranmer nodded his beard. ‘You simply fled from the temple. And Nenneke and the priestesses are tearing their hair out . . .’

‘I left a letter,’ muttered Jarre. ‘Mr Cranmer, I couldn’t . . . I had to . . . It wasn’t right to stay there idly, when the enemy are in the marches . . . At a dangerous moment for the fatherland . . . And what’s more she . . . Ciri . . . Mother Nenneke didn’t want to agree at all, although she’s sent three quarters of the girls from the temple to the army, she didn’t allow me . . . And I couldn’t . . .’

‘So you did a runner.’ The dwarf frowned sternly. ‘By a hundred bloody demons, I ought to tie you up with a stick under your knees and send you to Ellander by courier post! Order you locked up in the oubliette under the castle until the priestesses come to collect you! I ought to . . .’

He panted angrily.

‘When did you last eat, Jarre? When did you last have hot vittles in your gob?’

‘Really hot? Three . . . No, four days ago.’

‘Come with me.’

*

‘Eat slower, son,’ Zoltan Chivay, one of Dennis Cranmer’s comrades cautioned him. ‘It isn’t healthy to guzzle your food so quickly, without chewing properly. Where are you rushing to? Believe me, no one’s going to take it away from you.’

Jarre wasn’t so sure about that. A fist-fight duel was taking place right then in the main room of The Shaggy Bear inn. Two stocky dwarves, as wide as stoves, were punching each other so loudly it thudded, amidst the roars of their comrades from the Volunteer Regiment and the applause of the local prostitutes. The floor was shaking, furniture and pots were falling, and drops of blood from smashed noses were spraying around like rain. Jarre was just waiting for one of the fighters to sprawl across the officers’ table and bang into the wooden plate of pork knuckle, the great bowl of steamed peas and the earthenware mugs. He quickly swallowed a piece of fatty meat he had bitten off, assuming that what he swallowed was his.

‘I don’t really get it, Dennis.’ Another dwarf, called Sheldon Skaggs, didn’t even turn his head when one of the fighters almost caught him with a right hook. ‘Since this boy’s a priest, how can he join up? Priests aren’t allowed to shed blood.’

‘He’s a student at the temple, not a priest.’

‘I’ve never been bloody able to understand those tortuous human superstitions. Well, but it doesn’t do to mock other people’s beliefs. The conclusion, though, is that this young man here, although brought up in a temple, has nothing against spilling blood. Particularly Nilfgaardian blood. Eh, what, young man?’

‘Let him eat in peace, Skaggs.’

‘I’m happy to answer . . .’ Jarre swallowed a mouthful of pork knuckle and shoved a handful of peas into his mouth. ‘It’s like this: you can spill blood in a just war. In the defence of higher reasons. That’s why I’m signing up . . . The motherland is calling . . .’

‘You can see for yourselves—’ Sheldon Skaggs swept his gaze over his companions ‘—how much truth there is in the statement that humans are a race similar to and related to us, that we come from a common root, both us, and them. The best proof is, here, sitting before us, wolfing down peas. In other words: you can come across loads of similar stupid zealots among young dwarves.’

‘Especially after the Mayena battle,’ remarked Zoltan Chivay coolly. ‘Tons more volunteers always sign up after a victorious battle. The rush will stop when news spreads of Menno Coehoorn’s army marching up the Ina, leaving behind only earth and water.’

‘As long as a rush in the other direction doesn’t start,’ muttered Cranmer. ‘I somehow don’t trust volunteers. Interesting that every second deserter is a volunteer.’

‘How can you . . .’ Jarre almost choked. ‘How can you suggest something like that, sir? I’m joining up for ideological reasons . . . To fight a just and legitimate war . . . The motherland . . .’

One of the fighting dwarves fell from a blow that, it seemed to the boy, shook the very foundations of the building, the dust rising a yard in the air from gaps in the floorboards. This time, the fallen dwarf, rather than leaping up and whacking his adversary, lay, clumsily twitching his limbs, prompting associations of a huge beetle flipped on its back.

Dennis Cranmer stood up.

‘The matter is settled!’ he declared loudly, looking around the inn. ‘The position of commander of the troop made vacant after the heroic death of Elkana Foster, who fell on the battlefield at Mayena, is taken up by . . . What’s your name, mate? Because I’ve forgotten.’

‘Blasco Grant!’ The victor of the fist fight spat a tooth onto the floor.

‘Blasco Grant takes up the position. Are there any other contentious issues regarding promotions? There aren’t? Well and good. Innkeeper! Beer!’

‘Where were we. . . ?’

‘A just war.’ Zoltan Chivay began to count, bending his fingers back. ‘Volunteers. Deserters—’

‘Exactly,’ Dennis interrupted. ‘I knew I wanted to refer to something, and the matter concerned deserting and treacherous volunteers. Remember Vissegerd’s former Cintran corps? The whoresons, it turns out, didn’t even change their standard. I know that from the mercenaries of the Free Company, from the gang of Julia “Pretty Kitty”. Julia’s gang quarrelled with the Cintrans at Mayena. They marched in the vanguard of the Nilfgaardian troop, under the same standard with the lions—’

‘The Mother Country summoned them,’ Skaggs interjected morosely. ‘And Empress Ciri.’

‘Quiet,’ Dennis hissed.

‘That’s true,’ said a fourth dwarf, Yarpen Zigrin, who’d said nothing until then. ‘Quiet. Quieter than quietness itself. And not for fear of snoopers, but because you don’t talk about things you have no idea about.’

‘While you, Zigrin—’ Skaggs stuck out his chin ‘—*do* have an idea, eh?’

‘I do. And I’ll say one thing: no one, whether it’s Emhyr var Emreis or the rebellious sorcerers from Thanedd, or even the devil himself, could make that girl do anything. They couldn’t break her. I know that. Because I know her. That bloody marriage with Emhyr is a hoax. A hoax various asses have been taken in by . . . That girl, I tell you, has a different destiny. Quite a different one.’

‘You talk,’ muttered Skaggs, ‘as though you really knew her, Zigrin.’

‘Drop it,’ snapped Zoltan Chivay unexpectedly. ‘He’s right

about that destiny. I believe it. I also have reason to.'

'Eh.' Sheldon Skaggs waved a hand. 'Why waste breath. Cirilla, Emhyr, destiny . . . They're distant matters. While a closer matter, gentlemen, is Menno Coehoorn and the Centre Army Group.'

'Aye,' sighed Zoltan Chivay. 'Something tells me a huge battle won't pass us by. Perhaps the biggest history has ever seen.'

'A great deal,' mumbled Dennis Cranmer. 'Truly a great deal will be decided . . .'

'And put an end to even more.'

'Everything . . .' Jarre belched, decorously covering his mouth with his hand. 'Everything will end.'

The dwarves eyed him up for a moment, keeping silent.

'I don't quite understand you, young man,' Zoltan Chivay finally said. 'You wouldn't like to explain what you have in mind, would you?'

'In the ducal council . . .' Jarre stammered. 'In Ellander, I mean, it was said that victory in this great war is so important, because . . . because it's the great war to end all wars.'

Sheldon Skaggs snorted and spat beer down his beard. Zoltan Chivay burst out laughing.

'Don't you believe so, gentlemen?'

Now it was Dennis Cranmer's turn to snort. Yarpen Zigrin remained serious, looking intently and seemingly with concern at the boy.

'Look, son,' he said at last, very seriously. 'Evangelina Parr is sitting at the bar. She is, one must admit, large. Why, even enormous. But in spite of her size, beyond all doubt, she isn't a whore to end all whores.'

*

Turning into a narrow and deserted alley, Dennis Cranmer stopped.

'I must praise you, Jarre,' he said. 'Do you know what for?'

'No.'

'Don't pretend. You don't have to in front of me. It's

praiseworthy that you didn't blink when Cirilla was being talked about. It's even more praiseworthy that you didn't open your trap then . . . Hey, hey, don't make faces. I knew a lot of what went on behind Nenneke's temple walls, a lot, you can believe me. And if that's too little for you, then know that I heard what name the merchant wrote on that medallion for you.

'Keep it up.' The dwarf tactfully pretended he hadn't noticed the crimson blush that suffused the boy's face. 'Keep it up, Jarre. And not only in the case of Ciri . . . What are you staring at?'

On the wall of a granary visible at the end of the lane was a lopsided, whitewashed slogan reading MAKE LOVE NOT WAR. Just under that somebody had scribbled in much smaller letters AND TAKE A SHIT EVERY MORNING.

'Look somewhere else, idiot,' Dennis Cranmer barked. 'Just for looking at graffiti like that you can get into trouble, and if you say something at the wrong time, they'll flog you at the post, they'll flay the skin off your back. The judgments are swift here! Extremely swift!'

'I saw the shoemaker in the pillory,' muttered Jarre. 'Reputedly for sowing defeatism.'

'His defeatism,' the dwarf stated seriously, pulling the boy by his sleeve, 'probably lay in the fact that when he took his son to his troop he wept, instead of cheering patriotically. They punish differently for more serious sowing. Come, I'll show you.'

They entered a small square. Jarre stepped back, covering his mouth and nose with his sleeve. About a dozen corpses were hanging from a large, stone gallows. Some of them – their appearance and smell betrayed it – had been hanging there a long time. 'That one,' pointed Dennis, simultaneously driving flies away, 'wrote stupid graffiti on walls and fences. That one claimed that war is a matter for lords and that the Nilfgaardian drafted peasants aren't his enemies. And that one told the following anecdote when he was drunk: "What's a spear? It's a nobleman's weapon, a stick with a poor man on each end." And there, at the end, do you see that woman? She was the madam of the military brothel on wheels, which she decorated with the words "Soldier, get your leg over today! You might not be able to tomorrow".'

'And just for that . . .'

'Furthermore, one of the girls had the clap, as it turned out.

Which contravenes the law concerning sabotage and the undermining of military readiness.'

'I understand, Mr Cranmer.' Jarre stood up straight in a position he considered soldierly.

'But don't worry about me. I'm no defeatist . . .'

'You haven't understood shit and don't interrupt me, because I haven't finished. That last hanged man, the one stinking to high heaven, was only guilty of reacting to the chatter of a provocateur-snooper with the shout "You were right, sir, it's like that and not otherwise, as two plus two makes four!" Now tell me if you understand.'

'I do.' Jarre looked around furtively. 'I shall be careful. But . . . Mr Cranmer . . . What's it really like . . . ?'

The dwarf also looked around.

'It's like this,' he said softly. 'Marshal Menno Coehoorn's Centre Army Group is marching north with a force of around a hundred thousand men. Indeed, were it not for the insurrection in Verden, they'd already be here. Indeed, it would be better if negotiations were to take place. Indeed, Temeria and Redania don't have the forces to stop Coehoorn. Indeed, not before the strategic border of the Pontar.'

'The River Pontar,' whispered Jarre, 'is north of here.'

'That's exactly what I wanted to say. But remember: keep your trap shut about that.'

'I'll beware. When I'm in my unit will I also have to? May I also encounter a snooper?'

'In a frontline unit? Near the front? Not really. Snoopers are so ardent behind the front, because they're afraid of ending up on it. Furthermore, if they hung every soldier what grumbles, complains and swears there'd be no one left to fight. But, like you did with the matter of Ciri, Jarre, always keep your trap shut. Mark my words, no dung fly ever flew into a trap that was shut. Now go, I'll take you to the committee.'

'Will you put in a good word for me?' Jarre looked at the dwarf hopefully. 'Eh? Mr Cranmer?'

'Dear me, you're an ass, Mr Scribe. This is the army! If I put in a good word for you and tried pulling strings it would be as though I'd embroidered "lemon" on your back in gold thread! You'd have a

hard time in your troop, laddie.'

'What about if I joined . . .' blinked Jarre, 'your unit . . .'

'Don't even think about it.'

'Because there's only room for dwarves in it, right?' the boy said bitterly. 'And not for me?'

'Right.'

Not for you, thought Dennis Cranmer. *Not for you, Jarre. Because I still have unpaid debts with Nenneke. Which is why I'd prefer you to return from the war in one piece. And the Mahakam Volunteer Regiment, consisting of dwarves, specimens of a foreign and inferior race, will always be sent to do the lousiest tasks, to the worst sectors. The ones you don't come back from. The ones you don't send humans to.*

'So how can I make sure,' Jarre continued, downcast, 'that I'll end up in a good troop?'

'And which one, according to you, is so first-rate it's worth trying to get into?'

Jarre turned around on hearing singing, swelling like a breaking wave, growing like the thunder of an approaching storm. Loud, powerful, swaggering singing, as hard as steel. He'd heard singing like that before.

The mercenary troop, formed up into threes, walked their horses along the narrow street leading from the castle. At their head, on a grey stallion, beneath a pole decorated with human skulls, rode the commander, a grey-haired man with an aquiline nose and hair plaited into a queue falling down onto his armour.

'Adam "Adieu" Pangratt,' mumbled Dennis Cranmer.

The singing of the mercenaries thundered, roared and rumbled. Counterpointed by the ringing of horseshoes on cobbles, it filled the narrow street way up to the tops of the houses, and into the blue sky above the town.

No lovers or wives spill tears

When the time comes to bite the blood-soaked dust

For we briskly go to war

For the ducat, as red as the sun!

‘You ask what troop . . .’ said Jarre, unable to tear his eyes from the cavalrymen. ‘Why, one like that! In one such as that I’d like to—’

‘Each has his song,’ the dwarf interrupted quietly. ‘And each bites the blood-soaked earth his own way. Just as it befalls him. And they either cry for him or not. In a war, scribbler, you only sing and march as one, you stand in the ranks as one. And later in battle everyone gets what is written for him. Whether in “Adieu” Pangratt’s Free Company, or in the infantry, or in the convoys . . . Whether in a shining suit of armour with a glorious crest, or in bast shoes and a flea-ridden sheepskin coat . . . Whether on a fleet steed, or behind a shield . . . Something different comes to each one. As it befalls him! Well, and there’s the commission, do you see the sign above the entrance? That’s your way, since you’ve thought to become a soldier. Go, Jarre. Farewell. We’ll meet again when it’s all over.’

The dwarf’s gaze followed the boy until he disappeared into the door of the tavern occupied by the recruiting commission.

‘Or we won’t meet again,’ he added softly. ‘No one knows what’s written for anybody. Or what will befall them.’

*

‘Can you ride? Can you shoot a longbow or crossbow?’

‘No, sir. But I can write and calligraph, ancient runes, too . . . I know the Elder Speech . . .’

‘Can you wield a sword? Are you trained in lanceplay?’

‘. . . I’ve read *The History of Wars*. The work by Marshal Pelligram . . . And Roderick de Novembre . . .’

‘Or perhaps you know how to cook?’

‘No, I don’t . . . But I reckon up well . . .’

The recruiting officer grimaced and waved a hand.

‘A well-read smart-alec! You’re not the first today. Write him out a chitty for the pee-eff-eye. You’ll be serving in the pee-eff-eye, lad. Run with this chitty to the southern end of the town, then

beyond the Maribor Gate, down by the lake.'

'But . . .'

'You'll find it for sure. Next!'

*

'Hey, Jarre! Hey! Wait!'

'Melfi?'

'Who else?' The cooper's son staggered, holding on to the wall. 'It's me, right here, tee-hee!'

'What's wrong with you?'

'Wrong with me? He, he! Nothing! We've had a bit to drink! We drank to Nilfgaard's confusion! Ugh, Jarre, I'm glad to see you, for I thought I'd lost you somewhere . . . My comrade. . .'

Jarre stepped back as though someone had hit him. For the cooper's son's breath didn't only smell of second-rate beer and third-rate vodka, but also of onions, garlic and God knows what else. Very intensively.

'And where,' Jarre asked sneeringly, 'is your eminent company?'

'You asking about Pike?' Melfi grimaced. 'Then I'll tell you: to hell with him! Do you know, Jarre, I think he was a bad man.'

'Bravo. You saw through him quickly.'

'Didn't I just!' Melfi strutted, not noticing the mockery. 'He hid it, but whoever cheats me can eat the devil! I tell you I know what he was planning! What drew him here to Vizima! You probably think, Jarre, that he and his miscreants came to sign up like us? Ha, well you're seriously mistaken! Do you know what he had planned? You wouldn't believe it!'

'I would.'

'He needed horses and uniforms,' Melfi finished triumphantly. 'He meant to steal them from round here. For he meant to go to war in disguised as a soldier!'

'Let him end his days on the gallows.'

'The quicker the better!' The cooper's son staggered slightly,

stopped by the wall and undid his breeches. ‘I’m just sorry that Ograbek and Milton, those stupid village idiots, were taken in. They followed Pike, so they’re liable to meet the hangman too. Well, bollocks to them, effing bumpkins! And how goes it with you, Jarre?’

‘Regarding?’

‘Did the recruiting officers post you anywhere?’ Melfi sent a stream of piss down the whitewashed wall. ‘I asked because I’m already recruited. I’m to go through the Maribor Gate, to the southern end of the castle. And where do you have to go?’

‘To the south side too.’

‘Ha!’ The cooper’s son jumped up and down a few times, shook, and fastened his trousers. ‘So we’re going to fight together?’

‘I don’t think so.’ Jarre looked at him condescendingly. ‘I was assigned in accordance with my qualifications. To the pee-eff-eye.’

‘Well, naturally.’ Melfi hiccupped and breathed his dreadful mixture over him. ‘You’re book-learned! They probably assign smart alecs like you to important matters, not any old ones. Well, what to do. But for now, we’ll be travelling a little longer together. For our route’s to the southern end of the castle.’

‘Looks like it.’

‘Let’s go then.’

‘Let’s go.’

*

‘I don’t think it’s here,’ judged Jarre, looking at a parade square surrounded by tents, where a troop of scruffs with long sticks on their shoulders were kicking up dust. Every scruff, as the boy observed, had a bunch of hay attached to his right leg and a bunch of straw attached to his left.

‘I think we’ve come to the wrong place, Melfi.’

‘Straw! Hay!’ the roar of the lance corporal directing the scruffs could be heard from the parade square. ‘Straw! Hay! Even it up, for fuck’s sake!’

‘A standard’s fluttering over the tents,’ said Melfi. ‘See for

yourself, Jarre. Those same lilies, what you were talking about on the road. Is there a standard? There is. Is there an army? There is. That means it's here. We've come to the right place.'

'You, maybe. Not me, for sure.'

'Ah, some officer or other is standing there by the fence. Let's ask him.'

It moved fast after that.

'New recruits?' yelled the sergeant. 'From the conscription office? Papers! Why the fuck are you standing one behind the other? March on the spot! Don't fucking stand there! Left turn! About-turn, right-fucking-turn! Quick march! About-fucking-turn! Listen and remember. First-of-fucking-all, get to the quartermaster! Get your kit! Mail shirt, boots, pike, helmet and sword, for fuck's sake! Then to the drill ground! Be ready for the fucking muster, at dusk! Quiiiick maaarch!'

'Just a minute.' Jarre looked around hesitantly. 'Because I think I have a different posting—'

'Whaaaaaaaat?'

'I beg your pardon, officer, sir.' Jarre blushed. 'I only want to prevent a possible error . . . For the commissioner clearly . . . He distinctly spoke of a posting to the pee-eff-eye, so I—'

'You're at home, my lad,' snorted the sergeant, somewhat disarmed by the 'officer'. 'This is your posting. Welcome to the Poor Fucking Infantry.'

*

'And why,' repeated Rocco Hildebrandt, 'and for what reason, are we to pay you gentlemen tax? We've already paid everything we were supposed to.'

'Blow this, look at 'im, the smart-arsed halfling.' Pike, sprawled on the saddle of a stolen horse, grinned at his comrades. 'He's already paid! And he thinks that's all. Really, 'e's the spitting image of that turkey what were thinking about Sunday. But they chopped 'is 'ead off on Saturday!'

Okultich, Klaproth, Milton and Ograbek cackled in unison. The joke was excellent, after all. And the amusement promised to be

even more excellent.

Rocco noticed the revolting, clammy gazes of the marauders, and looked back. On the threshold of his cottage stood Incarvilia Hildebrandt, his wife, and Aloë and Yasmin, his two daughters.

Pike and his company looked at the hobbit girls, smiling lecherously. Yes, assuredly, the amusement promised to be first-class.

Impatientia Vanderbeck, Hildebrandt's niece, normally called by the pet name 'Impi', approached the hedge on the other side of the highway. She was a very pretty girl. The bandits' smiles became even more lecherous and revolting.

'Well, shorty,' Pike hurried him, 'hand over the penny to the royal army, give us your vittles, give us your horses, and lead the cows from the cowshed. We aren't going to stand here till sundown. We must get round a few more villages today.'

'Why must we pay and hand over our food?' Rocco Hildebrandt's voice trembled slightly, but determination and doggedness still resounded in it. 'You say it's for the army, that it's for our defence. And who, I ask, will defend us against hunger? We've already paid the winter levy, and the geld, and the poll tax, and the land tax, and the animal tax, and the devil only knows what else! If that wasn't enough, four halflings from this hamlet, my son included in that number, are coach drivers in the army convoys! And no one else but my brother-in-law, Milo Vanderbeck, known as Rusty, is a field surgeon, an important personage in the army. That means we've paid our acreage with interest. . . For what reason are we to pay more? Wherefore and what for? And why?'

Pike gave a long look at Incarvilia Hildebrandt, née Biberveldt, the halfling's wife. At their plump daughters, Aloë and Yasmin. At the gorgeous Impi Vanderbeck, dressed in a green frock. At Sam Hofmeier and his grandfather, old grandpa Holofernes. At Granny Petunia, doggedly picking at a flowerbed with a hoe. At the other halflings from the hamlet, mainly womenfolk and youngsters, apprehensively peeping out from their households and from behind fences.

'You ask why?' he hissed, leaning over in the saddle and looking into the halfling's terrified eyes. 'I'll tell you why. Because you're a mangy halfling, a foreigner, a stranger, and whoever robs you, you repulsive brute, delights the gods. Whoever vexes you, non-human, is carrying out a good and paterotic deed. And also

because I feel sick with the desire to send your non-human nest up in smoke. Because I feel a yen coming on to fuck your midget women. And because we're five burly fellows, and you're a handful of short-arsed wretches. Now do you know why?'

'Now I know,' said Rocco Hildebrandt slowly. 'Off with you, Big Folk. Begone, you good-for-nothings. We shan't give you anything.'

Pike straightened up, and reached for the short sword hanging from his saddle.

'Have at them!' he yelled. 'Kill them!'

With a movement so fast it was almost imperceptible, Rocco Hildebrandt stooped down towards his barrow, took out a crossbow concealed under a rush mat, brought it to his cheek and sent a bolt straight into Pike's mouth, which was wide open in a yell. Incarvilia Hildebrandt, née Biberveldt, swung her arm powerfully and a sickle spun through the air, slamming into Milton's throat. The peasant's son puked blood and somersaulted backwards over his horse's rump, swinging his legs comically. Ograbek, moaning, tumbled beneath the horse's hooves, with grandpa Holofernes' secateurs buried in his belly up to the handles' wooden facings. The strongman Klaproth aimed a club at the old man, but flew from the saddle, squealing inhumanly, caught right in the eye with the spike of a dibber flung by Impi Vanderbeck. Okultich reined his horse around and hoped to flee, but granny Petunia sprang at him and jabbed the teeth of her rake into his thigh. Okultich cried out and fell, his foot caught in the stirrup, and the frightened horse dragged him across the sharp poles of the wattle fence. The brigand yelled and wailed as he was dragged and Granny Petunia – with her rake – and Impi – with her curved pruning knife – followed him like two she-wolves. Grandpa Holofernes blew his nose loudly.

The entire incident – from Pike's shout to grandpa Holofernes blowing his nose – took more or less the same time it would to rapidly utter the sentence 'Halflings are incredibly fast and can throw all sorts of missiles unerringly'.

Rocco sat down on the cottage steps. His wife, Incarvilia Hildebrandt, née Biberveldt, planted herself beside him. Their daughters, Aloë and Yasmin, went to help Sam Hofmeier finish off the wounded and strip the dead.

Impi returned in her green frock with the sleeves spattered up to the elbows with blood. Granny Petunia also returned, walking

slowly, panting, grunting, leaning on her blood-spattered rake and holding her lower back. *Oh, she's getting old, our granny*, thought Hildebrandt.

'Where should we bury the brigands, Mr Rocco?' asked Sam Hofmeier.

Rocco Hildebrandt put his arm around his wife and looked up at the sky.

'In the birch copse,' he said. 'Next to the other ones.'

The sensational adventure of Mr Malcolm Guthrie of Braemore took the pages of many newspapers by storm. Even The Daily Mail of London *devoted several lines to it in its column 'Bizarre'. However, because very few of our readers read the press south of the Tweed, and if they do, then only newspapers more serious than* The Daily Mail*, let us remind you what happened. On the day of the 10th March last year Mr Malcolm Guthrie went fishing to Loch Glascarnoch. While there Mr Guthrie happened upon a young woman with an ugly scar on her face (sic!), riding a black mare (sic) in the company of a white unicorn (sic), who were emerging from the fog and darknes (sic). The girl spoke to the dumbstruck Mr Guthrie in a language which Mr Guthrie was so kind as to describe as, we quote: 'probably French, or some other dialect from the continent'. Because Mr Guthrie does not speak French or any other dialect from the continent, a conversation was not possible. The girl and the accompanying menagerie vanished, to quote Mr Guthrie again: 'like a golden dream'.*

Our comment: Mr Guthrie's dream was undoubtedly as golden as the colour of the single malt whisky Mr Guthrie customarily drinks, as we learned, drinking often and in such quantities that would explain the seeing of white unicorns, white mice and monsters from lochs. And the question we would like to pose runs thusly: What did Mr Guthrie think he was doing with a fishing rod by Loch Glascarnoch four days before the [angling] season began?

The Inverness Weekly, 18 March 1906 [edition]

CHAPTER SEVEN

Along with the intensifying wind the sky darkened from the west, and the clouds, approaching in waves, extinguished the constellations one after the other. The Dragon went out, the Winter Maiden went out and the Seven Goats went out. The Eye, which shines brightest and longest, went out.

The edge of the horizon lit up with a short-lived flashes of lightning. Thunder rolled with a dull rumble. The wind abruptly intensified, blowing dust and dry leaves into their eyes.

The unicorn neighed and sent a mental signal. Ciri understood immediately what he wanted to say.

There's no time to lose. Our only hope is in a quick escape. To the right place, and the right time. We must hurry, Star-Eye.

I am the Master of Worlds, she recalled. I am of the Elder Blood, I have power over time and place.

I am of Lara Dorren's blood.

Ihuarraquax neighed, urged them on. Kelpie echoed him with a long-drawn-out snort. Ciri put on her gloves.

'I'm ready,' she said.

A buzzing in her ears. A flash and brightness. And then darkness.

*

The water in the lake and the early-evening silence bore the curses of the Fisher King, who sat on his boat jerking and tugging the line, trying to free a lure caught on the lake bottom. A dropped oar thudded.

Nimue cleared her throat impatiently. Condwiramurs turned away from the window, and then bent over the etchings. One of the boards in particular caught her eye. A girl with windswept hair, riding a black mare rearing up. Beside her a white unicorn, also rampant, its mane blown around like the girl's.

‘I think that’s the only fragment of the legend that historians have never quibbled about,’ commented the novice, ‘unanimously regarding it as a fabrication and a fairy-tale embellishment, or a delirious metaphor. And painters and illustrators, spiting the scholars, took a liking to the episode. Look, prithee: each picture is Ciri and the unicorn. What do we have here? Ciri and the unicorn on a cliff above a sea beach. And here, if you please: Ciri and the unicorn in a landscape like something from a drug-induced trance, at night, beneath two moons.’

Nimue said nothing.

‘In a word—’ Condwiramurs tossed the boards onto the table ‘—everywhere it’s Ciri and the unicorn. Ciri and the unicorn in the labyrinth of the worlds, Ciri and the unicorn in the abyss of times—’

‘Ciri and the unicorn,’ interrupted Nimue, looking at the window, at the lake, at the boat and the Fisher King thrashing around in it. ‘Ciri and the unicorn emerge from nothingness like apparitions, suspended over some lake or other . . . And perhaps it’s constantly the same lake, one that spans times and places like a bridge, at once different, but nonetheless the same?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Apparitions.’ Nimue wasn’t looking at her. ‘Visitors from other dimensions, other planes, other places, other times. Apparitions that change someone’s life. That also change their own life, their own fate . . . Unbeknownst to them. For them it’s simply . . . another place. Not that place, not that time . . . Once again, one more time in a row, not that time—’

‘Nimue,’ Condwiramurs interrupted with a forced smile. ‘It’s me who’s the dream-reader, let me remind you. I’m the expert on dream visions and oneiroscopy. And all of a sudden you begin to prophesy. As though you saw what you’re talking about . . . in a dream.’

The Fisher King, judging by the sudden intensity of his voice and his cursing, had failed to unhitch the lure and the line had snapped. Nimue said nothing, and looked at the engravings. At Ciri and the unicorn.

‘I really have seen in a dream what I’ve been talking about,’ she finally said, very calmly. ‘I saw it many times in my dreams. And once while awake.’

*

As it is known, the journey from Człuchów to Malbork may in certain conditions take even five days. And since the letters from the Człuchów Commander to Winrych von Kniprode, Grand Master of the Order, had without fail to reach the addressee no later than on the day of Pentecost, the knight Heinrich von Schwelborn didn't delay and set off the day after Sunday *Exaudi Domine*, in order to travel peacefully and with no risk of being late. *Langsam, abersicher*. The knight's attitude greatly pleased his escort, which consisted of six mounted crossbowmen, commanded by Hasso Planck, a baker's son from Cologne. The crossbowmen and Planck were more accustomed to noble gentlemen who swore, yelled, urged and ordered them to gallop at breakneck speed, and afterwards, when they didn't make it in time anyway, put all the blame on the poor infantry, by lying in a way unbefitting a knight, not to mention one from a religious military order.

It was warm, though overcast. It drizzled from time to time, and the ravines were enveloped in fog. The hills, overgrown by lush greenery, reminded Sir Heinrich of his native Thuringia, his mother, and the fact that he hadn't had a woman for over a month. The crossbowmen riding at the rear were languidly singing a ballad by Walther von der Vogelweide. Hasso Planck was dozing in the saddle.

Wer guter Fraue Liebe hat

Der schämt sich aller Missetat . . .

The journey was proceeding peacefully and who knows, perhaps it would have been peaceful all the way, had Sir Heinrich not noticed the glistening surface of a lake down below around noon. And because the following day was Friday and it behove them to get in holy-day food in advance, the knight ordered his men to ride down to the water and look around for a fisherman's homestead.

The lake was large, and there was even an island on it. No one knew its name, but it was probably called Holy Lake. In this pagan land – as if in mockery – every second lake was called 'holy'.

Their horseshoes crunched on the shells lying on the shore. Fog hung over the lake, but it was obvious it was uninhabited. There was no sign of a boat, nor a net, nor any living soul. *We'll have to search elsewhere*, thought Heinrich von Schwelborn. *And if not, too bad. We'll eat what we have in our saddlebags, even if that means smoked bacon, and in Malbork we'll make our confession, the chaplain will demand a penance and the sin will be absolved.*

He was about to issue an order when something buzzed in his head under his helmet, and Hasso Planck yelled horrifyingly. Von Schwelborn looked and was struck dumb. And crossed himself.

He saw two horses: one white and the other black. A moment later, though, he noticed in horror that the white horse had a spirally twisted horn on its domed forehead. He also saw that a girl was sitting on the black, her ashen hair combed so as to obscure her cheek. The group apparition seemed not to be touching either the ground or the water – it looked as though it were suspended above the fog trailing over the surface of the lake.

The black horse neighed.

'Whoops . . .' said the girl with the grey hair quite distinctly, 'Ire lokke, ire tedd! Squaess'me.'

'Saint Ursula, O my patron . . .' mumbled Hasso, white as a sheet. The crossbowmen froze open-mouthed, and made the sign of the cross.

Von Schwelborn also crossed himself, after which with a trembling hand he drew a sword from a scabbard strapped under his saddle flap.

'Heilige Maria, Mutter Gottes!' he roared. 'Steh mir bei!'

That day Sir Heinrich didn't shame his valiant ancestors, the von Schwelborns, including Dietrich von Schwelborn, who had fought bravely at Damietta and was one of the few not to run away when the Saracens conjured up and set a demon on the crusaders. After spurring his horse and having recalled his fearless forebear, Heinrich von Schwelborn charged the apparition among the freshwater mussels splashing up from under his horse's hooves.

'For the Order and Saint George!'

The white unicorn reared up like a heraldic emblem, the black mare danced, and the girl was alarmed, it was clear at first glance. Heinrich von Schwelborn rode on. Who knows how it all would

have ended if the fog hadn't suddenly been blown towards him and the image of the strange group dissolved, disintegrating into a myriad of colours like a stained-glass window smashed by a stone. And everything vanished. Everything. The unicorn, the black horse and the strange girl . . .

Heinrich von Schwelborn's steed rode into the lake with a splash, stopped, tossed its head, neighed, and ground its teeth on the bit.

Hasso Planck, struggling to control his unruly horse, rode over to the knight. Von Schwelborn was huffing and puffing, almost wheezing, goggled-eyed like a fast-day fish.

'On the bones of Saint Ursula, Saint Cordula and all the eleven thousand virgin martyrs of Cologne . . .' Hasso Planck stammered out. 'What was it, noble Herr Ritter? A miracle? A revelation?'

'Teufelswerk!' von Schwelborn grunted, only now blanching horrifyingly and chattering his teeth. 'Schwarze Magie! Zauberey! A damned, pagan, devilish matter . . .'

'We ought to get out of here, sire. As quickly as possible . . . It's not far from Pelplin, anything to get within the sound of church bells . . .'

Sir Heinrich looked back for the last time on a rise just outside the forest. The wind had blown away the fog and the shining surface of the lake had grown dull and rippled in the places not obscured by the wall of trees.

A great osprey circled above the water.

'Godless, pagan land,' muttered Heinrich von Schwelborn. 'Much, much work, much hardship and labour await us before the Order of the Teutonic Knights will finally drive the Devil from this nest of Slavs.'

*

'Little Horse,' said Ciri, reproachfully and sneeringly at once. 'I don't want to be intrusive, but I'm in a bit of a hurry to get back to my world. My friends and family need me, you know that, don't you? And first we end up by some lake with a ridiculous boor in chequered clothes, then run into a pack of filthy, yelling shaggy heads with clubs, and finally on a madman with a black cross on his

cloak. They're the wrong times, the wrong places! Please, do try a bit harder. I beg you.'

Ihuarraquax neighed, nodded his horned head and communicated something to her, a clever thought. Ciri didn't quite understand. She didn't have time to ponder, since the inside of her skull was filled with cool brightness, her ears buzzed and her nape tingled.

And black and very soft nothingness engulfed her again.

*

Nimue, laughing joyously, dragged the man by the hand. The two of them ran down to the lake, winding their way among the young birches and alders, among stumps and blown down trees. After running onto the sandy beach, Nimue threw off her sandals, lifted up her dress and splashed around in bare feet in the water by the shore. The man also took off his boots, but was in no hurry to enter the water. He removed his cloak and spread it out on the sand.

Nimue ran over, threw her arms around his neck and stood on tiptoes to kiss it. The man had to lean over a long way in any case. Not without reason was Nimue called Squirt – but now that she was eighteen and was a novice of the magical arts, the privilege of using that epithet was exclusively reserved for her closest friends. And some men.

The man, his mouth clamped on Nimue's, put his hand down the front of her dress.

It moved fast after that. The two of them ended up on the cloak spread out on the sand, Nimue's dress up above her waist, her thighs powerfully gripping the man's hips, and her hands digging into his back. When he took her – too impatiently as usual – she clenched her teeth, but quickly caught up with him in excitement, drew level, and kept up with him. She was skilled.

The man was uttering amusing sounds. Nimue observed fantastic shapes of the cumuli slowly gliding across the sky over his shoulder.

Something rang, as a bell submerged at the bottom of the ocean rings. There was a sudden buzzing in Nimue's ears. *Magic*, she thought, turning her head, freeing herself from under the cheek

and shoulder of the man lying on her.

A white unicorn stood by the lake shore – literally suspended above the surface. Beside it was a black horse. And in the saddle of the black horse was sitting . . .

But I know that legend, the thought flashed through Nimue's head. *I know that fairy tale! I was a child, a little child, when I heard that tale.* The wandering storyteller, the beggar Pogwizd, had told it to her. *The witcher Ciri . . . with a scar on her cheek . . . The black mare Kelpie . . . Unicorns . . .The land of the elves . . .*

The movements of the man, who hadn't noticed the phenomenon at all, became more and more urgent, and the sounds he was uttering more and more amusing.

'Whooops,' said the girl on the black mare. 'Another mistake! It's not this place, not this time. And what's more, I see, it's a bad time. I'm sorry.'

The image blurred and shattered, as painted glass shatters, suddenly fell to pieces, disintegrated into a rainbow-coloured twinkling of sparkles, gleaming and gold. And then all of it vanished.

'No!' screamed Nimue. 'No! Don't disappear! I don't want you to go!'

She straightened her knees and tried to free herself from under the man, but she could not – he was stronger and heavier than her. The man groaned and moaned.

'Oooooh, Nimue . . . Ooooh!'

Nimue screamed and dug her teeth into his shoulder.

They lay on his sheepskin coat, quivering and hot. Nimue looked at the lake shore, at the caps of foam whipped up by the waves. At the reeds bent over by the wind. At the colourless, hopeless void, the void left by the disappearing legend.

A tear trickled down the novice's nose.

'Nimue . . . Is something the matter?'

'Yes.' She cuddled up to him, but carried on looking at the lake. 'Don't say anything. Hold me and don't say anything.'

The man smiled proudly.

'I know what happened,' he said boastfully. 'Did the earth

move?'

Nimue smiled sadly.

'Not just the earth,' she replied after a moment's silence. 'Not just the earth.'

*

A flash. Darkness. The next place.

*

The next place was tenebrous, baleful and foul.

Ciri involuntarily hunched over in the saddle, shaken – both in the literal and the metaphorical sense of the term. For Kelpie's horseshoes had thudded against something as painfully hard, flat and unyielding as rock. After a long time of gliding in very soft limbo, the impression of hardness was so astonishing and unpleasant that the mare neighed and suddenly lunged aside, beating out a staccato rhythm on the ground that made Ciri's teeth chatter.

The second shock, the metaphorical one, was supplied by the smell. Ciri groaned and covered her mouth and nose with her sleeve. She felt her eyes immediately filling with tears.

All around rose a sour, acrid, thick and glutinous stench, a smell of burning both choking and dreadful, impossible to define, resembling nothing Ciri had ever smelled. It was – she was certain of it – the stench of decay, a corpselike reek of final degradation and degeneration, the odour of disintegration and destruction; in addition, there was the impression that whatever was decaying hadn't smelled any more pleasantly when it was alive. Not even when it had been in its salad days.

She bent over in a nauseous reflex she was unable to control. Kelpie snorted and shook her head, contracting her nostrils. The unicorn, which had materialised beside them, leaned back on his haunches, jumped up and kicked. The hard ground answered with a shock and a loud echo.

All around was the night, the dark and filthy night, muffled by the sticky and reeking tatters of darkness.

Ciri glanced upwards, searching for the stars, but there was nothing above her, only an abyss, lit up in places by an indistinct, red glow, like a distant fire.

‘Whooops,’ she said and grimaced, feeling the sour and rotten mist settling on her lips. ‘Yuuuckk! Not this place, not this time! Under no circumstances!’

The unicorn snorted and nodded his head, his horn describing a short and dynamic arc.

The ground grinding beneath Kelpie’s hooves was rock, but strange, unnaturally smooth, emitting an intensive stench of burning and dirty ash. It took some time for Ciri to realise that what she was looking at was a road. She had had enough of that unpleasant and annoying hardness. She guided the mare to the side of the road, marked by something that had once been trees, but were now hideous and naked skeletons. Corpses hung with shreds of rags, quite like the remains of rotten shrouds.

The unicorn gave a warning by neighing and sending a mental signal. Too late.

Just beyond the strange road and the dead trees a heap of scree began, and further away, at its edge, a steep slope running downwards, almost a precipice. Ciri yelled, stuck her heels into the sides of the mare as she slipped down. Kelpie jerked, crushing whatever the heap was made of under her hooves. And it was waste. Mostly some kind of strange pots. The vessels didn’t crumble under the horseshoes, didn’t crunch, but burst repulsively softly and stickily, like great fishes’ bladders. Something squelched and gurgled, and the odour belching forth almost knocked Ciri from the saddle.

Kelpie, neighing wildly, trampled through the rubbish dump, struggling back upwards towards the road. Ciri, choking from the stench, grabbed the mare’s neck.

They managed to get up. And greeted the weird road’s disagreeable hardness with joy and relief.

Ciri, trembling all over, looked down onto the rubbish dump which ended in a black lake filling the bottom of the basin. The surface of the lake was lifeless and gleaming, as it wasn’t water but solidified pitch. Beyond the lake, beyond the rubbish dumps, the

piles of ash and heaps of cinders, the sky was red from distant glows, and was marked by trails of smoke.

The unicorn snorted. Ciri was about to wipe her watering eyes with her cuff, when she suddenly noticed her entire sleeve was covered in dust. The flecks of dust also covered her thighs, the pommel of her saddle and Kelpie's mane and neck.

The stench was stifling.

'Disgusting,' she muttered. 'Repulsive . . . I feel like I'm sticky all over. Let's get out of here . . . Let's get out of here with all haste, Little Horse.'

The unicorn pricked up his ears and snorted.

Only you can make it happen. Act.

'Me? All alone? Without your help?'

The unicorn nodded his horned head.

Ciri scratched her head, sighed and shut her eyes. She focused.

At first there was only disbelief, resignation and fear. But a cool brightness – the brightness of knowledge and power – quickly came over her. She had no idea where the knowledge and power were coming from, where their roots and source originated. But she knew she could do it. That she *would* do it if she wanted.

Once more she cast a glance at the hardened and lifeless lake, the smoking heap of refuse and the skeletons of trees. The sky was lit up by a distant glow.

'I'm glad it's not my world.' She leaned over and spat. 'Very glad!'

The unicorn neighed meaningfully. She understood what he wanted to say.

'Even if it's mine,' she wiped her eyes, mouth and nose with a handkerchief, 'it's at once not mine, because it's far away in time. It's the past, or—'

She broke off.

'The past,' she repeated softly. 'I deeply believe it's the past.'

*

They greeted the heavy rain, the proper downpour they fell under in the next place, as a blessing. The rain was warm and aromatic, smelling of summer, weeds, mud and compost. The rain washed the filth from them, purged them. The rain was quite simply a catharsis.

Like any catharsis, it also became monotonous, excessive and unbearable after a short while. After some time, the water she was washing herself in began to wet her annoyingly, run down her neck and chill her unpleasantly. So they got out of that rainy place.

For it wasn't that place either. Or that time.

*

The next place was very warm, the weather very hot, so Ciri, Kelpie and the unicorn dried off and steamed like three kettles. They found themselves on some sweltering moors at the edge of a forest. At once it could be deduced it was a very large forest, quite simply a dense, wild and inaccessible wilderness. Hope that it might be Brokilon Forest thumped in Ciri's heart, the hope that at last it might be a familiar and appropriate place.

They rode slowly along the edge of the forest. Ciri was looking out for something that might serve as a sign. The unicorn snorted, raised his head and horn, and looked around. It was anxious.

'Do you think, Little Horse,' she asked, 'that they might be following us?'

A snort – comprehensible and unambiguous even without telepathy.

'We haven't managed to flee far enough away yet?'

She didn't understand what he telepathically told her in answer. There was no far or near? A spiral? What spiral?

She didn't understand what he was talking about. But the anxiety infected her.

The scorching moors weren't the right place or the right time.

They understood it in the early evening, when the heat eased off, and instead of one, two moons rose in the sky above the forest. One large, the other small.

*

The next place was a seashore, a steep cliff, from which they saw breakers crashing against strangely-shaped rocks. They smelled the sea wind, and terns, black-headed gulls and petrels screeched, covering the ledges of the cliff in a restless white layer.

The sea reached all the way to the dark, cloudy horizon.

Down below, on the rocky beach, Ciri suddenly noticed the skeleton of a gigantic fish with a horrendously huge head partly buried in the shingles. Its great teeth, bristling in its sun-bleached jawbones, were at least three spans long, and it seemed one could have ridden a horse into its maw and easily paraded under the portals of its ribs without knocking one's head against its spine.

Ciri wasn't certain if fish like that existed in her world and her time.

They rode along the edge of the cliff, and the seagulls and albatrosses weren't frightened at all, reluctantly moving out of their way. Why, they even tried hard to peck and pinch the feathers on Kelpie and Ihuarraquax's fetlocks! Ciri instantly understood that the birds had never seen a human or a horse. Or a unicorn.

Ihuarraquax snorted, shook his head and horn, clearly anxious. It turned out he had reason to be.

Something creaked, just like canvas being torn. The terns rose with a cry and a fluttering, for a moment covering everything in a white cloud. The air above the cliff suddenly vibrated and became blurred like glass with water spilled over it. And then it shattered like glass. And darkness poured out of the rupture, while riders spilled out of the darkness. Around their shoulders fluttered cloaks whose vermilion-amaranth-crimson colour brought to mind the glow of a fire in a sky lit up by the blaze of the setting sun.

Dearg Ruadhri. The Red Horsemen.

Even before the crying of birds and the neighing of the unicorn had died away, Ciri had reined her mare around and spurred her into a gallop. But the air also ruptured in another place, and from the rupture, cloaks fluttering like wings, rushed out more horsemen. The semicircle of the noose closed, pressing them against the cliff. Ciri cried out, jerking Swallow out of its scabbard.

The unicorn summoned her with a sharp signal that

penetrated her brain like a needle. She understood at once this time. He was showing her the way. A gap in the circle. He meanwhile reared up, neighed piercingly and charged at the elves with his horn lowered menacingly.

'Little Horse!'

Save yourself, Star-Eye! Don't let them catch you!

She pressed herself against Kelpie's mane.

Two elves barred her way. They had lassos, nooses on long shafts. They tried to throw them over Kelpie's neck. The mare nimbly twisted her head out of reach of one, but didn't slow her gallop for a second. Ciri severed the other noose with a single flourish of her sword, and urged Kelpie with a cry to run quicker. The mare flew like a hurricane.

But others were now hard on their heels. She could hear their cries, the thud of their hooves, the flapping of their cloaks. *What about Little Horse*, she thought, *what have they done to him?*

There was no time for reflection. The unicorn was right; she couldn't let them capture her again. She had to dive into space, hide, and lose herself in the labyrinth of places and times. She focused, sensing with horror that all she had in her head was a void and a strange, ringing, quickly growing hubbub.

They're casting a spell on me, she thought. *They want to beguile me with witchcraft. Over my dead body! Spells have a range. I won't let them get close to me.*

'Run, Kelpie!'

The black mare stuck out her neck and flew like the wind. Ciri flattened herself on her neck to minimise air resistance.

The cries from behind her back, a moment earlier still loud and dangerously close, faded, drowned out by the screaming of frightened birds. Then they became harder and harder to make out. Remote.

Kelpie flew like a hurricane. So fast the sea wind howled in her ears.

A note of fury sounded in the distant shouts of the pursuers. They understood they couldn't keep up. That they had no chance of catching up with the black mare, who was running without any sign of fatigue, as light, soft and supple as a cheetah.

Ciri didn't look back. But she knew they continued to pursue her for a long time, even though it was futile. Until the moment their own horses began to wheeze and rasp, stumble and lower their foaming muzzles almost to the ground, teeth bared. Only then did they quit, sending after her nothing but curses and impotent threats she could no longer hear.

Kelpie flew like a gale.

*

The place she fled to was dry and windy. The keen, howling wind quickly dried the tears on her cheeks.

She was alone. Alone again. All alone.

A wanderer, a permanent vagabond, a sailor lost on the boundless sea among the archipelago of places and times.

A sailor losing hope.

The gale whistled and howled, rolling balls of dried weeds over the cracked earth.

The gale dried her tears.

*

Inside her skull cool lucidity, in her ears a buzzing, a monotonous buzzing, like from the twisted interior of a sea conch. A tingling in her nape. Black and very soft nothingness.

A new place. Another place.

An archipelago of places.

*

'This night,' said Nimue, wrapping herself up in a fur, 'will be a good night. I sense it.'

Condwiramurs didn't comment, although she had already heard similar assurances a good few times. For it wasn't the first

evening they had sat on the terrace, the lake blazing with the sunset in front of them, and behind them the magical looking glass and magical tapestry.

The curses of the Fisher King reached them from the lake, multiplied by the echo rolling across the water. The Fisher King was often in the habit of using vivid language to emphasise dissatisfaction with his angling failures – the unsuccessful strikes, plays, landings and other techniques he used. It had gone particularly badly that evening, judging from the strength and repertoire of the oaths.

'Time,' said Nimue, 'has neither a beginning nor an end. Time is like the serpent Ouroboros, which bites its own tail with its teeth. Eternity is hidden in every moment. And eternity consists of the moments that create it. Eternity is an archipelago of moments. You may sail through that archipelago, although navigation is very difficult, and it is dangerous to get lost. It's good to have a lighthouse whose light can guide you. It's good to be able to hear someone calling among the fog . . .'

She fell silent for a while.

'How does the legend that interests us end? It seems to us – to you and me – that we know how it ends. But Ouroboros is still grasping its own tail in its teeth. Yes, how the legend ends is being settled now. At this moment. The ending of the legend will depend on whether and when the sailor lost among the archipelago of moments sees the lamp of the lighthouse. If she hears the calling.'

A curse, a splash and the banging of oars in the rowlocks could be heard from the lake.

'It will be a good night tonight. The last before the summer solstice. The moon is getting smaller. The sun is passing from the Third to the Fourth House, to the sign of the Goat-Fish. The best time for divination . . . The best time . . . Focus, Condwiramurs.'

Condwiramurs, as so many times before, obediently focused, slowly entering a state close to a trance.

'Search for her,' said Nimue. 'She is somewhere among the stars, among the moonlight. Among the places. She is there. She is awaiting help. Let's help her, Condwiramurs.'

*

Concentration, fists at her temples. A buzzing in her ears, as though from the inside of a conch. A flash. And abruptly soft and black nothingness.

*

There was a place where Ciri saw burning pyres. The women bound by chains to stakes howled wildly and horrifyingly for mercy, and the crowd gathered around roared, laughed and danced. There was a place where a great city was burning, roaring with fire and bursting with flames from collapsing roofs, and black smoke hooded the whole sky. There was a place where enormous two-legged lizards fought one another, and garish blood gushed from beneath fangs and claws.

There was a place where hundreds of identical white windmills threshed the sky with their slender sails. There was a place where hundreds of snakes hissed and squirmed on stones, scraping and rustling their scales.

There was a place where there was darkness, and in the darkness voices, whispers and terror.

There were even more places. But none of them was the right one.

*

She was finding moving from place to place so easy that she began to experiment. One of the few places she wasn't afraid of was those warm moors at the edge of the wild forest above which two moons rose. Calling forth in her memory the sight of those moons and repeating in her mind what she wanted, Ciri focused, strained and plunged into the nothingness.

She succeeded at the second attempt.

Now encouraged, she decided to attempt an even more daring experiment. It was obvious that aside from places, she also visited times. Vysogota had talked about that, as had the elves, and the unicorns had mentioned it. Why, she had managed – albeit

unwittingly – to do it before! When she had been wounded in the face she had escaped from her persecutors into time, jumped forward four days, and then Vysogota couldn't account for those days. Nothing added up for him . . .

Perhaps that was her chance? A leap into time?

She decided to try. The burning city, for example, couldn't be burning permanently, could it? And if she were to get there before the fire? Or after it?

She landed almost in the centre of the fire, scorching her eyebrows and eyelashes and arousing horrendous panic amongst the victims of the fire fleeing from the blazing city.

She escaped to the friendly moors. *It probably wasn't worth taking a risk like that*, she thought, *the devil only knows how it might end. I do better with places, so I'll stick to places. Let's try to get to places. Familiar places, ones I remember well. And ones I have pleasant associations with.*

She began with the Temple of Melitele, imagining the gate, the building, the grounds and the workshop, the novices' dormitory, and the rooms where Yennefer lived. She concentrated with her fists against her temples, evoking in her memory the faces of Nenneke, Eurneid, Katje and Iola the Second.

Nothing came of it. She found herself in some swamps shrouded in mist and swarming with mosquitoes, resounding with the whistling of turtles and the deafening croaking of frogs.

She tried in turn – with no better result – Kaer Morhen, the Isles of Skellige, and the bank in Gors Velen where Fabio Sachs worked. She didn't dare to try Cintra, knowing that the city was occupied by Nilfgaardians. Instead of that she tried Vizima, the city where she and Yennefer used to go shopping.

*

Aarhenius Krantz, sage, alchemist, astronomer and astrologer, fidgeted on a hard stool with his eye stuck to the eyepiece of a telescope. The comet of great size and power, which it had been possible to observe in the sky for almost a week, merited observation and research. A comet like that, as Aarhenius Krantz knew, with a fiery red tail, usually heralded great wars,

conflagrations and massacres. Now, to tell the truth, the comet had been a bit late with its prophecy, because the war with Nilfgaard was well underway, and one could already have prophesied conflagrations and massacres correctly, without hesitation, for not a day went by without them. Aarhenius Krantz, who was familiar with the movements of heavenly bodies, was however hoping to calculate when, in how many years or centuries, the comet would appear again, announcing another war, which, who knows, it would perhaps be possible to prepare for better than the present one.

The astronomer stood up, massaged his backside and went to relieve his bladder. From the terrace, through the small balustrade. He always pissed straight from the terrace onto a bed of peonies, not caring at all about the housekeeper's reprimands. It was quite simply too far to the privy. Wasting time walking a long way to relieve himself bore the risk of the loss of valuable reflections, which no scholar could afford to do.

He stood by the balustrade and undid his trews, looking at the lights of Vizima reflected in the lake. He sighed with relief and raised his eyes heavenwards.

Stars, he thought, *and constellations. The Winter Maiden, the Seven Goats, the Pitcher. According to some theories, they aren't just little twinkling lights, but worlds. Other worlds. Worlds from which time and space separate us . . . I believe deeply,* he thought, *that one day journeys to those other places, to those other times and universes, will be possible. Yes, it will certainly be possible one day. A way will be found. But it will demand utterly new thinking, a new, original idea that will tear apart the rigid corset called rational cognition that restricts it today . . .*

Ah, he thought, hopping, *if only it could be achieved . . . If only one could experience inspiration. If there could be one, unique opportunity . . .*

Something flashed below the terrace, the darkness of the night ruptured like a starburst, and a horse emerged from the flare. With a rider on its back. The rider was a girl.

'Good evening,' she greeted him politely. 'I'm sorry if it's a bad time. May one know what place this is? And what time?'

Aarhenius Krantz swallowed, opened his mouth and mumbled.

'The place,' the girl repeated patiently and clearly. 'The time.'

'Errrm . . . Iiii . . . Ummm . . .'

The horse snorted. The girl sighed.

‘Well, it must be the wrong place again. The wrong place, the wrong time. But answer me, fellow! With at least one comprehensible word. For I can’t be in a world where people have forgotten articulate speech!’

‘Errr . . .’

‘One little word . . .’

‘Ummm . . .’

‘Then bugger you, you stupid old goat,’ said the girl.

And vanished. Along with the horse.

Aarhenius Krantz closed his mouth. He stood for a while by the balustrade, staring into the night, at the lake and the distant lights of Vizima reflected in it. Then he buttoned up his trousers and returned to his telescope.

The comet swiftly flashed across the sky. One ought to observe it, not let the eyepiece and eye lose sight of it. Track it until it disappeared into the chasms of the universe. It was an opportunity, and a scholar cannot waste such an opportunity.

*

Perhaps I could try from another direction, she thought, staring at the two moons above the moor, now visible as two crescents, one small, the other large and less crescent. *Perhaps not imagine places or faces*, she thought, *but strongly desire . . . Strongly wish for something, very strongly, right from my belly . . .*

What harm is there in trying?

Geralt. I want to go to Geralt. I very much want to go to Geralt.

*

‘Oh, no,’ she cried. ‘Where have I bloody ended up now?’

Kelpie confirmed that she thought the same by whinnying, belching steam from her nostrils and scraping her snowbound hooves.

The blizzard whistled and moaned, blinding them. Sharp snowflakes stung her cheeks and hands. The cold chilled her to the marrow, nipped her joints like a wolf. Ciri trembled, hunching her shoulders and hiding her neck in the meagre, non-existent protection of her turned-up collar.

To the left and right rose majestic, menacing peaks, grey, glazed monuments whose summits vanished somewhere high up in the fog and blizzard. A swift, very swollen river, dense with frazil and lumps of ice, sped along the bottom of the valley. It was white all around. And cold.

So much for my abilities, thought Ciri, feeling the inside of her nose freezing. *So much for my power. A fine Master of the Worlds, well, well. I wanted to go to Geralt, and I ended up in the middle of some bloody wilderness, winter and blizzard.*

'Come on, Kelpie, move, or you'll go numb!' She grabbed the reins with fingers paralysed by the frost. 'Gee up, gee up, girl! I know it's not the place it's meant to be, I'll soon get us out of here, we'll soon return to our warm moor. But I have to concentrate, and that may take some time. So move yourself! Come on, ride!'

Kelpie belched steam from her nostrils.

The strong wind blew. Snow stuck to her face, melting on her eyelashes. The freezing snowstorm howled and whistled.

*

'Look!' called Angoulême, outshouting the blizzard. 'Look there! There are tracks. Someone rode that way!'

'What are you saying?' Geralt unwrapped the shawl he had wrapped around his head to protect his ears from frostbite. 'What are you saying, Angoulême?'

'Tracks! Hoof prints!'

'A horse, here?' Cahir also had to shout. The blizzard intensified, and the River Sansretour, it seemed, whooshed and roared even louder. 'How could a horse get here?'

'Look for yourselves!'

'Indeed,' commented the vampire, the only member of the company who wasn't displaying symptoms of being utterly frozen,

since he was for obvious reasons just as insensitive to low as to high temperatures. ‘Hoof prints. But are they a horse’s?’

‘It’s impossible for it to be a horse.’ Cahir massaged his cheeks and nose hard. ‘Not in the middle of nowhere. The tracks must have been left by some wild animal. Most probably a moufflon.’

‘Moufflon yourself!’ yelled Angoulême. ‘When I say a horse, I mean a horse!’

Milva, as usual, preferred practice to theory. She dismounted and bent over, pushing her fox-fur kalpak back on her head.

‘The pup’s right,’ she decided after moment. ‘It’s a horse. I think it’s even shod, but it’s hard to say, the blizzard has covered the tracks. It rode over there, into that ravine.’

‘Ha!’ Angoulême banged her arms together briskly. ‘I knew it! Somebody lives here! In the vicinity! Let’s follow the trail, perhaps we’ll find some warm cottage or other? Perhaps they’ll let us get warm? Perhaps they’ll treat us to something?’

‘For certain,’ said Cahir with a sneer. ‘Most probably a crossbow bolt.’

‘It would be most sensible to keep to our plan and the river,’ Regis decided in his most omniscient tone. ‘Then we won’t be at risk of getting lost. And further down the Sansretour there was meant to be a trapper’s manufactory, there’s a greater likelihood they’ll put us up there.’

‘Geralt? What do you say?’

The Witcher said nothing, and fixed his eyes on the snowflakes swirling in the blizzard.

‘We’ll follow the tracks,’ he finally decided.

‘Actually—’ began the vampire, but Geralt immediately interrupted him.

‘Follow the hoof prints! Ride!’

They spurred their steeds, but didn’t get very far. They ventured not more than a quarter of a furlong into a gorge.

‘That’s it.’ Angoulême stated a fact, looking at the quite smooth and virginal snow. ‘Now you see it, now you don’t. Like an elven circus.’

‘What now, Witcher?’ Cahir turned around in the saddle. ‘The

tracks have ceased. They've been covered up by the blizzard.'

'No they haven't,' Milva said. 'The blizzard doesn't reach here, in the canyon.'

'What happened to the horse then?'

The archer shrugged, huddled up in the saddle, pulling her head into her shoulders.

'Where's that horse?' Cahir wasn't giving up. 'Did it vanish? Evaporate? Or perhaps we imagined it? Geralt? What do you say?'

The gale howled above the ravine, whipping up and swirling the snow.

'Why,' asked the vampire, scrutinising the Witcher intently, 'did you order us to follow those tracks, Geralt?'

'I don't know,' he confessed a moment later. 'I . . . I felt something. Something touched me. Never mind what. You were right, Regis. Let's go back to the Sansretour and keep by the river, without any excursions or diversions that might end badly. According to what Reynart said, the real winter and bad weather only begin in the Malheur pass. When we get there we'll have to be sound in body. Don't just stand there, we're turning around.'

'Without having cleared up what happened to that strange horse?'

'What's there to explain?' the Witcher said bitterly. 'The tracks were swept away, and that's that. Anyway, maybe it really was a moufflon?'

Milva looked at him strangely, but refrained from comment.

When they returned to the river the mysterious tracks were no longer there either, for they had been covered up by wet snow. Frazil was floating densely, pieces of pack ice were swirling and turning around in the tin-grey current of the Sansretour.

'I'll tell you something,' Angoulême piped up. 'But promise you won't laugh.'

They turned around. In her woollen pompom hat pulled down over her eyes, with cheeks and nose red from the cold, wearing a shapeless sheepskin coat, the girl looked funny, a dead ringer for a small, plump kobold.

'I'll tell you something about those tracks. When I was with Nightingale, in the hanza, they said that during the winter the

Mountain King, leader of the ice demons, rides on an enchanted horse in the passes. To meet him face to face is certain death. What do you say to that, Geralt? Is it possible that—'

'Anything,' he interrupted her. 'Anything's possible. On we go, company. Before us is the Malheur pass.'

The snow lashed and whipped, the wind blew, and ice demons whistled and wailed amidst the blizzard.

*

Except the moor she'd landed on wasn't the one she knew, Ciri realised at once. She didn't even have to wait until evening, she was sure she wouldn't see the two moons.

The forest along whose edge she rode was as wild and inaccessible as the other one, but differences could be seen. Here, for example, there were more birches and fewer beeches. She hadn't heard or seen any birds there, while there were great numbers of them here. There had only been sand and moss between the clumps of heather; here whole carpets of green clubmoss sprawled. Even the grasshoppers running from under Kelpie's hooves were somehow different here. Somehow familiar. And then . . .

Her heart began beating harder. She saw a track, overgrown and neglected. Leading into the forest.

Ciri looked around carefully and made sure the strange track didn't go on any further, that it ended here. That it didn't lead to the forest, but from it or through it. Without deliberating for long, she prodded the mare's sides with her heels and rode between the trees. *I'll ride south*, she thought. *If I don't come across anything to the south, I'll turn around and ride in the opposite direction, beyond the moor.*

She trotted beneath a canopy of boughs, looking around attentively, trying hard not to overlook anything important. Because of that she didn't overlook an old man peeping out from behind an oak tree.

The old man, who was very short, but not at all stooped, was dressed in a linen shirt and trews made from the same material. On his feet he had huge and very funny-looking bast slippers. In one hand he held a gnarled stick and in the other a wicker basket. Ciri

couldn't see his face precisely, for it was hidden by the frayed and drooping brim of a straw hat, from under which protruded a sunburnt nose and a tangled grey beard.

'Fear not,' she said. 'I won't do you any harm.'

The grey-bearded man shifted his weight from one foot to the other and removed his hat. He had a round face flecked with liver spots, ruddy and not very wrinkled, thin eyebrows, and a small and very receding chin. His long grey hair was tied up on his nape in a queue, but the top of his head meanwhile was completely bald, as yellow and shiny as a pumpkin.

She saw him looking at her sword, at the hilt extending above her shoulder.

'Don't be afraid,' she repeated.

'Ho, ho!' he said, mumbling a little. 'Ho, ho, my young maiden. Forest Gramps isn't afraid. He ain't one of those fearful types, oh no.'

He smiled. He had large, very protruding teeth, because of a bad occlusion and receding jaw. It was because of that that he mumbled so much.

'Forest Gramps ain't afraid of wanderers,' he repeated. 'Or even brigands. Forest Gramps is poor, he's a poor thing. Forest Gramps is peaceful, he doesn't disturb no one. Hey!'

He smiled again. When he smiled he seemed to be all front teeth.

'And you, young lass, aren't you afraid of Forest Gramps?'

Ciri snorted.

'I'm not, just imagine. I'm not the fearful kind either.'

'Hey, hey, hey! Well I never!'

He took a pace towards her, resting on his stick. Kelpie snorted. Ciri tugged on the reins.

'She doesn't like strangers,' she warned. 'And she bites.'

'Hey, hey! Forest Gramps knows. Bad, unruly mare! Where are you riding from, miss? And where are you heading, may I ask?'

'It's a long story. Where does this road lead?'

'Don't you know that, miss?'

‘Don’t answer questions with questions, if you don’t mind. Where will that road take me? What place is this, in any case? And what . . . time is it?’

The old man stuck his teeth out again, moving them like a coypu.

‘Hey, hey!’ he mumbled. ‘Well I never. What time, you ask, miss? Oh, I see you’ve travelled from far away, from far away to Forest Gramps, miss!’

‘From quite far away, indeed,’ she nodded indifferently. ‘From other—’

‘Places and times,’ he completed her sentence. ‘Gramps knows. Gramps guessed.’

‘What?’ she asked, excited. ‘What did you guess? What do you know?’

‘Forest Gramps knows much.’

‘Speak!’

‘Miss must be hungry?’ he stuck out his teeth. ‘Thirsty? Fatigued? If you want, miss, Forest Gramps will take you to his cottage, feed you, give you drink. Take you in.’

For a long time Ciri hadn’t had the time or the peace of mind to think about rest or food. Now the words of the strange old man tightened up her stomach, knotted up her guts, and tied up her tongue. The old man observed her from under the brim of his hat.

‘Forest Gramps,’ he mumbled, ‘has meat in his cottage. Has spring water. And has hay for the mare, the bad mare that wanted to bite good old Gramps! Hey! Everything is in Forest Gramps’ cottage. And we’ll be able to talk about other places and times . . . It’s not far at all, oh no. Will the young traveller avail herself? Won’t disdain a visit to poor old Gramps?’

Ciri swallowed.

‘Lead on.’

Forest Gramps turned around and shambled down a barely visible path among the thicket, measuring off the road with energetic swings of his stick. Ciri rode behind him, dipping her head under branches and reining Kelpie back. The mare was indeed determined to bite the old man, or at least eat his hat.

In spite of his assurances it wasn’t near at all. When they got

there, to a clearing, the sun was almost at its zenith.

Gramps' cottage turned out to be a picturesque shack on stilts, with a roof that had clearly often been patched up using whatever happened to be to hand. The shack's walls were covered with hides resembling pigskin. In front of the cottage there was a wooden construction shaped like a gallows, a low table and a chopping stump with an axe stuck in it. Behind the cottage was a hearth made of stones and clay with a large, blackened cauldron on it.

'This is Forest Gramps' home,' the old man indicated with his stick, not without pride. 'Forest Gramps lives here. He sleeps here. He cooks vittles here. Should he have something to cook. It's a hardship, a severe hardship to get vittles in the forest. Does miss wanderer like pearl barley?'

'She does,' Ciri swallowed again. 'She likes everything.'

'With a bit of meat? With some grease? With scratchings?'

'Mhm.'

'And it don't look,' Gramps shot her an appraising glance, 'that miss has lately tasted meat and scratchings often, oh no. You're skinny, miss, skinny. Skin and bones! Hey, hey! And what's that? Behind your back, miss?'

Ciri looked around, taken in by the oldest and most primitive trick in the book. A terrible blow of the gnarled stick caught her right in the temple. Her reflexes helped only in that she raised her arm, and her hand partly cushioned a blow capable of smashing her skull like an egg. But in any case, Ciri ended up on the ground, stunned, bewildered and completely disorientated.

Gramps, grinning, leaped at her and struck her again with the stick. Ciri once again managed to shield her head with her hands, with the result that both flopped down inertly. The left one was definitely injured, the metacarpals probably shattered.

Gramps, leaping forward, attacked from the other side and whacked her in the stomach with his stick. She screamed, curling up into a ball. Then he stooped on her like a hawk, turned her over face downwards and pinned her down with his knees. Ciri tensed up, kicked back hard, missing, then delivered a vicious blow with her elbow, this time hitting the target. Gramps roared furiously and smashed her in the back of the head with his fist, so powerfully she lurched face-first into the sand. He seized her by the hair on her nape and pressed her mouth and nose against the ground. She felt

herself suffocating. The old man kneeled on her, still pressing her head against the ground, tore the sword from her back and cast it aside. Then he began to fiddle with his trousers. He found the buckle and unfastened it. Ciri howled, choking and spitting sand. He pushed her down harder, immobilising her, entangling her hair in his fist. He tore her trousers off her with a powerful tug.

'Hey, hey,' he mumbled, wheezing. 'And hasn't Gramps got a nice bit of stuff. Ooh, ooh, Gramps hasn't had one like this for a long, long time.'

Ciri, feeling the repulsive touch of his dry, claw-like hand, yelled with her mouth full of sand and pine needles.

'Lie still, miss,' she heard him slavering, kneading her buttocks. 'Gramps isn't as young as he was, not right away, slowly . . . But never fear, Gramps will do what's to be done. Hey, hey! And then Gramps will eat his fill, hey, his fill! Lavishly—'

He broke off, roared, and squealed.

Feeling that his grip had eased off, Ciri kicked, jerked and leaped up like a spring. And saw what had happened.

Kelpie, creeping up noiselessly, had seized Forest Gramps in her teeth by his queue and almost lifted him into the air. The old man howled and squealed, struggled, kicked and wriggled his legs, finally managing to tear himself free, leaving the long, grey lock of hair in the mare's teeth. He tried to grab his stick, but Ciri kicked it out of range of his hands. She was about to treat him to another kick where he deserved it, but her movements were hindered by her trousers being halfway down her thighs. Gramps made good use of the time it took her to pull them up one-handed. He was by the stump in a few bounds and jerked the axe from it, driving the determined Kelpie away with a swing. He roared, stuck out his awful teeth and attacked Ciri, raising the axe to strike.

'Gramps is going to fuck you, miss!' he howled wildly. 'Even if Gramps has to chop you up into pieces first. It's all the same to Gramps if you're in one piece, or in portions.'

She thought she'd cope with him easily. After all he was a decrepit old geezer.

She was very much mistaken.

In spite of his enormous slippers he jumped like a spinning top, hopped like a rabbit, and swung the axe with the bent handle

like a butcher. After the dark and sharpened blade had literally grazed her several times Ciri realised that the only thing that could save her was to run away.

But she was rescued by a coincidence. Stepping back, she knocked her foot against her sword. She picked it up in a flash.

‘Drop the axe,’ she panted, drawing Swallow from the scabbard with a hiss. ‘Drop the axe onto the ground, you lecherous old man. Then, who knows, perhaps I’ll spare your life. And not cut you into pieces.’

He stopped. He was panting and wheezing, and his beard was disgustingly covered in saliva. He didn’t drop his weapon, though. She saw savage fury in his eyes.

‘Very well!’ she swung her sword in a hissing moulinet. ‘Make my day!’

For a moment he looked at her, as though not understanding, then he stuck out his teeth, goggled, roared and lunged at her. Ciri had had enough of fooling around. She dodged him with a swift half-turn and cut from below across both his raised arms, above the elbows. Gramps released the axe from his bloodied hands, but immediately jumped at her again. She leaped aside and slashed him in the nape of the neck. More out of mercy than need; he would soon have bled to death from his two severed brachial arteries.

He lay, fighting unbelievably hard not to give up his life, still writhing like a worm in spite of his cloven vertebrae. Ciri stood over him. The last grains of sand were still grating in her teeth. She spat them out straight onto his back. He was dead before she finished spitting.

*

The strange construction in front of the cottage resembling a gallows was equipped with iron hooks and a block and tackle. The table and chopping block were worn smooth, sticky with grease and reeked horribly.

Like a shambles.

In the kitchen, Ciri found a cauldron of the pearl barley he had offered her, swimming in grease, full of pieces of meat and mushrooms. She was very hungry, but something told her not to eat

it. She only drank some water from a wooden pail and nibbled a small, wrinkled apple.

Behind the shack she found a cellar with steps, deep and cool. In the cellar stood pots of lard. Something was hanging from the ceiling. The remains of a side of meat.

She ran out of the cellar, stumbling on the steps, as though devils were pursuing her. Then fell over in some nettles, jumped up, and ran tottering over to the cottage, grabbing with both hands one of the stilts supporting it. Although she had almost nothing in her stomach, she vomited very spasmodically for a very long time.

The side of meat hanging in the cellar belonged to a child.

*

Led by the strong smell, she found a water-filled hollow in the forest, into which the prudent Forest Gramps would throw scraps of what it wasn't possible to eat. Looking at the skulls, ribs and pelvises sticking out of the ooze, Ciri realised with horror that she was only alive thanks to the ghastly old man's lecherousness, only owing to the fact that he had felt like frolicking. Had his hunger been more powerful than his despicable sexual urges he would have hit her treacherously with the axe, not the stick. Suspended by the legs from the wooden gallows he would have disembowelled and skinned her, dressed and divided her on the table, chopped her up on the chopping block . . .

Although she was unsteady on her feet from giddiness, and her left hand was swollen and pain was shooting through it, she dragged the corpse to the hollow in the forest and pushed it into the stinking slime, among the bones of his victims. She returned, covered up the entrance to the cellar with branches and twigs, and the yard and entire smallholding with brushwood. Then she meticulously set fire to it all from four sides.

She only rode away once it had thoroughly caught fire, when the fire was raging and roaring satisfactorily. When she was certain that no rain showers would interfere with all traces of that place being obliterated.

*

Her hand wasn't in such bad shape. It was swollen, indeed, it hurt awfully, but probably no bones were broken.

As evening approached only one moon indeed rose. But somehow, strangely, Ciri didn't feel like considering this world hers.

Nor staying in it longer than need be.

*

'It'll be a good night tonight,' murmured Nimue. 'I can sense it.'

Condwiramurs sighed.

The horizon blazed gold and red. There was a stripe of the same colour on the lake, from the horizon to the island.

They sat in armchairs on the terrace, with the looking glass in the ebony frame and the tapestry depicting the old castle hugging a rock wall behind them, looking at themselves in the mountain lake.

How many evenings, thought Condwiramurs, *how many evenings have we sat like this until dusk has fallen and later, in the dark? Without any results? Just talking?*

It was getting cool. The sorceress and the novice covered themselves with furs. From the lake they heard the creaking of the rowlocks of Fisher King's boat, but they couldn't see it – it was obscured by the brilliance of the sunset.

'I quite often dream,' Condwiramurs returned to their interrupted conversation, 'that I'm in an icy wasteland, where there's nothing but the white of the snow and mounds of ice, glistening in the sun. And there's a silence, a silence ringing in the ears. An unnatural silence. The silence of death.'

Nimue nodded, as though to indicate she knew what was meant. But she didn't comment.

'Suddenly,' continued the novice, 'suddenly I feel I can hear something. That I feel the ice tremble beneath my feet. I kneel down, rake aside the snow. The ice is as transparent as glass, as in some clear, mountain lakes, when the pebbles at the bottom and the fish swimming can be seen through a layer two yards thick. In my dream I can also see, although the layer of ice is dozens or perhaps

hundreds of yards thick. It doesn't stop me seeing . . . and hearing . . . people calling for help. At the bottom, deep beneath the ice . . . is a frozen world.'

Nimue didn't comment this time either.

'Of course I know what the source of that dream is,' continued the novice. 'Ithlinne's Prophecy, the infamous White Frost, the Time of Frost and the Wolfish Blizzard. The world dying among the snows and ice, in order, as the prophecy says, to be born again centuries later. Cleansed and better.'

'I believe deeply,' said Nimue softly, 'that the world will be born again. Whether into something better, not particularly.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'You heard me.'

'Didn't I mishear? Nimue, the White Frost has already been prophesied thousands of times. Every time the winter is severe it's been said that it has come. Right now even children don't believe that any winter is capable of endangering the world.'

'Well, well. Children don't believe. But I, just imagine, do.'

'Based on any rational premises?' asked Condwiramurs with a slight sneer. 'Or only on a mystical faith in the infallibility of elven predictions?'

Nimue said nothing for a long while, picking at the fur she was draped in.

'The earth,' she finally began in a slightly sermonising tone, 'has a spherical shape and orbits the sun. Do you agree with that? Or perhaps you belong to one of those fashionable sects that try to prove something utterly different.'

'No. I don't. I accept heliocentrism and I agree with the theory of the spherical shape of the earth.'

'Excellent. You are sure then to agree with the fact that the vertical axis of the globe is tilted at an angle, and the path of the earth around the sun doesn't have the shape of a regular circle, but is elliptical?'

'I learned about it. But I'm not an astronomer, so—'

'You don't have to be an astronomer, it's enough to think logically. The earth circles the sun in an elliptical-shaped orbit, and so during its revolution sometimes it's closer and sometimes further

away. The further the earth is from the sun, the colder it is on it; that must be logical. And the less the world's axis deviates from the perpendicular the less light reaches the northern hemisphere.'

'That's also logical.'

'Both those factors, I mean the ellipticalness of the orbit and the degree of tilt of the world's axis, are subject to changes. As can be observed, cyclical ones. The ellipse may be more or less elliptical, that is stretched out and elongated, and the earth's axis may be less or more tilted. Extreme conditions, as far as climate is concerned, are caused by a simultaneous occurrence of the two phenomena: the maximum elongation of the ellipse and only an insignificant deviation of the axis from the vertical. The earth orbiting the sun receives very little light and heat at the aphelium, and the polar regions are additionally harmed by the disadvantageous angle of tilt of the axis.'

'Naturally.'

'Less light in the northern hemisphere means the snow lies longer. White and shining snow reflects sunlight, the temperature falls even more. The snow lies even longer because of that, it doesn't melt at all in greater and greater stretches or only melts for a short time. The more snow and the longer it lies, the greater the white and shining reflective surface . . .'

'I understand.'

'The snow's falling, it's falling and falling and there's more and more of it. So observe that masses of warm air drift with the sea currents from the south, which condense over the frozen northern land. The warm air condenses and falls as snow. The greater the temperature differences, the heavier the falls. The heavier the falls, the more white snow that doesn't melt for a long time. And the colder it is. The greater the temperature difference and the more abundant the condensation of the masses of air . . .'

'I understand.'

'The snow cover becomes heavy enough to become compacted ice. A glacier. On which, as we now know, snow continues to fall, pressing it down even more. The glacier grows, it's not only thicker and thicker, but it spreads outwards, covering greater and greater expanses. White expanses . . .'

'Reflecting the sun's rays,' Condwiramurs nodded. 'Becoming colder, colder and even colder. The White Frost prophesied by

Ithlinne. But is a cataclysm possible? Is there really a danger that the ice that has lain in the north forever will all of a sudden flow south, crushing, compressing and covering everything? How fast does the ice cap spread at the pole? A few inches annually?'

'As you surely know,' said Nimue, eyes fixed on the lake, 'the only port in the Gulf of Praxeda that doesn't freeze is Pont Vanis.'

'Yes. I am aware.'

'Enriching your knowledge: a hundred years ago none of the Gulf's ports used to freeze. A hundred years ago – there are numerous accounts of it – cucumbers and pumpkins used to grow in Talgar, and sunflowers and lupins were cultivated in Caingorn. They aren't cultivated now, since their growth is impossible; it's simply too cold there. And did you know there were once vineyards in Kaedwen? The wines from those vines probably weren't the best, because it appears from the surviving documents that they were very cheap. But local poets sung their praises anyway. Today vines don't grow in Kaedwen at all. Because today's winters, unlike the former ones, bring hard frosts, and a hard frost kills vines. It doesn't just retard growth, it simply kills. Destroys.'

'I understand.'

'Yes,' Nimue reflected. 'What more is there to add? Perhaps that it snows in Talgar in the middle of November and drifts south at a speed of more than fifty miles a day. That at the end of December and the beginning of January snowstorms occur by the Alba, where still a hundred years ago snow was a sensation? And that every child knows that the snows melt and the lakes thaw in April in our region, don't they? And every child wonders why that month is called April – the Opening. Didn't it surprise you?'

'Not especially,' admitted Condwiramurs. 'Anyway at home in Vicovaro we didn't say April, but Falsebloom. Or in the elven: Birke. But I understand what you're implying. The name of the month comes from ancient times when everything really did bloom in April . . .'

'Those distant times are all a hundred, a hundred and twenty years ago. That's virtually yesterday, girl. Ithlinne was absolutely right. Her prophecy will be fulfilled. The world will perish beneath a layer of ice. Civilisation will perish through the fault of the Destroyer, who could have, who had the opportunity, to open a path to hope. It is known from legend that she didn't.'

‘For reasons that the legend doesn’t explain. Or explains with the help of a vague and naive moral.’

‘That’s true. But the fact remains a fact. The White Frost is a fact. The civilisation of the northern hemisphere is doomed to extinction. It will vanish beneath the ice of a spreading glacier, beneath permanent pack ice and snow. There’s no need to panic, though, because it’ll take some time before it happens.’

The sun had completely set and the blinding glare had disappeared from the surface of the lake. Now a streak of softer, paler light lay down on the water. The moon rose over Inis Vitre, as bright as a gold sovereign chopped in half.

‘How long?’ Condwiramurs asked. ‘How long, according to you, will it take? I mean, how much time do we have?’

‘A good deal.’

‘How much, Nimue?’

‘Some three thousand years.’

On the lake, the Fisher King banged his oar down in the boat and swore. Condwiramurs sighed loudly.

‘You’ve reassured me a little,’ she said after a while. ‘But only a little.’

*

The next place was one of the foulest Ciri had visited. It certainly appeared in the top ranking and at the top of that ranking.

It was a port, a port channel. She saw boats and galleys by jetties and posts, saw a forest of masts, saw sails, sagging heavily in the still air. Smoke, clouds of stinking smoke, were creeping and hanging all around.

Smoke also rose from behind crooked shacks by the channel. The loud, broken crying of a child could be heard from there.

Kelpie snorted, jerking her head sharply, and stepped back, banging her hooves on the cobbles. Ciri glanced down and noticed some dead rats. They were lying everywhere. Dead rodents contorted in agony with pale, pink paws.

Something’s not right here, she thought, feeling horror gripping

her. *Something's wrong here. Get out of here. Run from here as quickly as possible.*

A man in a gaping shirt was sitting under hanging nets and lines, his head resting on his shoulder. A few paces away lay another. They didn't look as if they were asleep. They didn't even twitch when Kelpie's horseshoes clattered on the stones right next to them. Ciri bowed her head, riding under the rags hanging from washing lines and giving off an acrid odour of filth.

There was a cross on the door of one of the shacks painted in whitewash. Black smoke left a trail in the air behind the roof. The child was still crying, somebody shouted in the distance, somebody closer coughed and wheezed. A dog howled.

Ciri felt her hand itching. She looked down.

Her hand was flecked with the black dots of fleas, like caraway seeds.

She screamed at the top of her voice. Shaking all over in horror and revulsion, she began to brush herself off, waving her arms wildly. Kelpie, alarmed, burst into a gallop, and Ciri almost fell off. Squeezing the mare's sides with her thighs she combed and ran her fingers through her hair, she shook her jacket and blouse. Kelpie galloped into a smoke-enveloped alleyway. Ciri screamed with terror.

She rode through hell, through an inferno, through the most nightmarish of nightmares. Among houses marked with white crosses. Among smouldering piles of rags. Among the dead lying singly and those who lay in heaps, one upon the other. And among living, ragged, half-naked spectres with cheeks sunken from pain, grovelling through dung, screaming in a language she didn't understand, stretching out towards her bony arms, covered in horrible, bloody pustules . . .

Run! Run from here!

Even in the black nothingness, in the oblivion of the archipelago of places, Ciri could still smell that smoke and stench in her nostrils.

*

The next place was also a port. There was also a quay here, with a

piled canal busy with cogs, launches and other craft, and above them a forest of masts. But here, in this place, above the masts, seagulls were cheerfully screeching, and it stank in a normal, familiar way: of wet wood, pitch, sea water, and also fish in all its three basic varieties: fresh, rotten and fried.

Two men were arguing on the deck of a cog, shouting over each other in raised voices. She understood what they were saying. It was about the price of herrings.

Not far away was a tavern. The odour of mustiness and beer, and the sound of voices, clanking and laughter belched from the open door. Someone roared out a filthy song, the same verse the whole time:

Luned, v'ard t'elaine arse

Aen a meath ail aen sparse!

She knew where she was. Before she had even read on the stern of one of the galleys: *Evall Muire*. And its home port. Baccalá. She knew where she was.

In Nilfgaard.

She fled before anyone could pay more close attention to her.

But before she managed to dive into nothingness, a flea, the last of the ones that had crawled all over her in the previous place, that had survived the journey in time and space nestled in a fold of her jacket, leaped a great flea leap onto the wharf.

That same evening the flea settled into the mangy coat of a rat, an old male, the veteran of many rat fights, testified to by one ear chewed off right by its skull. That same evening the flea and the rat embarked on a ship. And the next morning set sail on a voyage. On a barge; old, neglected and very dirty.

The barge was called *Catriona*. That name was to pass into history. But no one knew that then.

*

The next place – difficult though it was to believe – was a truly

astonishingly idyllic scene. A thatched tavern grown over with wild vines, ivy and sweet peas stood among hollyhocks by a peaceful, lazy river flowing among willows, alders and oaks bent over the water, right beside a bridge connecting the banks with its elegant, stone arch. A sign with gilded letters on it swung over the porch. The letters were completely foreign to Ciri. But there was quite a well-executed picture of a cat, so she assumed it was The Black Cat tavern.

The scent of food drifting from the tavern was simply captivating. Ciri did not ponder for long. She straightened her sword on her back and entered.

It was empty inside. Only one of the tables was occupied, by three men with the appearance of peasants. They didn't even look at her. Ciri sat down in the corner with her back to the wall.

The innkeeper, a corpulent woman in a perfectly clean apron and horned cap, approached and asked about something. Her voice sounded jangling, but melodic. Ciri pointed a finger at her open mouth, patted herself on the stomach, after which she cut off one of the silver buttons on her jacket and laid it on the table. Seeing a strange glance, she set to cutting off another button, but the woman stopped her with a gesture and a hissing, though nicely ringing, word.

The value of a button turned out to be a bowl of thick vegetable soup, an earthenware pot of beans and smoked bacon, bread and a jug of watered-down wine. Ciri thought she'd probably burst into tears at the first spoonful. But she controlled herself. She ate slowly. Delighting in the food.

The innkeeper came over, jingling questioningly, and laid her cheek on her pressed-together hands. Would she stay the night?

'I don't know,' said Ciri. 'Perhaps. In any case, thank you for the offer.'

The woman smiled and went out into the kitchen.

Ciri unfastened her belt and rested her back against the wall. She wondered what to do next. The place – particularly compared to the last few – was pleasant, and encouraged her to stay longer. She knew, though, that excessive trust could be dangerous, and lack of vigilance fatal.

A black cat, exactly like the one on the inn sign, appeared from nowhere and rubbed against her calf, arching its back. She

stroked it, and the cat gently butted her palm, sat down and began licking the fur on its breast. Ciri gazed into space, her sight drifting elsewhere…

She saw Jarre sitting by the fireplace in a circle of some unattractive looking scruffs. They were all knocking over small vessels containing a red liquid.

'Jarre?'

'That's what you should do,' said the boy, looking into the flames of the fire. 'I read about it in *The History of Wars*, a work written by Marshal Pelligram. You should do that when the motherland is in need.'

'What should you do? Spill blood?'

'Yes. Precisely. The motherland is calling. And partly for personal reasons.'

'Ciri, don't sleep in the saddle,' says Yennefer. 'We're almost there.'

There are large crosses painted in whitewash on the houses of the town they are arriving in, on all the doors and gates. Thick, reeking smoke, smoke is billowing from pyres with corpses burning on them. Yennefer seems not to notice it.

'I have to make myself beautiful.'

A small mirror is floating in front of her face, over the horse's ears. A comb is dancing in the air, tugging through her black curls. Yennefer is using witchcraft, she doesn't use her hands at all, because . . .

Because her hands are a mass of clotted blood.

'Mummy! What have they done to you?'

'Stand up, girl,' says Coën. 'Master your pain, get up and onto the comb! Otherwise fear will seize you. Do you want to be dying of fear all your life?'

His yellow eyes shine unpleasantly. He yawns. His pointed teeth flash white. It's not Coën at all. It's the cat. The black cat . . .

A column of soldiers many miles long are marching. A forest of spears and standards sways and undulates over them. Jarre also marches, he has a round helmet on his head, and a pike on his shoulder so long he has to clutch it tightly in both hands, otherwise it would overbalance him. The drums growl, and the soldiers' song

booms and rumbles. Crows caw above the column. A mass of crows . . .

A lake shore. On the beach whitecaps of whipped up foam, rotten reeds washed up. An island on the lake. A tower. Toothed battlements, a keep thickened by the protrusions of machicolations. Over the tower, in the darkening blue of the sky, the moon shines, as bright as a gold sovereign chopped in half. Two women wrapped in furs sit on the terrace. A man in a boat . . .

A looking glass and a tapestry.

Ciri jerks her head up. Eredin Bréacc Glas is sitting opposite, on the other side of the table.

'You can't not know,' he says, showing his even teeth in a smile, 'that you're only delaying the inevitable. You belong to us and we'll catch you.'

'Like hell!'

'You will return to us. You will roam a little around places and times, then you'll reach the Spiral and we'll catch you in it. You will never return to your world or time. It's too late, in any case. There's nothing for you to return to. The people you knew died long ago. Their graves are overgrown and have caved in. Their names have been forgotten. Your name also.'

'You're lying! I don't believe you!'

'Your beliefs are your private matter. I repeat, you'll soon reach the Spiral, and I'll be waiting there for you. You desire that secretly, don't you, *me elaine luned*?'

'You've got to be talking rubbish!'

'We Aen Elle sense things like that. You were fascinated by me, you desired me and feared that desire. You desired me and you still desire me, Zireael. Me. My hands. My touch . . .'

Feeling a touch, she leaped up, knocking over a cup, which was fortunately empty. She reached for her sword, but calmed down almost at once. She was in The Black Cat inn, she must have dropped off, dozing on the table. The hand that had touched her hair belonged to the portly innkeeper. Ciri wasn't fond of that kind of familiarity, but kindness and goodness simply radiated from the woman, which she couldn't pay back with brusqueness. She let herself be stroked on the head, and listened to the melodic, jingling speech with a smile. She was weary.

‘I must ride,’ she said at last.

The woman smiled, jingling melodiously. *How does it happen*, thought Ciri, *what can it be ascribed to, that in all worlds, places and times, in all languages and dialects that one word always sounds comprehensible? And always similar?*

‘Yes. I must ride to my mamma. My mamma is waiting for me.’

The innkeeper led her out into the courtyard. Before she found herself in the saddle, the innkeeper suddenly hugged Ciri hard, pressing her against her plump breast.

‘Goodbye. Thank you for having me. Forward, Kelpie.’

She rode straight for the arched bridge over the tranquil river. When the mare’s horseshoes rang on the stones, she looked around. The woman was still standing outside the inn.

Concentration, fists at her temples. A buzzing in her ears, as though from the inside of a conch. A flash. And abruptly soft and black nothingness.

‘*Bonne chance, ma fille*!’ Thérèse Lapin, the innkeeper of the tavern Au Chat Noir in Pont-sur-Yonne cried after her by the highway running from Melun to Auxerre. ‘Have a pleasant journey!’

*

Concentration, fists at her temples. A buzzing in her ears, as though from the inside of a conch. A flash. And abruptly soft and black nothingness.

A place. A lake. An island. The moon like a sovereign hacked in half, its light lies down on the water in a luminous streak. In the streak a boat, on it a man with a fishing rod . . .

On the terrace of the tower . . . Two women?

*

Condwiramurs couldn’t bear it and screamed in amazement, immediately covering her mouth with her hand. The Fisher King

dropped the anchor with a splash, swore gruffly, and then opened his mouth and froze like that. Nimue didn't even twitch.

The surface of the lake, bisected by a streak of moonlight, vibrated and rippled as though having been struck by a gale. The night air above the lake ruptured, like a smashed stained-glass window cracks. A black horse emerged from the crack. With a rider on its back.

Nimue calmly held out her hands, chanting a spell. The tapestry hanging on the stand suddenly burst into flames, lighting up in an extravaganza of tiny multi-coloured lights. The tiny lights reflected in the oval of the looking glass, danced, teemed in the glass like coloured bees and suddenly flowed out like a rainbow-coloured apparition, a widening streak, making everything as bright as day.

The black mare reared up and neighed wildly. Nimue spread wide her arms violently, and screamed a formula. Condwiramurs, seeing the image forming and growing in the air, focused intently. The image gained in clarity at once. It became a portal. A gate beyond which was visible . . .

A plateau full of shipwrecks. A castle embedded in the sharp rocks of a cliff, towering over the black looking glass of a mountain lake . . .

'This way!' Nimue screamed piercingly. 'This is the way you must take! Ciri, daughter of Pavetta! Enter the portal, take the road leading to your encounter with destiny. May the wheel of time close! May the serpent Ouroboros sink its teeth into its own tail!

'Roam no more! Hurry, hurry to help your friends! This is the right way, O, witcher girl.'

The mare whinnied again, flailed the air with its hooves once more. The girl in the saddle turned her head, looking now at them, now at the image called up by the tapestry and the looking glass. She brushed her hair aside, and Condwiramurs saw the ugly scar on her cheek.

'Trust me, Ciri!' cried Nimue. 'For you know me! You saw me once!'

'I remember,' they heard. 'I trust you. Thank you.'

They saw the mare spurred on and running with a light and dancing step into the brightness of the portal. Before the image

became blurred and dispersed, they saw the ashen-haired girl wave a hand, turned towards them in the saddle.

And then everything vanished. The surface of the lake slowly calmed, the streak of moonlight became smooth again.

It was so quiet they felt they could hear the Fisher King's wheezing breath.

Holding back the tears welling up in her eyes, Condwiramurs hugged Nimue tightly. She felt the little sorceress tremble. They remained in an embrace for some time. Without a word. Then they both turned around towards the place where the Gate of the Worlds had vanished.

'Good luck, witcher girl!' they cried in unison. 'Good luck!'

Close by that field where the fierce battle took place, where almost the whole force of the North clashed with almost the entire might of the Nilfgaardian invader, were two fishing villages. Old Bottoms and Brenna. Because, however, Brenna was burned down to the ground at that time, it caught on at first to call it the 'Battle of Old Bottoms'. Today, nonetheless, no one says anything other than the 'Battle of Brenna', and there are two reasons for that. Primo, after being rebuilt Brenna is today a large and prosperous settlement, while Old Bottoms did not resist the ravages of time and all trace of it was covered over by nettles, couch grass and burdock. Secundo, somehow that name did not befit that famous, memorable and, at the same time, tragic battle. For, just ask yourself: here was a battle in which more than thirty thousand men laid down their lives, and if Bottoms was not enough, they had to be Old as well.

Thus in all the historical and military literature it became customary only to write the Battle of Brenna – both in the North, and in Nilfgaardian sources, of which, nota bene, there are many more than ours.

The Venerable Jarre of Ellander the Elder.

Annales seu Cronicae Incliti Regni Temeriae

CHAPTER EIGHT

‘Cadet Fitz-Oesterlen, fail. Please sit down. I wish to draw your attention to the fact that lack of knowledge about famous and important battles from the history of our fatherland is embarrassing for every patriot and good citizen, but in the case of a future officer is simply a scandal. I shall take the liberty of making one more small observation, Cadet Fitz-Oesterlen. For twenty years, that is since I’ve been a lecturer at this institution, I don’t recall a diploma exam in which a question about the Battle of Brenna hasn’t come up. Thus, ignorance in this regard virtually rules out any chances of a career in the army. Well, but if one is a baron, one doesn’t have to be an officer, one can try one’s luck in politics. Or in diplomacy. Which I sincerely wish for you, Cadet Fitz-Oesterlen. And let’s return to Brenna, gentlemen. Cadet Puttkammer!’

‘Present!’

‘Please come to the map. And continue. From the point where eloquence gave up on the lord baron.’

‘Yes sir. The reason Field Marshal Menno Coehoorn decided to execute a manoeuvre and a rapid march westwards were the reports from reconnaissance informing that the army of the Nordlings was coming to the relief of the besieged fortress of Mayena. The marshal decided to cut off the Nordlings’ progress and force them into a decisive battle. To this end he divided the forces of the Centre Army Group. He left some of his men at Mayena, and set off at a rapid march with the rest of his troops—’

‘Cadet Puttkammer! You aren’t a novelist. You’re to be an officer! What kind of expression is: “the rest of his troops”? Please give me the exact *ordre de bataille* of Marshal Coehoorn’s strike force. Using military terminology!’

‘Yes, Captain. Field Marshal Coehoorn had two armies under his command: The 4th Horse Army, commanded by Major General Markus Braibant, our school’s patron—’

‘Very good, Cadet Puttkammer.’

‘Damn toady,’ hissed Cadet Fitz-Oesterlen from his desk.

‘—and the 3rd Army, commanded by Lieutenant General

Rhetz de Mellis-Stoke. The 4th Horse Army consisted of, numbering over twenty thousand soldiers: the Venendal Division, the Magne Division, the Frundsberg Division, the 2nd Vicovarian Brigade, the 3rd Daerlanian Brigade and the Nauzicaa and Vrihedd Divisions. The 3rd Army consisted of: the Alba Division, the Deithwen Division and . . . hmmm . . . and the . . .'

*

'The Ard Feainn Division,' stated Julia 'Pretty Kitty' Abatemarco. 'If you haven't ballsed anything up, of course. They definitely had a large silver sun on their gonfalon?'

'Yes, Colonel,' stated the reconnaissance commander firmly. 'Without doubt, they did!'

'Ard Feainn,' murmured Pretty Kitty. 'Hmmm . . . Interesting. That would mean that not only the horse army but also part of the 3rd are coming for us in those columns you supposedly saw. No, sir! Nothing on faith alone! I have to see it with my own eyes. Captain, during my absence you command the company. I order you to send a liaison officer to Colonel Pangratt—'

'But, Colonel, is that wise, to go yourself—'

'That's an order!'

'Yes, sir!'

'It's sheer lunacy, Colonel!' the commander of the reconnaissance outshouted the rush of the gallop. 'We might run into some elven patrol—'

'Don't talk! Lead on!'

The small troop galloped hard down the gorge, flashed like the wind down the stream's valley and rushed into a forest. Here they had to slow down. The undergrowth impeded riding, and furthermore they were indeed in danger of suddenly happening upon reconnaissance troops or pickets, which the Nilfgaardians had undoubtedly sent. The party of mercenaries had admittedly stolen up on the enemy from the flank, not head on, but the flanks were certainly also guarded. The game was thus as risky as hell. But Pretty Kitty liked games like that. And there wasn't a soldier in the entire Free Company who wouldn't have followed her. All the way to hell.

‘It’s here,’ said the commander of the reconnaissance. ‘The tower.’

Julia Abatemarco shook her head. The tower was crooked, ruined, bristling with broken beams forming a latticework through which the wind, blowing from the west, played as though on a tin whistle. It wasn’t known who had built the tower here, in a wilderness, or why. But it was apparent it had been built a long time before.

‘It won’t collapse?’

‘Certainly not, Colonel.’

‘Sir’ wasn’t used among the mercenaries of the Free Company. Or ‘madam’. Only rank. Julia climbed to the top of the tower, almost running up. The reconnaissance commander only joined a minute later, panting like a bull covering a heifer. Leaning on the crooked railing, Pretty Kitty surveyed the valley using a telescope, sticking her tongue between her lips and sticking out her shapely rear. The reconnaissance commander felt a quiver of excitement at the sight. He quickly controlled himself.

‘Ard Feainn, there’s no doubt.’ Julia Abatemarco licked her lips. ‘I can also see Elan Trahe’s Daerlanians, there are also elves from the Vrihedd Brigade, our old friends from Maribor and Mayena . . . Aha! There are also the Death’s Heads, the famous Nauzicaa Brigade. I can also see the flames on the pennants of the Deithwen armoured division. And a white standard with a black alerion, the sign of the Alba Division . . .’

‘You recognise them,’ murmured the reconnaissance commander, ‘as though they were friends . . . Are you so well-informed?’

‘I’m a graduate of the military academy,’ Pretty Kitty cut him off. ‘I’m a qualified officer. Good, I’ve seen what I wanted to see. Let’s return to the company.’

*

‘The 4th and 3rd Horse are making for us,’ said Julia Abatemarco. ‘I repeat, the whole of the 4th Horse and probably the whole of the cavalry of the 3rd Army. A cloud of dust was rising into the sky behind the standards that I saw. By my reckoning, forty thousand

horse are heading this way in those three columns. And maybe more. Perhaps—'

'Perhaps Coehoorn has divided up the Centre Army Group,' finished Adam 'Adieu' Pangratt, leader of the Free Company. 'He only took the 4th Horse and the cavalry from the 3rd, without infantry, in order to move quicker . . . Ha, Julia, were I in the place of Constable Natalis or King Foltest—'

'I know,' Pretty Kitty's eyes flashed. 'I know what you'd do. Have you sent runners to them?'

'Naturally.'

'Natalis is nobody's fool. Perhaps, tomorrow—'

'Perhaps.' Adieu didn't let her finish. 'And I even think that will happen. Spur your horse, Julia. I want to show you something.'

They rode a few furlongs, quickly, pulling a long way ahead of the rest of the soldiers. The sun was almost touching the hills in the west, the wetland forests cloaked the valley in a long shadow. But enough could be seen for Pretty Kitty to guess at once what Adieu Pangratt had meant to show her.

'Here,' Adieu confirmed her speculation, standing up in the stirrups. 'I would engage the enemy here tomorrow. If the command of the army were mine.'

'Nice terrain,' agreed Julia Abatemarco. 'Level, hard, smooth . . . There's room to form up . . . Hmmm . . . From those hills to those fishponds there . . . It'll be some three miles . . . That hill, there, is a perfect command position . . .'

'You're right. And there, look, in the centre, there's one more small lake or fishpond. It's sparkling over there. It can be taken advantage of . . . That little river is suitable for a border, because although it's small, it's marshy . . . What's that river called, Julia? We rode that way yesterday, didn't we? Do you remember?'

'I've forgotten. I think it's the Halter. Or something like that.'

*

Whoever knows those parts can easily imagine the whole thing, while to those who are less well travelled I shall reveal that the left wing of the royal army reached the place where today the settlement of Brenna is

located. At the time of the battle there was no settlement, for the year before it had been sent up in smoke by the Squirrel elves and had burned down to the ground. For there, on the left wing, stood the Redanian royal corps, which the Count of Ruyter was commanding. And there were eight thousand foot and frontline horse in that corps.

The centre of the royal formation stood beside a hill later to be named Gallows Hill. There, on the hill, stood with their detachment King Foltest and Constable Jan Natalis, having a prospect of the whole battlefield from high up. Here the main forces of our army were gathered – twelve thousand brave Temerian and Redanian infantrymen formed in four great squares, protected by ten cavalry companies, standing right at the northern end of the fishpond, called Golden Pond by local folk. The central formation, meanwhile, had a reserve regiment in the second line – three thousand Vizimian and Mariborian foot, over which Voivode Bronibor held command.

From the southern edge of Golden Pond, however, up to the row of fishponds and a bend in the River Chotla, to the marches a mile wide, stood the right wing of our army, the Volunteer Regiment formed of Mahakam dwarves, eight companies of light horse and companies of the eminent Free Mercenary Company. The condottiero Adam Pangratt and dwarf Barclay Els commanded the right wing.

Field Marshal Menno Coehoorn deployed the Nilfgaardian Army opposite them, about a mile or two away, on a bare field beyond the forest. Iron-hard men stood there like a black wall, regiment by regiment, company by company, squadron by squadron, endless it seemed, as far as the eye could see. And, from the forest of standards and spears, one could deduce that it was not just a broad but a deep array. For it was an army of six and forty thousand, which few knew about at that time, and just as well, because at the sight of that Nilfgaardian might many hearts sank somewhat.

And hearts started to beat beneath the breastplates of even the bravest, started to beat like hammers, for it became patent that a heavy and bloody battle would soon begin and many of those who stood in that array would not see the sunset.

Jarre, holding his spectacles which were sliding off his nose, read the entire passage of text once again, sighed, rubbed his pate, and then picked up a sponge, squeezing it a little and rubbing out the last sentence.

The wind soughed in the leaves of a linden tree and bees

buzzed. The children, as children will, tried hard to outshout another.

A ball which had rolled across the grass came to rest against the foot of the old man. Before he managed to bend over, clumsy and ungainly, one of his grandchildren flashed past like a little wolf cub, grabbing the ball in full flight. He knocked the table, which began to rock, and Jarre saved the inkwell from falling over with his right hand, holding down the sheets of paper with the stump of his left.

The bees buzzed, heavy with tiny yellow balls of acacia pollen.

Jarre took up his writing again.

The morning was cloudy, but the sun broke through the clouds and its height clearly signalled the passing of the hours. A wind got up; pennants fluttered and flapped like flocks of birds taking flight. And Nilfgaard stood on, stood on, until everyone began to wonder why Marshal Menno Coehoorn did not give his order to march forward . . .

*

'When?' Menno Coehoorn raised his head from the maps and turned his gaze on his commanders. 'When, you ask, will I give the order to begin?'

No one said anything. Menno quickly looked his commanders up and down. The most anxious and nervous seemed to be those who were going to remain in reserve – Elan Trahe, commander of the 7th Daerlanian, and Kees van Lo of the Nauzicaa Brigade. Ouder de Wyngalt, the marshal's *aide-de-camp*, who had the least chance of active involvement in the fighting, was also nervous.

Those who were to strike first looked composed, why, even bored. Markus Braibant was yawning. Lieutenant General Rhetz de Mellis-Stoke kept sticking his little finger in his ear, pulling it out and looking at it, as though really expecting to find something worthy of his attention. Oberst Ramon Tyrconnel, the young commander of the Ard Feainn Division, whistled softly, fixing his gaze on a point on the horizon known only to him. Oberst Liam aep Muir Moss of the Deithwen Division turned the pages of his ever-present slim volume of poetry. Tibor Eggebracht of the Alba Heavy Lancers scratched the back of his neck with the end of a riding crop.

‘We shall begin the attack,’ said Coehoorn, ‘as soon as the patrols return. Those hills to the north trouble me, gentlemen. Before we strike I must know what is behind them.’

*

Lamarr Flaut was afraid. He was terribly afraid, and the fear was creeping over his innards. It seemed to him he had at least twelve slimy eels covered in stinking mucus in his intestines, doggedly searching for an opening they would be able to escape through. An hour earlier, when the patrol had received its orders and set off, Flaut had hoped deep down that the cool of the morning would drive away the terror, hoped that routine, practised ritual, the hard and severe ceremony of service would quell the fear. He was disappointed. Only now, after an hour had passed and after travelling some five miles, far, dangerously far from his comrades, deep, hazardously deep in enemy territory, close, mortally close to unknown danger, had the fear showed what it was capable of.

They stopped at the edge of a fir forest, prudently not emerging from behind the large juniper bushes growing at the edge. A wide basin stretched out before them, beyond a belt of low spruces. Fog trailed over the tops of the grass.

‘No one,’ judged Flaut. ‘Not a soul. Let’s go back. We’re a little too far already.’

The sergeant looked at him askance. *Far? We’ve barely ridden a mile. And crawling along like lame tortoises, at that.*

‘It’d be worth,’ he said, ‘having a look beyond that hill, Lieutenant. I reckon the prospect will be better from there. A long way, over both valleys. If someone’s heading that way, we can’t not see them. Well then? Do we ride over, sir? It’s no more than a few furlongs.’

A few furlongs, thought Flaut. *Over open ground, totally exposed.* The eels squirmed, violently searching for a way out of his guts. At least one, Flaut felt clearly, was well on its way.

I heard the clank of a stirrup. The snorting of a horse. Over there, among the vivid green of young pines on a sandy slope. Did something move there? A figure?

Are they surrounding us?

A rumour was going around the camp that a few days earlier the mercenaries of the Free Company, having wiped out a patrol of the Vrihedd Brigade in an ambush, had taken an elf alive. It was said they'd castrated him, torn his tongue out and cut off all his fingers . . . And finally gouged out his eyes. Now, they had jeered, you won't frolic with your elven whore in any fashion. And you won't even be able to watch her when she frolics with others.

'Well, sir?' the sergeant cleared his throat. 'Shall we nip up that hill?'

Lamarr Flaut swallowed.

'No,' he said. 'We cannot dally. We've ascertained it: there's no enemy here. We must give a dispatch on it to headquarters. Back we go!'

*

Menno Coehoorn listened to the dispatch and raised his head from the maps.

'To your companies,' he ordered briefly. 'Mr Braibant, Mr Mellis-Stoke. Attack!'

'Long live the Emperor!' yelled Tyrconnel and Eggebracht. Menno looked at them strangely.

'To your companies,' he repeated. 'May the Great Sun enlighten your glory.'

*

Milo Vanderbeck, halfling, field surgeon, known as Rusty, greedily breathed into his nostrils the heady blend of the smells of iodine, ammonia, alcohol, ether and magical elixirs hanging beneath the tent roof. He wanted to enjoy that aroma to the full now, while it was still healthy, pure, virginally uncontaminated and clinically sterile. He knew it wouldn't stay like that for long.

He glanced at the operating table – also virginally white – and at the surgical instruments, at the dozens of tools which inspired respect and confidence by the cool and menacing dignity of their

cold steel, the pristine cleanliness of the metal sheen, the order and aesthetics of their arrangement.

His staff – three women – busied themselves around the instruments. Rusty spat and made a correction in his thoughts. One woman and two girls. He spat again. One old, though beautiful and young-looking, grandmother. And two children.

A sorceress and healer, called Marti Sodergren. And the volunteers. Shani, a student from Oxenfurt. Iola, a priestess from the Temple of Melitele in Ellander.

I know Marti Sodergren, thought Rusty, *I've already worked with that beauty more than once. A bit of a nymphomaniac, she's also prone to hysteria, but that's nothing, as long as her magic works. Anaesthetic, disinfectant and blood-staunching spells.*

Iola. A priestess, or rather a novice. A girl with looks as plain and dull as linen, with long, strong peasant hands. The temple had prevented those hands from becoming tainted by the ugly mark of heavy and dirty slogging on the soil. But it hadn't managed to disguise their descent.

No, thought Rusty, *I'm not afraid for her, by and large. Those peasant woman's hands are sure hands, trustworthy hands. Besides, girls from temples seldom disappoint, they don't cave in at moments of despair, but seek comfort in religion, in their mystical faith. Interestingly, it helps.*

He glanced at red-haired Shani, nimbly threading curved needles with catgut.

Shani. A child from reeking city backstreets, who made it to the Academy of Oxenfurt thanks to her own thirst for knowledge and the unimaginable sacrifices of her parents in paying her fees. A schoolgirl. A jester. A cheerful scamp. What does she know? How to thread needles? Put on tourniquets? Hold retractors? Ha, the question is: when will the little red-haired student faint, drop the retractors and tumble nose-first into the open belly of a patient being operated on?

People aren't very hardy, he thought. *I asked to be given an elf woman. Or somebody from my own race. But no. There's no trust.*

Not towards me either, as a matter of fact.

I'm a halfling. An unhuman.

A stranger.

'Shani!'

‘Yes, Mr Vanderbeck?’

‘Rusty. I mean, to you it’s “Mr Rusty”. What’s this, Shani? And what’s it for?’

‘Are you testing me, Mr Rusty?’

‘Answer, girl!’

‘It’s a raspatory! For stripping the periosteum during amputations! So that the periosteum doesn’t crack under the teeth of the saw, to make the sawing clean and smooth! Satisfied? Did I pass?’

‘Quiet, girl, quiet.’

He raked his fingers through his hair.

Interesting, he thought. *There are four of us doctors here. And each one’s ginger! Is it fate or what?*

‘Please step outside the tent, girls,’ he beckoned.

They obeyed, though all of them snorted to themselves. Each in her own way.

Outside the tent sat a cluster of orderlies enjoying the last minutes of sweet idleness. Rusty cast a severe glance at them, and sniffed to check if they were already plastered.

A blacksmith, a huge fellow, was bustling around by his table which resembled a torture chamber, and organising his tools which served to pull the wounded out of suits of armour, mail shirts and bent visors.

‘In a moment, over there,’ began Rusty without introductions, indicating the field, ‘people will start slaughtering each other. And a moment after that moment the first casualties will appear. Everyone knows what they’re supposed to do, each one of us knows their duties and their place. If everyone obeys what they ought to obey nothing can go wrong. Clear?’

None of the ‘girls’ commented.

‘Over there,’ continued Rusty, pointing again, ‘almost a hundred thousand soldiers will begin to wound each other. In very elaborate ways. There are, including the other two hospitals, twelve of us doctors. Not for all the world will we manage to help all those that are in need. Not even a scanty percentage of those in need. No one expects that.

‘But we’re going to treat them. Because it is, excuse the banality, our raison d’être. To help those in need. So we shall banally help as many as we manage to help.’

Once again no one commented. Rusty turned around.

‘We won’t manage to do much more than we’re capable of,’ he said more quietly and more warmly. ‘But we shall all do our best to make sure it won’t be much less.’

*

‘They’ve set off,’ stated Constable Jan Natalis, and wiped his sweaty hand on his hip. ‘Your Majesty, Nilfgaard has set off. They’re heading for us!’

King Foltest brought his dancing horse, a grey in a trapping decorated with lilies, under control. He turned his beautiful profile, worthy of featuring on coins, towards the constable.

‘Then we must receive them with dignity. Constable, sir! Gentlemen!’

‘Death to the Black Cloaks!’ yelled the mercenary Adam ‘Adieu’ Pangratt and Graf de Ruyter in unison. The constable looked at them, then straightened up and breathed in deeply.

‘To your companies!’

From a distance the Nilfgaardian war drums thundered dully, crumhorns, oliphants and battle horns wailed. The ground, struck by thousands of hooves, shuddered.

*

‘Here they come,’ said Andy Biberveldt, a halfling and the leader of the convoy, brushing the hair from his small, pointed ear. ‘Any moment . . .’

Tara Hildebrandt, Didi “Brewer” Hofmeier and the other carters who were gathered around him nodded. They could also hear the dull, monotonous thud of hooves coming from behind the hill and forest. They could feel the trembling of the ground.

The roar suddenly increased, jumping a tone higher.

'The archers' first salvo.' Andy Biberveldt was experienced, and had seen – or rather heard – many a battle. 'There'll be another.'

He was right.

'Now they'll clash!'

'We'd beee . . . ttter, geee . . . ttt under the carts,' suggested William Hardbottom, known as Momotek, fidgeting anxiously. 'I'm ttttt . . . telling you.'

Biberveldt and the other halflings looked at him with pity. Under the carts? What for? Nearly a quarter of a mile separated them from the site of the battle. And even if a patrol turned up here, at the rear, by the convoys, would hiding under a cart save anyone?

The roaring and rumbling increased.

'Now,' Andy Biberveldt judged. And he was right again.

A distinct, macabre noise which made the hair on their heads stand up reached the ears of the victuallers from a distance of a quarter of a mile, from beyond the hill and the forest, through the roaring and the sudden thud of iron smashing against iron.

Squealing. The gruesome, desperate, wild squealing and shrieking of mutilated animals.

'The cavalry . . .' Biberveldt licked his lips. 'The cavalry have impaled themselves on the pikes . . .'

'I jjjjust,' stammered out the pale Momotek, 'ddddon't know . . . how the horses are to blame . . . the whoresons.'

*

Jarre rubbed out another sentence with a sponge. God only knew how many that made. He squinted his eyes, recalling that day. The moment the two armies clashed. When the two armies, like determined mastiffs, went for each other's throats, clenched in a mortal grip.

He searched for words he could use to describe it.

In vain.

*

The wedge of cavalry rammed into the square. Like the thrust of a gigantic dagger, the Alba Division crushed everything that was defending access to the living body of the Temerian infantry – the pikes, javelins, halberds, spears, pavises and shields. Like a dagger, the Alba Division thrust into the living body and drew blood. Blood, in which horses now splashed and slid. But the dagger's blade, though thrust in deep, hadn't reached the heart or any of the vital organs. The wedge of the Alba Division, instead of smashing and dismembering the Temerian square, thrust in and became stuck. Became lodged in the elastic horde of foot soldiers, as thick as pitch.

At first it didn't look dangerous. The head and sides of the wedge were made up of elite heavily-armoured companies, and the landsknechts' edges and blades rebounded from the shields and armour plate like hammers from anvils, and neither was there any way to get through the barding of the steeds. And although every now and then one of the armoured men would tumble from his horse or with his horse, the swords, battle-axes, hatchets and morning stars of the cavalrymen cut down the pressing infantrymen. Trapped in the throng, the wedge shuddered and began to drive in deeper.

'Albaaa!' Second Lieutenant Devin aep Meara heard the cry of Oberst Eggebracht soaring above the clanging, roaring, groaning and neighing. 'Forward, Alba! Long live the Emperor!'

They set off, hacking, clubbing and slashing. Beneath the hooves of the squealing and kicking horses was the sound of splashing, crunching, grinding and snapping.

'Aaalbaaa!'

The wedge became caught again. The landsknechts, although thinned out and bloodied, didn't yield, but pressed forward and gripped the cavalry like pliers. Until they cracked. Under the blows of halberds, battle-axes and flails, the armoured troops of the front line caved in and broke. Jabbed by partizans and pikes, hauled from the saddle by the hooks of guisarmes and bear spears, mercilessly pounded by iron balls-and-chains and clubs, the cavalrymen of the

Alba Division began to die. The wedge thrust into the square of infantry, which not long before had been menacing iron, cutting into a living body, was now like an icicle in a huge peasant fist.

'Temeriaaaa! For the king, boys! Kill the Black Cloaks!'

But neither was it coming easily to the landsknechts. Alba didn't let itself be broken up. Swords and battle-axes rose and fell, hacked and slashed, and the infantry paid a grim price in blood for every horseman knocked from the saddle.

Oberst Eggebracht, stabbed through a slit in his armour by a pike blade as thin as a bodkin, yelled and rocked in the saddle. Before anyone could help him, an awful blow of a flail swept him to the ground. The infantry teemed over him.

The standard with a black alerion bearing a gold *perisonium* on its chest wobbled and fell.

The armoured soldiers, including also Second Lieutenant Devlin aep Meara, rushed over to it, hacking, hewing, trampling and yelling.

I'd like to know, thought Devlin aep Meara, tugging his sword out of the cloven kettle hat and skull of a Temerian landsknecht. *I'd like to know*, he thought, deflecting with a sweeping blow the toothed blade of a gisarme which was stabbing at him.

I'd like to know what all this is for. What's the point of it? And who's the cause of it?

*

'Errr . . . And then the convent of the great master sorceresses gathered . . . Our Esteemed Mothers . . . Errr . . . Whose memory will always live among us . . . For . . . Errr . . . the great master sorceresses of the First Lodge . . . decided to . . . Errr . . . Decided to . . .'

'Novice Abonde. You are unprepared. Fail. Sit down.'

'But I revised, really—'

'Sit down.'

'Why the hell do we have to learn about this ancient history?' muttered Abonde, sitting down. 'Who's bothered about it today?

And what use is it?'

'Silence! Novice Nimue.'

'Present, mistress.'

'I can see that. Do you know the answer to the question? If you don't, sit down and don't waste my time.'

'Yes I do.'

'Go on.'

'So, the chronicles teach us that the convent of master sorceresses gathered at Bald Mountain Castle to decide on how to end the damaging war that the emperor of the South was waging with the kings of the North. Esteemed Mother Assire, the holy martyr, said that the rulers would not stop fighting until they had lost a lot of men. And Esteemed Mother Philippa, the holy martyr, answered: "Let us then give them a great and bloody, awful and cruel battle. Let us bring about such a battle. Let the emperor's armies and the kings' forces run in blood in that battle, and then we, the Great Lodge, shall force them to make peace". And this is precisely what happened. The Esteemed Mothers caused the Battle of Brenna to happen. And the rulers were forced to sign the Peace of Cintra.'

'Very good, novice Nimue. I'd have given you a starred A grade . . . Had it not been for that "so" at the beginning of your contribution. We don't begin sentences with "so". Sit down. And now, who'll tell us about the Peace of Cintra?'

The bell for the break rang. But the novices didn't react with immediate uproar and the banging of desktops. They maintained a peaceful and dignified silence. They weren't chits from the kindergarten now. They were third-formers! They were fourteen!

And that carried certain expectations.

*

'Well, there's not much to add here.' Rusty assessed the condition of the first wounded man who was right then sullying the immaculate white of the table. 'Crushed thighbone . . . The artery is intact, otherwise they would have brought us a corpse. It looks like an axe blow, and at the same time the saddle's hard pommel acted like a

woodcutter's chopping block. Please look . . .'

Shani and Iola bent over. Rusty rubbed his hands.

'As I said, nothing to add. All we can do is take away. To work. Iola! Tourniquet, tightly. Shani, knife. Not that one. The double-bladed one. For amputations.'

The wounded man couldn't tear his restless gaze from their hands, tracked their movements with the eyes of a terrified animal caught in a snare.

'A little magic, Marti, if you please,' nodded the halfling, leaning over the patient so as to fill his entire field of vision. 'I'm going to amputate, son.'

'Nooooo!' yelled the injured man, thrashing his head around and trying hard to escape from Marti Sodergren's hands. 'I don't waant tooo!'

'If I don't amputate, you die.'

'I'd rather die . . .' The wounded man was speaking slower and slower under the effect of the healer's magic. 'I'd rather die than be a cripple . . . Let me die . . . I beg you . . . Let me die!'

'I can't.' Rusty raised the knife, looked at the blade, at the still shining, immaculate steel. 'I can't let you die. For it so happens that I'm a doctor.'

He stuck the blade in decisively and cut deeply. The wounded man howled. For a human, inhumanly.

*

The messenger reined in his horse so hard that turf sprayed from its hooves. Two adjutants clutched the bridle and calmed down the foaming steed. The messenger dismounted.

'From whom?' shouted Jan Natalis. 'From whom do you come?'

'From Graf de Ruyter . . .' the messenger panted. 'We've held the Black Cloaks. . . But there are severe casualties . . . Graf de Ruyter requests reinforcements . . .'

'There are no reinforcements,' the constable replied after a moment's silence. 'You must hold out. You must!'

*

‘And here,’ Rusty indicated with the expression of a collector showing off his collection, ‘please look at the beautiful result of a cut to the belly . . . Someone has helped us somewhat by previously conducting an amateur laparotomy on the poor wretch. It’s good he was carried carefully, none of his more important organs have been lost . . . I mean, I assume they haven’t been. What’s up with him, Shani, in your opinion? Why such a face, girl? Have you only known men from the outside before today?’

‘The intestines are damaged, Mr Rusty . . .’

‘A diagnosis as accurate as it is obvious! One doesn’t even have to look, it’s enough to sniff. A cloth, Iola. Marti, there’s still too much blood, be so kind as to give us a little more of your priceless magic. Shani, clamp. Put on some arterial forceps, you can see it’s pouring, can’t you? Iola, knife.’

‘Who’s winning?’ suddenly asked the man being operated on, quite lucidly, although he mumbled a little, rolling his goggling eyes. ‘Tell me . . . who . . . is winning?’

‘Son.’ Rusty stooped over the open, bloody and throbbing abdominal cavity. ‘That really is the last thing I’d be worrying about in your shoes.’

*

. . . Cruel and bloody fighting then began on the left wing and the centre of the line, but here, though great was Nilfgaard’s fierceness and impetus, their charge broke on the royal army like an ocean wave breaks on a rock. For here stood the select soldiers, the valiant Mariborian, Vizimian and Tretorian armoured companies, and also the dogged landsknechts, the professional soldiers of fortune, whom cavalry could not frighten.

And thus they fought, truly like the sea against a rocky cliff, thus continued the battle in which you could not guess who had the upper hand, for although the waves endlessly beat against the rock, not weakening, and they only fell back to strike anew, the rock stood on, as it had always stood, still visible among the turbulent waves.

The battle unfolded in a different way on the right wing of the royal army.

Like an old sparrowhawk that knows where to stoop and peck its prey to death, so Field Marshal Menno Coehoorn knew where to aim his blows. Clenching in his iron fist his select divisions, the Deithwen lancers and the armoured Ard Feainn, he struck at the junction of the line above Golden Pond, where the companies from Brugge stood. Although the Bruggeans resisted heroically, they turned out to be more weakly accoutred, both in armour and in spirit, than their foes. They did not weather the Nilfgaardian advance. Two companies of the Free Company under the old condottiero Adam Pangratt went to their aid and held back Nilfgaard, paying a severe price in blood. But the awful threat of being surrounded stared the dwarves of the Volunteer Regiment standing on the right flank in the face, and the severing of the array imperilled the whole royal army.

Jarre dipped his quill pen in the inkwell. His grandchildren further away in the orchard were shouting, their laughter ringing like little glass bells.

Jan Natalis, nonetheless, attentive as a crane, had noticed the menacing danger, and understood in an instant which way the wind was blowing. And without delay sent a messenger to the dwarves with an order for Colonel Els . . .

*

In all his seventeen-year-old naivety, Cornet Aubry believed that to reach the right wing, deliver the order and return to the hill would take him ten minutes at most. Absolutely no more! Not on Chiquita, a mare as nimble and fleet as a hind.

Even before he had arrived at Golden Pond, the cornet had become aware of two things: there was no telling when he'd reach the right wing, and there was no way of telling when he'd manage to return. And that Chiquita's fleetness would come in very handy.

Fighting was raging on the battlefield to the east of Golden Pond. The Black Cloaks and the Bruggean horse protecting the infantry array were smiting each other. In front of the cornet's eyes figures in green, yellow and red cloaks suddenly shot out like sparks, like the glass of a stained-glass window, from the whirl of the battle, chaotically bolting towards the River Chotla.

Nilfgaardians flooded like a black river behind them.

Aubry pulled his mare back hard, jerked the reins, ready to turn tail and flee, get out of the way of the fugitives and the pursuers. A sense of duty took the upper hand. The cornet pressed himself to his horse's neck and galloped at breakneck speed.

All around was yelling and hoof beats, a kaleidoscopic twinkling of figures, the flashes of swords, clanging and thudding. Some of the Bruggeans who were pressed against the fishpond were putting up desperate resistance, herding together around a standard bearing an anchored cross. The Black Cloaks were slaughtering the scattered and exposed infantry.

The view was obscured by a black cloak with the symbol of a silver sun.

'*Evgyr*, Nordling!'

Aubry yelled, and Chiquita, excited by the cry, give a truly deer-like bound, saving Aubry's life by carrying him out of range of the Nilfgaardian sword. Arrows and bolts suddenly howled over his head, figures flickered before his eyes again.

Where am I? Where are my comrades? Where is the enemy?

'*Evgyr morv*, Nordling!'

Thudding, clanking, neighing of horses, shouts.

'Stand, you little shit! Not that way!'

A woman's voice. A woman on a black stallion, in armour, with hair blown around, her face covered in spots of blood. Beside her armoured horsemen.

'Who are you?' The woman smeared the blood on her sword with a fist.

'Cornet Aubry . . . Constable Natalis' Flügel-Adjutant . . . With orders for Colonels Pangratt and Els—'

'You have no chance of getting to where Adieu is fighting. We'll ride to the dwarves. I'm Julia Abatemarco . . . To horse, dammit! They're surrounding us! At the gallop!'

He didn't have time to protest. There was no point anyway.

After some furious galloping, a mass of infantry emerged from the dust, a square, encased like a tortoise in a wall of pavises, like a pincushion bristling with spear blades. A great gold standard with

crossed hammers fluttered over the square and beside it rose up a pole with horsetails and human skulls.

The square was being attacked by Nilfgaardians, who were darting forwards and jumping back like dogs worrying a beggar swinging a cane. The Ard Feainn Division, owing to the great suns on their cloaks, could not be mistaken for any other.

'Fight, Free Company!' yelled the woman, whirling her sword around in a moulinet. 'Let's earn our pay!'

The horsemen – and with them Cornet Aubry – charged the Nilfgaardians.

The clash only lasted a few moments. But it was terrible. Then the wall of pavises opened before them. They found themselves inside the square, in a crush, amongst dwarves in mail shirts, basinets and pointed chichak helmets, amongst the Redanian infantry, light Bruggean horse and armoured condottieri.

Julia Abatemarco – Pretty Kitty, condottiero, Aubry only now recognised her – dragged him in front of a pot-bellied dwarf in a chichak helmet decorated with a splendid plume, sitting awkwardly on an armoured Nilfgaardian horse, in a lancer's saddle with large pommels, which he had clambered into to be able to see over the heads of the infantrymen.

'Colonel Barclay Els?'

The dwarf nodded his plume-helmeted head, noticing with evident appreciation the blood with which the cornet and his mare were sprayed. Aubry blushed involuntarily. It was the blood of the Nilfgaardians whom the condottieri had hacked down just beside him. He himself hadn't even managed to draw his sword.

'Cornet Aubry . . .'

'The son of Anzelm Aubry?'

'His youngest.'

'Ha! I know your father! What have you brought me from Natalis and Foltest, Cornet, my boy?'

'You are threatened by a breach in the centre of the line . . . The constable orders the Volunteer Regiment to pull back the wing as soon as possible, and retreat to Golden Pond and the River Chotla . . . In order to reinforce—'

His words were drowned out by roaring, clanging and the

squealing of horses. Aubry suddenly realised how absurd the orders he had brought were. What little significance those orders had for Barclay Els, for Julia Abatemarco, for that dwarven square under a gold standard with hammers fluttering over the surrounding black sea of Nilfgaard, attacking them from all sides.

'I'm late . . .' he whimpered. 'I arrived too late . . .'

Pretty Kitty snorted. Barclay Els grinned.

'No, little cornet, son,' he said. 'It was Nilfgaard that came too soon.'

*

'Congratulations to you, ladies, and to me, on a successful segmentectomy of the small and large bowel, splenectomy, and a liver suture. I draw your attention to the time it took to remove the consequences of what was done to our patient in a split second during the battle. I recommend that as material for philosophical reflections. Miss Shani will sew up the patient.'

'But I've never done it before, Mr Rusty!'

'You have to start sometime. Red to red, yellow to yellow, white to white. Sew like that and it's sure to be fine.'

*

'What the hell?' Barclay Els twisted his beard. 'What are you saying, little cornet? Anzelm Aubry's youngest son? That we're just loafing around here? We didn't even fucking budge in the face of the enemy! We didn't budge an inch! It ain't our fault the men from Brugge didn't hold out!'

'But the order—'

'I don't give a shit about the order!'

'If we don't fill the breaches,' Pretty Kitty shouted over the commotion, 'the Black Cloaks will break the front! They'll break the front! Open the array, Barclay! I'm going to strike! I'll get through!'

'They'll slaughter you before you get to the fishpond! You'll

perish senselessly!'

'So what do you suggest?'

The dwarf swore, tore his helmet from his head and hurled it to the ground. His eyes were savage, bloodshot, dreadful.

Chiquita, frightened by the yells, danced beneath the cornet, as far as the crush permitted.

'Summon Yarpen Zigrin and Dennis Cranmer! Pronto!'

It was apparent at first glance that the two dwarves had come from the heaviest fighting. They were both bespattered with blood. The steel spaulder of one of them bore the mark of a cut so powerful it had bent the edges of the metal plating outwards. The head of the other dwarf was wrapped in a rag oozing blood.

'Everything in order, Zigrin?'

'I wonder,' panted the dwarf, 'why everyone's asking that?'

Barclay Els turned around, found the cornet's gaze and stared hard at him.

'So, Anzelm's youngest son?' he rasped. 'The king and the constable have ordered us to go to them and support them? Well, keep your eyes wide open, little cornet. This'll be worth seeing.'

*

'Sod it!' roared Rusty, springing back from the table and brandishing his scalpel. 'Why? Blast it, why does it have to be like this?'

No one answered him. Marti Sodergren just spread her arms. Shani bowed her head and Iola sniffed.

The patient who had just died was looking upwards, and his eyes were unmoving and glazed.

*

'Strike, kill! Confusion to the whoresons!'

'Keep in line!' Barclay Els roared. 'Keep an even step! Hold the

line! And keep close! Close!'

They won't believe, thought Cornet Aubry. *They'll never believe me when I tell them about it. This square is fighting in a total encirclement . . . Surrounded on all sides by cavalry, being torn, hacked, pounded and stabbed . . . And the square is marching. It's marching in line, serried, pavise by pavise. It's marching, trampling and stepping over corpses, pushing the élite Ard Feainn Division in front of it . . . And it's marching.*

'Fight!'

'Even step! Even step!' bellowed Barclay Els. 'Hold the line! The song, for fuck's sake, the song! Our song! Forward, Mahakam!'

Several thousand dwarven throats yelled the famous Mahakam battle song.

Hooouuuu! Hooouuu! Hou!

Just wait! Don't be hasty!

Things will very soon get tasty!

This shambles will fall apart

Shaken to its very heart!

Hoooouuuu! Hooouuu! Hou!

'Fight! Free Company!' Julia Abatemarco's high-pitched soprano cut into the throaty roar of the dwarves, like the thin, keen edge of a misericorde. The condottieri, breaking free of the line, counter-struck the cavalry attacking the square. It was a truly suicidal stroke, as the entire momentum of the Nilfgaardian offensive turned onto the mercenaries, now deprived of the protection of the dwarven halberds, pikes and pavises. The thudding, yelling and squealing of horses made Cornet Aubry cringe involuntarily in the saddle. Someone struck him in the back and he felt himself drift with his mare, stuck in the crush, towards the greatest confusion and the most terrible slaughter. He tightly gripped his sword hilt which suddenly seemed slippery and strangely unwieldy.

A moment later, carried in front of the line of pavises, he was already hacking around himself like a madman and yelling like a madman.

‘One more time!’ he heard the wild cry of Pretty Kitty. ‘One more shove! You’ll do it, boys! Fight, kill! For the ducat, as gold as the sun! To me, Free Company!’

A helmetless Nilfgaardian rider with a silver sun on his cloak penetrated the line, stood up in his stirrups, and with a terrible blow of his battle axe felled a dwarf along with his pavise, and cleaved open the head of another. Aubry turned in the saddle and hacked backhanded. A sizeable fragment bearing hair flew from the head of the Nilfgaardian, who tumbled to the ground. At the same time the cornet was also struck in the head and fell from the saddle. The crush meant he didn’t end up on the ground immediately, but hung for several seconds, screaming shrilly, between the sky, the earth and the sides of two horses. But although he had the fright of his life, he didn’t have time to experience pain. When he fell, his skull was almost immediately crushed by iron-shod hooves.

*

Sixty-five years later, when asked about that day, about Brenna Field, about the square marching towards Golden Pond over the bodies of friends and enemies, the old woman would smile, wrinkling up even more a face already as shrivelled and dark as a prune. Impatient – or perhaps pretending to be impatient – she waved a trembling, bony hand, grotesquely contorted by arthritis.

‘There was no way,’ she mumbled, ‘that either of the sides could gain the advantage. We were in the middle. In the encirclement. And they were on the outside. And we were simply killing one another. They us, and we them . . . Eck-eck-eeck . . . They us. We them . . .’

The old woman struggled to overcome a coughing fit. Those listeners who were closest saw on her cheek a tear, making its way with difficulty among the wrinkles and old scars.

‘They were just as brave as us,’ mumbled the old dear, who had once been Julia Abatemarco, Pretty Kitty of the Free Mercenary Company. ‘Eck-eck . . . We were all just as brave. Us and them.’

The old woman fell silent. For a long time. Her audience didn’t urge her on, seeing her smile at her recollections. At her glory. At the faces of those who gloriously survived, looming in the fog of oblivion, of forgetting. In order later to be shabbily killed by vodka,

drugs and consumption.

'We were all just as brave,' finished Julia Abatemarco. 'Neither of the sides had the strength to be braver. But we . . . We managed to be brave for a minute longer.'

*

'Marti, I'd be very grateful if you could give us a little more of your wonderful magic! Just a little bit more, just a few ounces! The inside of this poor wretch's belly is one great goulash, seasoned, additionally, by loads of metal rings from a mail shirt. I can't do anything while he thrashes about like a fish being gutted! Shani, dammit, hold those retractors! Iola! Are you asleep, dammit? Clamp! Claaampp!'

Iola breathed out heavily, fighting to swallow the saliva filling her mouth. *I'm going to faint soon*, she thought. *I can't bear it, I can't bear this any longer, this stench, this ghastly mixture of blood, puke, excrement, urine, the content of intestines, sweat, fear and death. I can't bear these endless screams any longer, this moaning, these bloodied, slimy hands clinging to me as though I really was their hope, their escape, their life . . . I can't bear the pointlessness of what we're doing. Because it is pointless. It's one great, enormous pointless pit of pointlessness.*

I can't bear the effort and the fatigue. They keep bringing new ones . . . And new ones . . .

I can't stand it. I'm going to vomit. I'm going to faint. I'll shame myself.

'Dressing! Compress! Bowel clamp! Not that one! Soft clamp! Mind what you're doing! Make another mistake and I'll smack you in that ginger head! Do you hear? I'll smack you in that ginger head!'

Great Melitele. Help me. Help me, O goddess.

'There! Better already! One more clamp, priestess! Clamp on the artery! Good! Good, Iola, keep it up! Marti, mop his eyes and face. And mine too . . .'

*

Where does that pain come from? thought Constable Jan Natalis. *What hurts so much?*

Aha.

My clenched fists.

*

‘Let’s finish them off!’ yelled Kees van Lo, rubbing his hands. ‘Let’s finish them off, sir! The line’s breaking along the formation, let’s strike! Let’s strike without delay, and by the Great Sun, they’ll fall apart! They’ll scatter!’

Menno Coehoorn was nervously chewing a fingernail, realised they were watching, and quickly took his finger out of his mouth.

‘Let’s strike,’ repeated Kees van Lo calmly, now without emphasis. ‘Nauzicaa’s ready—’

‘Nauzicaa is to stand by,’ said Menno sharply. ‘The Daerlanians, too. Mr Faoiltiarna!’

The commander of the Vrihedd Brigade, Isengrim Faoiltiarna, called the Iron Wolf, turned his awful face – disfigured by a scar running across his forehead, brow, bridge of the nose and cheek – towards the marshal.

‘Strike,’ Menno pointed with his baton. ‘At the junction of Temeria and Redania. Over there.’

The elf saluted. His disfigured face didn’t even twitch, his large eyes didn’t change their expression.

Allies, thought Menno. *Confederates. We’re fighting together. Against a common foe.*

But I don’t understand them at all, those elves.

They’re somehow alien.

Different.

*

‘Interesting,’ Rusty tried to rub his face with his elbow, but his elbow was also covered in blood. Iola hurried to help him.

‘Curious,’ repeated the surgeon, pointing at the patient. ‘Stabbed by a pitchfork or some sort of two-pronged type of gisarme . . . One of the prongs punctured the heart, there, please look. The chamber undoubtedly perforated, the aorta almost severed. And he was still breathing for a while. Here, on the table. Gored right in the heart, he survived all the way to the table . . .’

‘Do you wish to state,’ a cavalryman from the light volunteer horse asked gloomily, ‘that he’s expired? We bore him from the battle in vain?’

‘Nothing is in vain.’ Rusty didn’t lower his eyes. ‘And for the sake of the truth, then yes, he’s dead, sadly. *Exitus*. Take him away . . . Oh, bloody hell . . . Take a look, girls.’

Marti Sodergren, Shani and Iola bent over the body. Rusty pulled back the corpse’s eyelid.

‘Ever seen anything like that?’

All three of them shuddered.

‘Yes,’ they all said at the same time. They glanced at each other, as though slightly surprised.

‘I have too,’ said Rusty. ‘It’s a witcher. A mutant. That would explain why he lived so long . . . Was he your comrade-at-arms, men? Or did you bring him here by chance?’

‘He was our comrade, Mr Medic,’ confirmed another volunteer gloomily, a beanpole with a bandaged head. ‘From our squadron, a volunteer like us. Eh, he was a master with a sword. They called him Coën.’

‘And he was a witcher?’

‘Aye. But he was a decent bloke otherwise.’

‘Ha,’ sighed Rusty, seeing four soldiers carrying another casualty on a blood-soaked cloak dripping with blood. He was very young, judging by how shrilly he was wailing.

‘Ha, pity. I would have gladly taken that otherwise decent witcher for a post-mortem. I’m consumed with curiosity, and a paper could be written if one could just take a look inside him . . . But there’s no time! Get the corpse off the table! Shani, water. Marti, disinfection. Iola, pass me . . . Hello, girl, are you shedding

tears again? What's it this time?'

'Nothing, Mr Rusty. Nothing. Everything's all right now.'

*

'I feel,' repeated Triss Merigold, 'as though I've been robbed.'

Nenneke didn't answer for a long time, and looked from the terrace towards the temple garden, where the priestesses and novices were busily engaged in their springtime work.

'You made a choice,' she finally said. 'You chose your way, Triss. Your own destiny. Of your own free will. Now isn't the time for regrets.'

'Nenneke,' the sorceress lowered her eyes. 'I really can't say anything more than what I've said. Believe me and forgive me.'

'Who am I to forgive you? And what will you get from my forgiving you?'

'But I can see how you're glaring at me!' Triss exploded. 'You and your priestesses. I can see you asking me questions with your eyes. Like "W*hat are you doing here, witch? Why aren't you where Iola, Eurneid, Katje and Myrrha are? And Jarre?"* '

'You're exaggerating, Triss.'

The sorceress looked into the distance, at the forest, bluish beyond the temple wall, at the smoke of distant campfires.

Nenneke said nothing. She was also far away in her thoughts. Away where the fighting was raging and the blood was flowing. She thought about the girls she'd sent there.

'They talked me out of it all,' Triss said.

Nenneke said nothing.

'They talked me out of it all,' Triss repeated. 'So wise, so sensible, so logical . . . How not to believe them when they explained that there are more and less important matters, that one ought to give up the less important ones without a second thought, sacrifice them for the important ones without a trace of regret. That there's no point saving people you know and love, because they're individuals, and the fate of individuals is meaningless against the fate of the world. That there's no point fighting in the defence of

virtue, honour and ideals, because they are empty notions. That the real battlefield for the fate of the world is somewhere else completely, that the fight will take place somewhere else. And I feel robbed. Robbed of the chance to commit acts of insanity. I can't insanely rush to help Ciri, I can't run and save Geralt and Yennefer like a madwoman. But that's not all, in the war being waged, in the war to which you sent your girls . . . In the war to which Jarre fled, I'm even refused the chance to stand on the Hill. To stand on the Hill once more. This time with the awareness of a truly conscious and correct decision.'

'Everybody has their own decision and their own Hill, Triss,' said the high priestess softly. 'Everybody. You can't run away from yours either.'

*

There was a commotion in the entrance to the tent. Another casualty was being carried in, accompanied by several knights. One, in full plate armour, was shouting, giving orders and urging the carriers on.

'Move, stretcher-bearers! Quicker! Put him here, here! Hey, you, medic!'

'I'm busy.' Rusty didn't even look up. 'Please put the wounded man on a stretcher. I'll see to him when I finish.'

'You'll see to him immediately, stupid leech! For it is none other than the Most Honourable Count of Garramone!'

'This hospital—' Rusty raised his voice, angry, because the broken arrowhead stuck in the casualty's guts had once again slipped out of his forceps '—this hospital has very little in common with democracy. They mainly bring in knights and upward. Barons, counts, marquises, and various others of that ilk. Somehow few care about wounded men of humbler birth. But there is some kind of equality here, nonetheless. That is, on my table.'

'Eh? You what?'

'It doesn't matter—' Rusty once again stuck a cannula and pair of forceps into the wound '—if this one here, from whose guts I'm removing bits of iron, is a peasant, a member of the minor gentry, old nobility or aristocracy. He's lying on my table. And to me, as I

hum to myself, a duke's worth a jester. Before God we are all equally wise – and equally foolish.'

'You what?'

'Your count will have to wait his turn.'

'You confounded halfling!'

'Help me, Shani. Take the other forceps. Look out for that artery! Marti, just a little more magic, if you would, we have serious haemorrhaging here.'

The knight took a step forward, teeth and armour grating.

'I'll have you hanged!' he roared. 'I'll order you hanged, you unhuman!'

'Silence, Papebrock,' the wounded count said with difficulty, biting his lips. 'Silence. Leave me and get back to the fighting—'

'No, my lord! Never!'

'That was an order.'

A thudding and clanging of iron, the snorting of horses and wild cries reached their ears from behind the tent flap. The wounded in the field hospital moaned in various keys.

'Please look.' Rusty raised his forceps, showing the splintered arrowhead he had finally extracted. 'A craftsman made this trinket, supporting a large family thanks to its manufacture, furthermore contributing to the growth of small craftwork, and thus also to general prosperity and universal happiness. And the way this ornament clings to human guts is surely protected by a patent. Long live progress.'

He casually threw the bloody blade into the bin, and glanced at the casualty, who had fainted during the operation.

'Sew him up and take him away,' he nodded. 'If he's lucky, he'll survive. Bring me the next in the queue. The one with the gashed head.'

'That one,' Marti Sodergren said calmly, 'just gave up his place. A moment ago.' Rusty sucked in and exhaled, moved away from the table without unnecessary comments and stood over the wounded count. Rusty's hands were bloody, and his apron splashed with blood like a butcher. Daniel Etcheverry, the Count of Garramone, paled even more.

‘Well,’ panted Rusty. ‘It’s your turn, Your Grace. Put him on the table. What do we have here? Ha, nothing remains of that joint that could be saved. It’s porridge! It’s pulp! What do you whack each other with, Count, that you smash each other’s bones like that? Well, it’ll hurt a bit, Your Grace. It’ll hurt a bit. But please don’t worry. It’ll be just like it is in a battle. Tourniquet. Knife! We’re going to amputate, Your Grace!’

Daniel Etcheverry, the Count of Garramone, who had put a brave face on it until then, howled like a wolf. Before he clenched his jaws from the pain, Shani quickly slipped a peg of linden wood between his teeth.

*

‘Your Royal Highness! Lord Constable!’

‘Talk, lad.’

‘The Volunteer Regiment and the Free Company are holding the defile near Golden Pond . . . The dwarves and condottieri are holding fast, although they’re awfully bloodied . . . They say Adieu Pangratt’s dead, Frontino’s dead, Julia Abatemarco’s dead . . . All of them, all dead! The Dorian Company, which came to relieve them, is slaughtered . . .’

‘Reserves, my lord constable,’ Foltest said quietly, but clearly. ‘If you want to know my opinion, it’s time to send in the reserves. Have Bronibor throw his infantry at the Black Cloaks! Now! Forthwith! Otherwise they’ll dismember our lines, and that means the end.’

Jan Natalis didn’t answer, now observing the next liaison officer rushing towards them from a distance on a horse spraying flecks of foam.

‘Get your breath back, lad. Get your breath back and speak concisely!’

‘They’ve breached . . . the front . . . the elves of the Vrihedd Brigade. Graf de Ruyter informs Your Graces that . . .’

‘What does he inform us? Talk!’

‘That it’s time to save your lives.’

Jan Natalis raised his eyes heavenwards.

‘Blenckert,’ he said hollowly. ‘May Blenckert come now. Or may the night come.’

*

The ground around the tent trembled beneath hooves, and the tent walls, it seemed, billowed from the intensity of the cries and the neighing of horses. A soldier rushed into the tent, followed close behind by two orderlies.

‘People, flee!’ the soldier bellowed. ‘Save yourselves! Nilfgaard is vanquishing our army! Destruction! Destruction! Defeat!’

‘Clamp!’ Rusty withdrew his face before the stream of blood, a potent and vivid fountain squirting from an artery. ‘Clamp! And a compress! Clamp, Shani! Marti, do something, if you would, about that bleeding . . .’

Someone howled like an animal right beside the tent, briefly, stopping abruptly. A horse squealed, something hit the ground with a clank and a thud. A crossbow bolt punctured the canvas with a crack, hissed and flew out the other side, fortunately too high to threaten the wounded men lying on stretchers.

‘Nilfgaaaaaard!’ the soldier shouted again, in a high, trembling voice. ‘Gentlemen medics! Can’t you hear what I’m saying? Nilfgaard has breached the royal line, they’re coming and murdering! Fleeeee!’

Rusty took a needle from Marti Sodergren, and put in the first suture. The man being operated on hadn’t moved for a long time. But his heart was beating. Visibly.

‘I don’t want to diiiieee!’ yelled one of the conscious wounded. The soldier cursed, dashed for the exit, suddenly yelled, crashed backwards, splashing blood, and tumbled onto the dirt floor. Iola, kneeling by the stretchers, leaped to her feet, and stepped back.

It suddenly went quiet.

Not good, thought Rusty, seeing who was entering the tent. Elves. Silver lightning bolts. The Vrihedd Brigade. The notorious Vrihedd Brigade.

‘A field hospital,’ the first of the elves stated. He was tall, with a pretty, oval, expressive face with large, cornflower blue eyes.

‘Treating the wounded?’

No one said anything. Rusty felt his hands begin to tremble. He quickly handed the needle to Marti. He saw Shani’s forehead and the bridge of her nose pale.

‘So what’s this about?’ said the elf, drawling his words menacingly. ‘Why do we wound our foes over there on the battlefield? Over there in the fighting we inflict wounds so men will die from them. And you treat them. I observe an absolute lack of logic here. And a conflict of interests.’

He stooped over and thrust his sword almost without a swing into the chest of the casualty on the stretcher nearest the entrance. Another elf pinned another wounded man with a half-pike. A third casualty, conscious, tried hard to stop a thrust with his left arm and the heavily bandaged stump of his right.

Shani screamed. Shrilly, piercingly. Drowning out the heavy, inhuman groaning of the mutilated man being murdered. Iola, throwing herself onto a stretcher, covered the next casualty with her body. Her face blanched like the linen of a bandage and her mouth began to twitch involuntarily. The elf squinted his eyes.

‘*Va vort, beanna*!’ he barked. ‘Or I’ll run you through along with this Dh’oine!’

‘Get out of here!’ Rusty was beside Iola in three bounds, shielding her. ‘Get out of my tent, you murderer. Get back there to the battlefield. Your place is there. Among the other murderers. Murder each other there, if that is your will. But get out of here!’

The elf looked down at the pot-bellied halfling shaking with fear, the top of whose curly mop reached a little above his waist.

‘*Bloede Pherian*,’ he hissed. ‘Toady to humans! Get out of my way!’

‘Not a chance.’ The halfling’s teeth were chattering, but his words were distinct.

The second elf leaped forward and pushed the surgeon with the shaft of his half-pike. Rusty fell to his knees. The tall elf wrenched Iola away from the wounded man with a brutal tug and raised his sword.

And froze, seeing, on the rolled up cloak under the injured man’s head, the silver flames of the Deithwen Division. And the insignia of a colonel.

‘*Yaevinn*!’ screamed an elf woman with dark hair woven into a plait, rushing into the tent. ‘*Caemm, veloe! Ess’evgyriad a’Dh’oine a’en va! Ess’ tedd!*’

The tall elf looked at the wounded colonel for a moment, then at the eyes of the surgeon, which were watering in terror. Then he turned on his heel and left.

Once again the tramping of hooves, yelling and the clanging of iron could be heard from beyond the wall of the tent.

‘Have at the Black Cloaks! Murder!’ a thousand voices yelled. Someone howled like an animal, and the howling transformed into macabre wheezing.

Rusty tried to stand up, but his legs failed him. His arms weren’t much use either.

Iola, trembling with powerful spasms of suppressed tears, curled up by the stretcher of the wounded Nilfgaardian. In a foetal position.

Shani was crying, not trying to hide her tears. But still holding the retractors. Marti was calmly putting in sutures, only her mouth moving in a kind of mute, silent monologue.

Rusty, still unable to stand up, sat back down. He met the gaze of the orderly, huddled and squeezed into a corner of the tent.

‘Give me a swig of hooch,’ said Rusty with effort. ‘Just don’t say you don’t have any. I know you rascals. You always do.’

*

General Blenheim Blenckert stood up in his stirrups, stuck his neck out like a crane and listened to the sounds of the battle.

‘Draw out the array,’ he ordered his commanders. ‘And we’ll go at a trot at once behind that hill. From what the scouts say it appears that we’ll come out straight on the Black Cloaks’ right wing.’

‘And we’ll give them what for!’ one of the lieutenants, a whippersnapper with a silky and very spare little moustache, shouted shrilly. Blenckert looked askance at him.

‘A detachment with a standard at the head,’ he ordered,

drawing his sword. ‘And in the charge cry “Redania!” Cry it at the top of your lungs! May Foltest and Natalis’ boys know that the relief is coming.’

*

Graf Kobus de Ruyter had fought in various battles, for forty years, since he was sixteen. Furthermore, he was an eighth-generation soldier, without doubt he had something in his genes. Something that meant that the roar and hubbub of battle, for everyone else simply a horrifying hullabaloo that drowned out everything else, was like a symphony, like a concert for a full orchestra, to Kobus de Ruyter. De Ruyter at once heard other notes, chords and tones.

‘Hurraaah, boys!’ he roared, brandishing his baton. ‘Redania! Redania is coming! The eagles! The eagles!’

From the north, from behind the hills, rolling towards the battle, came a mass of cavalry, over which an amaranth pennant and a great gonfalon with a silver Redanian eagle fluttered.

‘Relief!’ yelled de Ruyter. ‘The relief’s coming! Hurraaah! Death to the Black Cloaks!’

The eighth-generation soldier immediately noticed that the Nilfgaardian wing was wheeling around, trying to turn towards the charging relief with a disciplined, tight front. He knew he could not allow them to do that.

‘Follow me!’ he roared, wresting the standard from the standard-bearer’s hands. ‘Follow me! Tretogorians, follow me!’

They struck. They struck suicidally, dreadfully. But effectively. The Nilfgaardians of the Venendal Division fell into confusion and then the Redanian companies drove into them. A great shout rose into the sky.

Kobus de Ruyter didn’t see or hear it. A stray bolt from a crossbow had struck him straight in the temple. The nobleman sagged in the saddle and fell from his horse, the standard covering him like a shroud.

Eight generations of de Ruyters who had fallen fighting and were following the battle from the beyond nodded in acknowledgement.

*

‘It could be said, captain, that the Nordlings were saved by a miracle that day. Or a coincidence that no one could have predicted. Admittedly Restif de Montholon writes in his book that Marshal Coehoorn made a mistake in his assessment of the enemy’s strength and plans. That he took too great a risk, splitting up the Centre Army Group and setting off with a cavalry troop. That he took on a risky battle, not having at least a threefold advantage. And that he neglected reconnaissance, he didn’t uncover the Redanian Army arriving with reinforcements.’

‘Cadet Puttkammer! Mr de Montholon’s “work”, which is of doubtful quality, is not included in this school’s curriculum. And His Imperial Highness deigned to express himself extremely critically about the book. Thus you will not quote it here, Cadet. Indeed, it astonishes me. Until now your answers have been very good, positively excellent, and suddenly you begin to discourse about miracles and coincidences, while finally you take the liberty of criticising the leadership abilities of Menno Coehoorn, one of the greatest leaders the Empire has produced. Cadet Puttkammer – and all the rest of you cadets – if you’re seriously thinking about passing the final exam, you’ll listen and remember: at the Battle of Brenna no miracles or accidents were at work, but a conspiracy! Hostile saboteur forces, subversive elements, foul rabble-rousers, cosmopolites, political bankrupts, traitors and turncoats. A canker that was later burned out with white-hot iron. But before it came to that, those base traitors tangled up their own nation in spider webs and wove a snare of scheming! It was they who inveigled and betrayed Marshal Coehoorn then, deceived him and misled him! It was they; scoundrels without faith or honour . . .’

*

‘Whoresons,’ repeated Menno Coehoorn, without taking the telescope from his eye. ‘Common whoresons. But I’ll find you, just wait, I’ll teach you what reconnaissance means. De Wyngalt! You will personally find the officer who was on the patrol beyond the hills to the north. Have all of them, the entire patrol, hanged.’

‘Yes, sir.’ Ouder de Wyngalt, the marshal’s *aide-de-camp*, clicked his heels together. He could not know that right then Lamarr Flaut, the officer from the patrol, was dying, trampled by horses of the secret reserves of the Nordlings who were attacking the flanks, the reserves he hadn’t uncovered. Neither could de Wyngalt know that he only had two hours of life left.

‘How many of them are there, Mr Trahe?’ Coehoorn still didn’t take the telescope from his eye. ‘In your opinion?

‘At least ten thousand,’ replied the commander of the 7th Daerlanian dryly. ‘Mainly Redania, but I also see the chevron of Aedirn . . . The unicorn is also there, so we also have Kaedwen . . . With a detachment of at least a company . . .’

*

The company was galloping, sand and grit flew from beneath hooves.

‘Forward, you Duns!’ roared centurion Halfpot, drunk as usual. ‘Attack, kill! Kaedweeen! Kaedweeeen!’

Dammit, but I’m dying for a piss, thought Zyvik. *I should have gone before the battle . . .*

Now there might not be a chance.

‘Forward, you Duns!’

Always the Duns. Wherever things are going wrong, the Duns. Who did they send as an expeditionary force to Temeria? The Duns. Always the Dun Banner. I need a piss.

They arrived. Zyvik yelled, turned around in the saddle and slashed backhand, destroying the spaulder and shoulder of a horseman in a black cloak with an eight-pointed silver star.

‘The Duns! Kaedweeen! Fight, kill!’

The Dun Banner Standard struck Nilfgaard with a thud, a clatter and a clank, amidst the roars of soldiers and the squeals of horses.

*

‘De Mellis-Stoke and Braibant will cope with that relief,’ said Elan Trahe, the commander of the 7th Daerlanian Brigade calmly. ‘The forces are balanced, nothing has gone wrong yet. Tyrconnel’s division is counterbalancing the left wing, Magne and Venendal are managing on the right. And we . . . We can tip the scale, sir—’

‘By striking the line, going in after the elves,’ Menno Coehoorn understood at once. ‘By striking at the rear lines, sowing panic. That’s it! That’s what we shall do, by the Great Sun! To your companies, gentlemen! Nauzicaa and the 7th, your time has come!’

‘Long live the Emperor!’ yelled Kees van Lo.

‘Lord de Wyngalt.’ The marshal turned around. ‘Please muster the adjutants and the guard troop. Enough inactivity! We’re going to charge with the 7th Daerlanian.’

Ouder de Wyngalt paled slightly, but immediately regained control.

‘Long live the Emperor!’ he cried, and there was almost no tremor in his voice.

*

Rusty cut, and the wounded man wailed and scratched the table. Iola, bravely fighting giddiness, was taking care of the tourniquets and clamps. Shani’s raised voice could be heard from the entrance to the tent.

‘Where? Are you insane? The living are waiting to be saved here, and you’re marching in with corpses?’

‘But this is Baron Anzelm Aubry himself, Madam Medic! The company commander!’

‘It *was* the company commander! Now it’s a corpse. You only managed to bring him in one piece because his armour is watertight! Take him away. This is a field hospital, not a mortuary!’

‘But Madam Medic—’

‘Don’t block the entrance! Look there, they’re carrying one that’s still breathing. Or at least he looks like he’s still breathing. Because it might just be wind.’

Rusty snorted, but immediately afterwards raised an eyebrow.

‘Shani! Come here at once!

‘Remember, you chit,’ he said through clenched teeth, bending over the mutilated leg, ‘that a surgeon can only take the liberty of cynicism after ten years of experience. Will you remember that?’

‘Yes, Mr Rusty.’

‘Take the raspatory and strip off the periosteum . . . Blast, it would be worth anaesthetising him a little more . . . Where’s Marti?’

‘She’s puking outside the tent,’ said Shani without a trace of cynicism. ‘Puking her guts out.’

‘Sorcerers!’ Rusty took hold of a saw. ‘Instead of thinking up numerous awful and powerful spells they would be better thinking up one. One that would enable them to cast minor spells, for example anaesthetising ones, without difficulty. And without puking.’

The saw grated and crunched on bone. The wounded man moaned.

‘Tighten the tourniquet, Iola!’

The bone finally gave way. Rusty tidied it up with a small chisel and wiped his forehead.

‘Blood vessels and nerves,’ he said mechanically and needlessly, because before he had finished the sentence the girls were already putting in the sutures. He removed the severed leg from the table and threw it down onto a pile of other severed limbs. The wounded man hadn’t roared or moaned for some time.

‘Fainted or dead?’

‘Fainted, Mr Rusty.’

‘Good. Sew up the stump, Shani. Bring on the next one! Iola, go and find out if Marti has puked everything up.’

‘I wonder,’ said Iola very quietly, without raising her head, ‘how many years of experience you have, Mr Rusty. A hundred?’

*

After a quarter of an hour of strenuous marching and choking on

dust, the yells of the centurions and decurions ceased and the Vizimian regiments spread out in a line. Jarre, gasping and gulping in air through his mouth like a fish, saw Voivode Bronibor strutting before the front on his beautiful armoured steed. The voivode himself was also in full plate armour. His armour was enamelled in blue stripes, making Bronibor look like a great steel-plated mackerel.

'How are you, you dolts?'

The rows of pikemen answered with a rumbling growl like distant thunder.

'You're issuing farting sounds,' the voivode noted, reining his armoured horse around and directing him to walk before the front. 'That means you're feeling good. When you're feeling bad, you don't fart in hushed tones, but you wail and howl like the damned. It's clear from your expressions that you're spoiling for a fight, that you're dreaming of battle, that you can't wait to get your hands on the Nilfgaardians! Right, you Vizimian brigands? Then I have good news for you! Your dream will come true in a short while. In a very short while.'

The pikemen muttered again. Bronibor, after riding to the end of the line, turned around, and spoke on, rapping his mace against the ornamented pommel of his saddle.

'You stuffed yourselves with dust, infantry, marching behind the armoured troops. Up until now, instead of glory and spoils, you've been sniffing horses' farts. And even today, when a great battle is upon us, you almost didn't make it to the field. But you managed it, so I congratulate you with all my heart. Here, outside this village, whose name I've forgotten, you will finally show how much worth you have as an army. That cloud you see on the battlefield is the Nilfgaardian horse, which means to crush our army with a flanking strike, shove us and drown us in the bogs of this little river, whose name I have also forgotten. The honour of defending the breach that has arisen in our ranks has fallen to you, celebrated Vizimian pikemen, by the grace of King Foltest and Constable Natalis. You will close that breach, so to speak, with your breasts, you will stop the Nilfgaardian charge. You're rejoicing, comrades, what? You're bursting with pride, eh?'

Jarre, squeezing his pikestaff, looked around. There was nothing to indicate that the soldiers were rejoicing at the prospect of the imminent battle, and if they were bursting with pride by

virtue of the honour of closing the breach, they were skilfully disguising it. Melfi, standing on the boy's right, was mumbling a prayer under his breath. On his left, Deuslax, a hardened professional soldier, sniffed, swore and coughed nervously.

Bronibor reined his horse around and sat up straight in the saddle.

'I can't hear you!' he roared. 'I asked if you're bursting with fucking pride?'

This time the pikemen, seeing no alternative, roared with one, great voice that they were. Jarre also roared. If everyone was he might as well too.

'Good!' The voivode reined back his horse before the front. 'And now stand in an orderly array! Centurions, what are you waiting for, for fuck's sake? Form a square! The first rank kneels, the second stands! Ground your pikes! Not that end, ass! Yes, yes, I'm talking to you, you horrible little man! Higher, hold your pikestaffs higher, you wretches! Close ranks, close up, close ranks, shoulder to shoulder! Well, now you look impressive! Almost like an army!'

Jarre found himself in the second rank. He pushed the butt of his pike into the ground and gripped the pikestaff in his hands, sweaty from fear. Melfi was muttering indistinctly, repeating various words over and over, mainly concerning the private lives of the Nilfgaardians, dogs, bitches, kings, constables, voivodes and all their mothers.

The cloud in the battlefield grew.

'Don't fart there, don't chatter your teeth!' roared Bronibor. 'Thoughts of frightening the Nilfgaardian horses with those noises are misguided! Let no man deceive himself! What is heading for you are the Nauzicaa and 7th Daerlanian Brigades; splendid, valiant, superbly trained soldiers! They can't be scared! They can't be defeated! They have to be killed! Hold those pikes higher!'

From a distance the still soft but growing thud of hooves could now be heard. The ground began to shudder. Blades began to glint like sparks in the cloud of dust.

'It's your good fucking fortune, Vizimians,' the voivode roared once more. 'That the standard infantry pike of the new, modernised model is twenty-one feet long! And a Nilfgaardian sword is three-and-a-half feet long. Can you reckon? Know that they can too. But

they are counting on your not holding out, that your true nature will emerge, that it will be confirmed and revealed that you are shitheads, cowards and mangy sheep shaggers. The Black Cloaks are counting on you to throw down your poles and start running, and they will pursue you across the battlefield and hack you on the backs, heads and necks, hack you comfortably and with no difficulty. Remember, you little shits, that although fear lends the heels extraordinary speed, you won't outrun cavalrymen. Whoever wants to live, whoever wants glory and spoils, must stand! Stand firm! Stand like a wall! And close ranks!'

Jarre looked back. The crossbowmen standing behind the line of pikemen were already winding their cranks, and the interior of the square was bristling with the points of gisarmes, ranseurs, halberds, glaives, partizans, scythes and pitchforks. The ground trembled more and more distinctly and powerfully, and it was already possible to discern the shapes of horsemen in the black wall of cavalry hurtling towards them.

'Mamma, dear mother,' repeated Melfi through trembling lips. 'Mamma, dear mother—'

'—fucker,' mumbled Deuslax.

The hoof beats intensified. Jarre wanted to lick his lips, but he couldn't. His tongue had gone stiff. His tongue stopped behaving normally, it had stiffened strangely and was as dry as a bone. The hoof beats intensified.

'Close ranks!' roared Bronibor, drawing his sword. 'Feel your comrade's shoulder! Remember, none of you is fighting alone! And the only remedy for the fear you are feeling is the pike in your fist! Prepare to fight! Pikes aimed at the horses' chests! What are we going to do, Vizimian brigands? I'm asking!'

'Stand firm!' roared the pikemen with one voice. 'Stand like a wall! Close ranks!'

Jarre also roared. If everyone was he might as well too. Sand, grit and turf sprayed from beneath the hooves of the advancing wedge of cavalry. The charging horsemen yelled like demons, brandishing their weapons. Jarre leaned onto his pike, buried his head in his shoulders and shut his eyes.

*

Jarre shooed away a wasp circling above his inkwell with a violent movement of his stump, without interrupting his writing.

Marshal Coehoorn came to nothing. His flanking troop was stopped by the heroic Vizimian infantry under Voivode Bronibor, paying in blood for his heroism. And at the moment the Vizimians resisted, Nilfgaard fell into confusion on the left wing – some of them began to take flight, others to pull together and defend themselves in groups, surrounded on all sides. Soon after the same thing happened on the right wing, where the doggedness of the dwarves and condottieri finally overcame Nilfgaard's assault. A single great cry of triumph went up along the entire front, and a new spirit entered the royal knights. And the spirit fell in the Nilfgaardians, their hands weakened, and our men began to shell them like peas so loudly it echoed.

And Field Marshal Menno Coehoorn understood that the battle was lost, saw the brigades perishing and falling into confusion around him.

And then his officers and knights ran to him, giving him a fresh horse, calling for him to flee and save his own life. But a fearless heart beat in the breast of the Nilfgaardian field marshal. 'That will not do,' he called, pushing away the reins held out towards him. 'It will not do for me to flee like a coward from the field on which so many good men under my command have fallen for the emperor.' And the doughty Menno Coehoorn added . . .

*

'Besides, now there's nowhere to fuck off to,' Menno Coehoorn added calmly and soberly, looking around the battlefield. 'They're surrounding us on all sides.'

'Give me your cloak and helmet, sir.' Captain Sievers wiped blood and sweat from his face. 'Take mine, sir! Dismount your steed, and take mine . . . Don't protest! You must live, sir! You're indispensable to the empire, irreplaceable . . . We Daerlanians will strike the Nordlings, we'll draw them to us, you meanwhile try to break through down there, below the fishpond . . .'

'You won't get out of that alive,' muttered Coehoorn, taking the reins being offered to him.

‘It’s an honour.’ Sievers straightened up in the saddle. ‘I’m a soldier! Of the 7th Daerlanians! To me! Have faith! To me!’

‘Good luck,’ mumbled Coehoorn throwing over his back a Daerlanian cloak with a black scorpion on the shoulder. ‘Sievers?’

‘Yes, sir, marshal, sir?’

‘Nothing. Good luck, lad.’

‘And may luck be on your side, sir. To horse, have faith!’

Coehoorn watched them ride off. For a long while. Until the moment Sievers’ small group rode with a bang, a yell and a thud into the condottieri. Into a troop considerably outnumbering them, to whose aid, indeed, other troops hurried at once. The Daerlanians’ black cloaks vanished among the greyness of the condottieri; all was lost in the dust.

The nervous coughing of de Wyngalt and the adjutants brought Coehoorn to his senses. The marshal adjusted the stirrup leathers and flaps. He brought the restless steed under control.

‘To horse!’ he commanded.

At first things went well for them. In the mouth of the valley leading to the riverlet a dwindling troop of survivors of the Nauzicaa Brigade was doggedly defending itself, forced into a circle bristling with blades, onto which the Nordlings had concentrated all their momentum and force, making a breach in the ring. Naturally, they didn’t get away totally unscathed – they had to hack their way through a row of light volunteer horse, probably Bruggean, judging by their insignia. The skirmish was very short, but furiously fierce. Coehoorn had already lost and discarded all remains and appearances of lofty heroism and now just wanted to survive. Not even looking back at his escort trading vicious blows with the Bruggeans, he rushed towards the stream with his adjutants, pressing himself to and hugging the horse’s neck.

The way was clear; beyond the little river, beyond the crooked willows, a barren plain spread out, on which no enemy troops could be seen. Ouder de Wyngalt, galloping beside Coehoorn, also saw it and yelled triumphantly.

Prematurely.

A meadow covered in bright-green knotgrass separated them from the sluggish, murky little river. When they charged into it at full gallop the horses suddenly plunged up to their bellies in the

bog.

The marshal flew over his steed's head and fell headfirst into the bog. All around, horses were neighing and kicking, and men covered in mud and green duckweed were yelling. Menno suddenly heard another sound amidst this pandemonium. A sound that meant death.

The hiss of fletchings.

He dashed for the current of the small river, wading up to his hips in the thick marsh. An adjutant forcing his way through beside him suddenly tumbled face first into the mud, and the marshal saw a bolt stuck into his back up to the fletchings. At that same moment he felt a terrible blow to the head. He staggered but didn't fall, stuck in the mud and swamp. He wanted to scream, but only managed to splutter. *I'm alive*, he thought, trying to wriggle out of the clutch of the sticky slime. A horse struggling out of the marsh had kicked him in the helmet, and the deeply dented metal had shattered his cheek, knocked out some teeth and cut his tongue . . . *I'm bleeding . . . I'm swallowing blood . . . But I'm alive . . .*

Once again the slap of bowstrings, the hiss of fletchings, the thud and crack of arrowheads penetrating armour, yells, the neighing of horses, squelching, and blood splashing. The marshal looked back and saw bowmen on the bank; small, stocky, pot-bellied shapes in mail shirts, basinets and pointed chichaks. *Dwarves*, he thought.

The slap of bowstrings, the whistle of bolts. The squeal of horses threshing around. The yelling of men choking on water and mud.

Ouder de Wyngalt, turning towards the marksmen, cried in a high, squeaky voice that he was surrendering, asked for mercy and compassion, promised a ransom and begged for his life. Aware that no one understood his words, he raised his sword, held by the blade, above his head. He held the weapon out towards the dwarves in the international, outright cosmopolitan gesture of surrender. He wasn't understood, or was misunderstood, for two bolts slammed into his chest with such force that the impact hurled him up out of the bog.

Coehoorn tore the dented helmet from his head. He knew the Common Speech of the Nordlings quite well.

'I'm Marfal Coeoon . . .' he mumbled, spitting blood. 'Marfal

Coeoon . . . I furrender . . . Merfy . . . Merfy . . .'

'What's he saying, Zoltan?' one of the crossbowmen asked in surprise.

'Bugger him and his chattering! Do you see the embroidery on his cloak, Munro?'

'A silver scorpion! Haaaa! Wallop the whoreson, boys! For Caleb Stratton!'

'For Caleb Stratton!'

Bowstrings clanged. One bolt hit Coehoorn straight in the chest, the second in the hip and the third in the collar bone. The Nilfgaardian field marshal fell over backwards in the watery mush, the knotgrass and swamp yielding under his weight. *Who the bloody hell could Caleb Stratton be?* he managed to think, *I've never heard of any Caleb . . .*

The murky, viscous, muddied and bloodied water of the River Chotla closed over his head and gushed into his lungs.

*

She went outside the tent to get some fresh air. And then she saw him, sitting beside the blacksmith's bench.

'Jarre!'

He raised his eyes towards her. There was emptiness in those eyes.

'Iola?' he asked, moving his swollen lips with difficulty. 'How come you're—'

'What a question!' she interrupted him at once. 'You'd better tell me how you've ended up here!'

'We've brought our commander . . . Voivode Bronibor . . . He's wounded—'

'You're also wounded. Show me that hand. O goddess! But you'll bleed to death, lad!'

Jarre looked at her, and Iola suddenly began to doubt whether he could see her.

'It's a battle,' said the boy, teeth chattering slightly. 'You must

stand like a wall . . . Steady in the line. The lightly wounded are to carry the heavily wounded to the field hospital. It's an order.'

'Show me your hand.'

Jarre howled briefly, his clenching teeth snapping in a wild staccato. Iola frowned.

'Oh my, it looks dreadful . . . Oh, dear, Jarre, Jarre . . . You'll see, Mother Nenneke will be angry . . . Come with me.'

She watched him blanch when he saw it. When he smelled the stench hanging beneath the roof of the tent. He staggered. She held him up. She saw him looking at the bloodied table. At the man lying there. At the surgeon, a small halfling, who suddenly leaped up, stamped his feet, cursed foully and threw a scalpel on the ground.

'Dammit! Fuck it! Why? Why is it like this? Why does it have to be like this?'

No one replied to the question.

'Who was it?'

'Voivode Bronibor,' explained Jarre in a feeble voice, looking straight ahead with his empty gaze. 'Our commander . . . We stood firm in the line. It was an order. Like a wall. And they killed Melfi . . .'

'Mr Rusty,' Iola asked. 'This boy's a friend of mine . . . He's wounded . . .'

'He's on his feet,' the surgeon assessed coldly. 'And here there's a dying man waiting for a trepanation. There's no room here for any sentimental connections . . .'

At that moment Jarre – with excellent timing – fainted dramatically and fell down on the dirt floor. The halfling snorted.

'Oh, very well, on the table with him,' he commanded. 'Oho, a nicely smashed arm. I wonder what's holding it on. His sleeve, I think? Tourniquet, Iola! Tightly! And don't you dare cry! Shani, give me a saw.'

The saw dug into the bone above the crushed elbow joint with a hideous crunching. Jarre came to and bellowed. Horribly, but briefly. For when the bone gave way he immediately fainted again.

*

And thus the might of Nilfgaard was reduced to dust on the Brenna battlefields, and an end was put to the march of the Empire northwards. Either by being killed or taken captive the Empire lost four and forty thousand men at the Battle of Brenna. The flower of the knighthood and the élite cavalry fell. Leaders of the stature of Menno Coehoorn, Braibant, de Mellis-Stoke, van Lo, Tyrconnel, Eggebracht and others whose names have not survived in our archives, fell, were taken prisoner or disappeared without trace.

Thus did Brenna become the beginning of the end. But it behoves me to write that that battle was but a small stone in the building, and superficial would have been its importance had the fruits of the victory not been wisely taken advantage of. It behoves us to recall that instead of resting on his laurels and bursting with pride, and awaiting honours and homage, Jan Natalis headed south almost without stopping. The cavalry troop under Adam Pangratt and Julia Abatemarco destroyed two divisions of the Third Army that had brought belated relief to Menno Coehoorn, routing them such that nec nuntius cladis. *At news of this, the rest of the Centre Army Group took miserable flight and fled in haste to the far side of the Yaruga, and since Foltest and Natalis were on their heels, the imperial forces lost entire convoys and all their siege engines with which, in their hubris, they had meant to capture Vizima, Gors Velen and Novigrad.*

And like an avalanche rolling down from the mountains, becoming covered in more and more snow and becoming greater, so also Brenna caused more and more severe results for Nilfgaard. Hard times came for the Verden Army under Duke de Wett, whom the corsairs from Skellige and King Ethain of Cidaris sorely vexed in a guerrilla war. When, meanwhile, de Wett learned about Brenna, when news reached him that King Foltest and Jan Natalis were marching briskly to him, he immediately ordered the trumpeting of the retreat and fled to Cintra, strewing the escape route with corpses, because at the news of the Nilfgaardian defeats an insurrection in Verden flared up anew. Only in the undefeated strongholds of Nastróg, Rozróg and Bodróg did powerful garrisons remain, for which reason only after the Peace of Cintra did they leave honourably and with their standards intact.

Whereas in Aedirn, the tidings about Brenna led to the feuding kings Demavend and Henselt shaking each other's right hands and taking arms against Nilfgaard together. The East Army Group, which

under the command of Duke Ardal aep Dahy marched towards the Pontar valley, did not manage to challenge the two allied kings. Strengthened by reinforcements from Redania and Queen Meve's guerrillas, who had cruelly plundered Nilfgaard, Demavend and Henselt drove Ardal aep Dahy all the way to Aldersberg. Duke Ardal wanted to give battle, but by a strange twist of fate he suddenly fell ill, having eaten something. He came down with the colic and diarrhoea miserere, and thus in two days he died in great pain. And Demavend and Henselt, without delay, attacked the Nilfgaardians, also there at Aldersberg, evidently for the sake of historical justice, and they routed them in a decisive battle, though Nilfgaard still had a significant numerical advantage. Thus do spirit and artistry usually triumph over dull and brutal force.

It behoves me to write about one more thing: what exactly happened to Menno Coehoorn himself at the Battle of Brenna no one knows. Some say: he fell and his body, unrecognised, was buried in a common grave. Others say: he escaped with his life, but fearing imperial wrath did not return to Nilfgaard, but hid in Brokilon among the dryads, and there became a hermit, letting his beard grow down to the ground. And there shortly after expired amidst his worries.

A story circulates among simple folk that the marshal returned at night to the Brenna battlefield and walked among the burial mounds, wailing 'Give me back my legions!', until finally he hanged himself on an aspen spike on the hill, called Gibbet Hill because of that. And at night one can happen upon the ghost of the celebrated marshal among other apparitions that commonly haunt the battlefield.

'Grandfather Jarre! Grandfather Jarre!'

Jarre raised his head from his papers and adjusted his spectacles, which were slipping down his sweaty nose.

'Grandfather Jarre!' his youngest granddaughter shouted in the upper register. She was a determined and bright six-year-old, who, thank the Gods, had taken more after her mother, Jarre's daughter, than his lethargic son-in-law.

'Grandfather Jarre! Grandmother Lucienne told me to tell you that that's enough for today of that layabout scribbling and that tea's on the table!'

Jarre meticulously assembled the written sheets and corked the inkwell. Pain throbbed in the stump of his arm. *The weather's changing*, he thought. *There'll be rain.*

‘Grandfather Jaaaaarre!’

‘I’m coming, Ciri. I’m coming.’

*

It was already well after midnight before they had dealt with the last casualties. They carried out the final operations by artificial light – first from an ordinary lamp and later using magic. Marti Sodergren recovered after the crisis she had undergone and, although as pale as death, stiff and as unnatural in her movements as a golem, used her magic competently and effectively.

The night was black when they exited the tent, and all four of them sat down, leaning against the canvas.

The plain was full of fires. Various fires – the stationary fires of camps and the moving flames of torches. The night resounded with distant song, chanting, shouts and cheers.

The night around them was also alive with the intermittent cries and groans of the wounded. The pleading and sighs of the dying. They didn’t hear it. They had become accustomed to the sounds of suffering and dying, and those sounds were ordinary, natural to them, as integrated into the night as the croaking of frogs in the marshes by the River Chotla or the singing of cicadas in the acacia trees by Golden Pond.

Marti Sodergren sat in lyrical silence resting on the halfling’s shoulder. Iola and Shani, indifferent, cuddling one another, snorted from time to time with completely nonsensical laughter.

Before they sat down against the tent they had each drunk a cup of vodka, and Marti had treated all of them with her last spell: a cheering charm, typically used when extracting teeth. Rusty felt cheated by this treatment – the drink, combined with the magic, instead of relaxing him had stupefied him; instead of reducing his exhaustion had increased it. Instead of giving oblivion, brought back memories.

It looks, he thought, *as though the alcohol and magic have only acted as they were meant to on Iola and Shani.*

He turned around and in the moonlight saw sparkling, silvery tracks of tears on the girls’ faces.

‘I wonder,’ he said, licking his numb, insensitive lips, ‘who won this battle. Does anybody know?’

Marti turned her face towards him, but remained silent. The cicadas were singing among the acacias, willows and alders by Golden Pond, and the frogs croaked. The wounded moaned, begged and sighed. And died. Shani and Iola giggled through their tears.

*

Marti Sodergren died two weeks after the battle. She began meeting an officer of the Free Company of Condottieri. She treated the affair light-heartedly. Unlike the officer. When Marti, who liked change, began fraternising with a Temerian cavalry captain, the condottiero – mad with jealousy – stabbed her with a knife. He was hanged for it, but it was impossible to save the healer.

Rusty and Iola died a year after the battle, in Maribor, during the largest outbreak yet of an epidemic of viral haemorrhagic fever, a disease also called the Red Death or – from the name of the ship it was brought on – Catriona’s Plague. All the physicians and most of the priests fled from Maribor then. Rusty and Iola remained, naturally. They treated the sick, because they were doctors. The fact that there was no cure for the Red Death was unimportant to them. They both became infected. He died in her arms, in the powerful, confidence-inspiring embrace of her large, ugly, peasant hands. She died four days later. Alone.

Shani died seventy-two years after the battle, as the celebrated and universally respected retired dean of the Department of Medicine at the University of Oxenfurt. Generations of future surgeons used to repeat her famous joke: ‘Sew red to red, yellow to yellow, white to white. It’s sure to be fine’.

Almost no one noticed how after delivering that witty anecdote the dean always wiped away a furtive tear.

Almost no one.

*

The frogs croaked and the cicadas sang among the willows by

Golden Pond. Shani and Iola giggled through their tears.

'I wonder,' repeated Milo Vanderbeck, halfling, field surgeon, known as Rusty. 'I wonder who won?'

'Rusty,' Marti Sodergren said lyrically. 'Believe me, in your shoes it's the last thing I'd be worrying about.'

Some of the flames were tall and strong, burning brightly and vividly, while others were tiny, flickering and quavering, and their light diminished and died. At the very end was but one tiny flame, so weak it barely flickered and glimmered, now struggling to flare up, now almost going out entirely.

'Whose is the dying flame?' asked the Witcher.

'Yours,' Death replied.

Flourens Delannoy, *Fairy Tales and Stories*

CHAPTER NINE

The plateau, extending almost all the way to the distant mountain peaks, greyish-blue in the fog, was like an actual stone sea, here undulating in a hump or a ridge, there bristling with the sharp fangs of reefs. The impression was enhanced by shipwrecks. Dozens of wrecks. Of galleys, galeases, cogs, caravels, brigs, holks and longships. Some of them looked as though they had ended up there not long before, others were piles of barely recognisable planks and ribs, clearly having lain there for decades – if not centuries.

Some of the ships were lying keel up, others, turned over on their sides, looked as though they had been tossed up by devilish squalls and storms. Still others gave the impression they were sailing, making away, amidst that stone ocean. They stood even and straight, the chests of their figureheads proudly stuck out, their masts pointing to the zenith, the remains of sails, shrouds and stays fluttering. They even had their own ghostly crews – skeletons jammed between rotten planks and entangled in ropes, dead sailors, busy forever with endless navigation.

Flocks of black birds flew up, cawing, from the masts, yards, ropes and skeletons alarmed by the appearance of the rider, frightened by the clack of hooves. For a moment they flecked the sky, circled in a flock over the edge of the cliff, at the bottom of which lay a lake, as grey and smooth as quicksilver. On the edge could be seen a dark and gloomy stronghold, whose towers partly overlooked the graveyard of ships, and were partly suspended over the lake, with its bastions embedded in the vertical rock. Kelpie danced, snorted, and pricked up her ears, alarmed by the wrecks, the skeletons, at the whole landscape of death. At the cawing black birds, which had already returned, alighting again on the broken masts and crosstrees, on the shrouds and skulls. But if anyone ought to have been afraid there, it was the rider.

‘Easy, Kelpie,’ said Ciri in a changed voice. ‘It’s the end of the road. This is the right place and the right time.’

*

She found herself outside a gate, God knows how, and emerged like an apparition from between the wrecks. The guards at the foot of the gate noticed her first, alarmed by the cawing of rooks, and now shouted, gesticulating and pointing at her, calling others.

When she rode to the gatehouse, there was already a crush there. An excited hubbub. They were all staring at her. The few who knew her and had seen her before, like Boreas Mun and Dacre Silifant, and the considerably more numerous of them who had only heard about her: newly recruited soldiers from Skellen, mercenaries, and ordinary marauders from Ebbing and the surroundings, who were now looking in amazement at the ashen-haired girl with the scar on her face and the sword on her back. At the splendid black mare, holding her head high, and snorting, her horseshoes ringing on the flagstones of the courtyard.

The hubbub died down. It became very quiet. The mare trotted, lifting her legs like a ballerina, her horseshoes ringing like a hammer on an anvil. This went on for a long time before her way was finally barred by crossed gisarmes and ranseurs. Someone reached out a hesitant and frightened hand towards the bridle. The mare snorted.

'Take me to the lord of this castle,' the girl said confidently.

Boreas Mun, not knowing himself why he was doing it, held her stirrup steady and offered his hand. Others held the stamping and snorting mare.

'Do you recognise me, my lady?' Boreas asked softly. 'For we've already met.'

'Where?'

'On the ice.'

She looked him straight in the eye.

'I didn't look at your face then, sir,' she said unemotionally.

'You were the Lady of the Lake,' he nodded seriously. 'Why have you come here, girl? What for?'

'For Yennefer. And to claim my destiny.'

'Claim your death, more like,' he whispered. 'This is Stygga Castle. In your place I'd flee as far from here as you can.'

She looked again. And Boreas at once understood what she meant to say with that look.

Stefan Skellen appeared. He watched the girl for a long time, his arms crossed on his chest. Finally, he indicated with an energetic gesture that she was to follow him. She went without a word, escorted on all sides by armed men.

‘A strange wench,’ muttered Boreas. And shuddered.

‘Fortunately, she isn’t our concern now,’ said Dacre Silifant. ‘And I’m surprised at you for talking to her like that. It was she, the witch, who killed Vargas and Fripp, and later Ola Harsheim—’

‘Tawny Owl killed Harsheim,’ Boreas cut him off. ‘Not she. She spared our lives, there on the pack ice, though she could have slaughtered and drowned us like pups. All of us. Tawny Owl too.’

‘Very well.’ Dacre spat on the flags of the courtyard. ‘He’ll reward her for that mercy, together with the sorcerer and Bonhart. You’ll see, Mun, now they’ll gut her ceremonially. They’ll flay her in thin strips.’

‘I’m inclined to believe they’ll flay her,’ snapped Boreas. ‘Because they’re butchers. And we ain’t no better, since we serve under them.’

‘And do we have a choice? We don’t.’

One of Skellen’s mercenaries suddenly cried softly, and another followed suit. One man swore, another gasped. Someone pointed silently.

As far as the eye could see black birds were sitting on the battlements, on the corbels, on the roofs of the towers, on the cornices, on the window sills and gables, on the gutters, and on the gargoyles and mascarons. They had flown from the ships’ graveyard, noiselessly, without cawing, and now they were sitting in silence, waiting.

‘They scent death,’ mumbled one of the mercenaries.

‘And carrion,’ added a second.

‘We don’t have a choice,’ Silifant repeated mechanically, looking at Boreas. Boreas Mun looked at the birds.

‘Perhaps it’s time we did?’ he replied softly.

*

They climbed a great staircase with three landings, walked along a long corridor between an avenue of statues set in niches, and passed through a cloister surrounding a vestibule. Ciri walked boldly, feeling no anxiety; neither the weapons nor her escort's murderous visages caused her fear. She had lied saying she couldn't remember the faces of the men from the frozen lake. She did remember. She remembered seeing Stefan Skellen – the same man now leading her with a gloomy expression deeper into that huge, awful castle – as he shook, teeth chattering, on the ice.

Now, as he looked around and glared at her from time to time, she sensed he was still a little afraid of her. She breathed more deeply.

They entered a hall beneath a high star vault supported on columns, beneath great spidery chandeliers. Ciri saw who was waiting there for her. Fear dug its claw-like fingers into her guts, clenched its fist, tugged and twisted.

Bonhart was by her in three strides. He grabbed her by the front of her jerkin, lifted her up and pulled her towards him at the same time, bringing her face closer to his pale, fishy eyes.

'Hell must indeed be dreadful,' he roared, 'if you've chosen me.'

She didn't reply. She could smell alcohol on his breath.

'And maybe hell didn't want you, you little beast? Perhaps that devilish tower spat you out in disgust, after tasting your venom?'

He drew her closer. She turned aside and drew back her face.

'You're right,' he said softly. 'You're right to be afraid. It's the end of your road. You won't escape from here. Here, in this castle, I'll bleed you dry.'

'Have you finished, Mr Bonhart?'

She knew at once who had spoken. The sorcerer Vilgefortz, who first of all had been a prisoner in manacles, and afterwards pursued her in the Tower of the Gull. He had been very handsome then, on the island. Now something in his face had changed, something that made it ugly and fearful.

'Mr Bonhart—' the sorcerer didn't even move on his throne-like armchair '—let me assume the pleasant duty of welcoming to Stygga Castle our guest, Miss Cirilla of Cintra, the daughter of

Pavetta, the granddaughter of Calanthe, the descendant of the famous Lara Dorren aep Shiadhal. Greetings. Please come closer.'

The derision hidden beneath the mask of civility slipped out from the sorcerer's last words. There was nothing but a threat and an order in them. Ciri felt at once that she would be unable to resist that order. She felt fear. Ghastly fear.

'Closer,' hissed Vilgefortz. Now she noticed what was wrong with his face. His left eye, considerably smaller than his right, blinked, flickered and spun around like a mad thing in the wrinkled, grey-blue eye socket. The sight was gruesome.

'A brave pose, a trace of fear in the face,' said the sorcerer, tilting his head. 'My acknowledgements. Assuming your courage doesn't result from stupidity. I shall dispel any possible fantasies at once. You will not escape from here, as Mr Bonhart correctly observed. Neither by teleportation, nor with the help of your own special abilities.'

She knew he was right. Previously, she had persuaded herself that if it came to it she would always – even at the last moment – be able to flee and hide amidst times and places. Now she knew that was an illusory hope, a fantasy. The castle positively vibrated with strange, evil, hostile magic, and that magic was pervading, penetrating her. It crawled like a parasite over her innards, repulsively slithering over her brain. She could do nothing about it. She was in her enemy's power. Helpless.

Too bad, she thought, *I knew what I was doing. I knew what I was coming here for. The rest was really just fantasy. May what has to happen, happen.*

'Well done,' said Vilgefortz. 'An accurate assessment of the situation. What must happen, *will* happen. Or more precisely: what I decide will happen, will happen. I wonder if you're also guessing, my splendid one, what I shall decide?'

She was about to answer, but before she could overcome the resistance of her tight, dry throat, he anticipated her by reading her thoughts.

'Of course you know. Master of Worlds. Master of Times and Places. Yes, yes, my splendid one, your visit didn't surprise me. Quite simply, I know where you escaped to from the lake and how you did it. I know how you got here. The one thing I don't know is: was it a long way? And did it provide you with many thrills?

‘Oh,’ he smiled nastily, anticipating her once again. ‘You don’t have to reply. I know it was interesting and exciting. You see, I can’t wait to try it myself. I’m very envious of your talent. You’ll have to share it with me, my splendid one. Yes, “have to” are the right words. Until you share your talent with me I simply won’t let you out of my hands. I won’t let you out of my hands, neither by day nor by night.’

Ciri finally understood it wasn’t only fear squeezing her throat. The sorcerer was gagging and choking her magically. He was mocking her. Humiliating her. In front of everyone.

‘Let . . . Yennefer go.’ She coughed so hard she arched her back with the effort. ‘Let her go . . . And you can do what you want with me.’

Bonhart roared with laughter, and Stefan Skellen also laughed dryly. Vilgefortz poked the corner of his gruesome eye with his little finger.

‘You can’t be so slow-witted not to know that I can do what I want with you in any case. Your offer is pompous, and thus pathetic and ridiculous.’

‘You need me . . .’ She raised her head, although it cost her an enormous amount of strength. ‘To have a child with me. Everybody wants that, you too. Yes, I’m in your power, I came here by myself . . . You didn’t catch me, although you pursued me through half the world. I came here by myself and I’m giving myself up to you. For Yennefer. For her life. Is it so ridiculous to you? So try using violence and force with me . . . You’ll see, you’ll be over your desire to laugh in no time.’

Bonhart leaped at her and swung his scourge. Vilgefortz made an apparently careless gesture, just a slight movement of the hand, but even that was enough for the whip to fly from the hunter’s hand, and he staggered as though hit by a coal wagon.

‘I see Mr Bonhart still has difficulty understanding the responsibilities of a guest,’ said Vilgefortz, massaging his fingers. ‘Try to remember: when one is a guest, one doesn’t destroy the furniture or works of art, nor steal small objects, nor does one soil the carpets or inaccessible places. One doesn’t rape or beat other guests. The latter two not, at least, until the host has finished raping and beating, not until he gives the sign that one may now rape and beat. You too, Ciri, ought to be able to draw the appropriate conclusions from what I’ve said. You can’t? I’ll help you. You

surrender yourself to me and humbly agree to everything, allow me to do anything I want with you. You think your offer highly generous. You're mistaken. For the matter is that I shall do with you what I have to do, not what I'd like to do. An example: I'd like to gouge out at least one of your eyes as revenge for Thanedd, but I can't, because I'm afraid you wouldn't survive it.'

Ciri knew it was now or never. She spun around in a half-turn, and jerked Swallow from the scabbard. The entire castle suddenly whirled and she felt herself falling, painfully banging her knees. She bent over, her forehead almost touching the floor, fighting the urge to vomit. The sword slipped from her numb fingers. Someone lifted her up.

'Yeees,' Vilgefortz drawled, resting his chin on hands held together as if in prayer. 'Where was I? Ah, yes, that's right, your offer. Yennefer's life and freedom in exchange . . . For what?' For your voluntary surrender, willingly, without violence or compulsion? I'm sorry, Ciri. Violence and compulsion are simply essential to what I shall do to you.

'Yes, yes,' he repeated, watching with interest as the girl wheezed, spat and tried to vomit. 'It simply won't happen without violence or compulsion. You would never agree voluntarily to what I shall do to you, I assure you. So, as you must see, your offer, still pathetic and ridiculous, is furthermore worthless. So I reject it. Go on, take her. To the laboratory! At once.'

*

The laboratory didn't differ much from the one Ciri knew from the Temple of Melitele in Ellander. It was also brightly lit, clean, with long metal-topped tables, laden with glass, large jars, retorts, flasks, test tubes, pipes, lenses, hissing and bubbling alembics and other strange apparatus. Here also, as in Ellander, it smelled strongly of ether, alcohol, formalin and something else, something that triggered fear. Even in the friendly temple, beside the friendly priestesses and a friendly Yennefer, Ciri had felt fear in the laboratory. And after all, in Ellander no one had dragged her to the laboratory by force, no one had brutally shoved her onto a bench, and no one had held her shoulders and arms in an iron grip. In Ellander there hadn't been a dreadful steel chair whose purpose was quite sadistically obvious. There had been no shaven-headed

characters dressed in white in the middle of the laboratory, no Bonhart, and no Skellen, excited, flushed and licking his lips. And neither was there Vilgefortz, with one normal eye and the other tiny and twitching hideously.

Vilgefortz turned around from the table, where he had spent a long time arranging some sinister-looking instruments.

'Do you see, my splendid maiden,' he began, walking towards her, 'that you are the key to mastery and power? Not only over this world, a vanity of vanities, doomed in any case to early extinction, but over all worlds. Over the whole compass of places and times which have arisen since the Conjunction. You certainly understand me; you have already visited some of those places and times.

'I'm ashamed to admit it,' he continued a moment later, rolling up his sleeves, 'but I'm terribly attracted by power. It's crude, I know, but I want to be a ruler. A ruler before whom people will bow down, whom people will bless simply because I let them be, and whom they will worship as a god, if, let's say, I decide to save their world from a cataclysm. Even if I only save it on a whim. Oh, Ciri, my heart is gladdened by the thought of how magnanimously I shall reward the faithful, and how cruelly I shall punish the disobedient and arrogant. The prayers that shall be offered up by whole generations to me and for me; for my love and my mercy will be balm and honey to my soul. Whole generations, Ciri, whole worlds. Listen out. Do you hear? Deliver us from the plague, hunger, war and wrath of Vilgefortz . . .'

He moved his fingers just in front of her face, then violently seized her by the cheeks. Ciri screamed and struggled, but she was held firmly. Her lips began to tremble. Vilgefortz saw it and sniggered.

'The Child of Destiny,' he laughed nervously, and white flecks of foam appeared at the corners of his mouth. 'Aen Hen Ichaer, the sacred elven Elder Blood . . . Now all mine.'

He straightened up abruptly. And wiped his mouth.

'Various fools and mystics,' he now announced in his usually cold tone, 'have tried to adapt you to fairy tales, legends and prophecies; have tracked the genes you carry, your inheritance from your ancestors. Mistaking the sky for stars reflected in the surface of a pond, they mystically supposed that a gene determining great potential would continue to evolve, that it would achieve the height of power in your child or the child of your child. And a charming

aura grew around you, incense smoke trailed behind you. But the truth is much more banal, much more mundane. Organically mundane, I'd say. Your blood, my splendid one, is important. But in the absolutely literal, quite unpoetic sense of the word.'

He picked up from the table a glass syringe measuring about six inches. The syringe ended in a thin, slightly curved capillary. Ciri felt her mouth go dry. The sorcerer examined the syringe under the light.

'In a moment,' he declared coldly, 'you will be undressed and placed on this chair, precisely this one, which you're contemplating with such curiosity. You'll spend some time in the chair, albeit in an uncomfortable position. With the help of this device, which also, as I see, is fascinating you, you will be impregnated. It won't be so awful, for almost the whole time you'll be befuddled by elixirs, which I shall give you intravenously, with the aim of implanting the foetal ovum properly and ruling out an ectopic pregnancy. You needn't be afraid, I'm skilled; I've done this hundreds of times. Never, admittedly, to a chosen one of fate and destiny, but I don't think the uteruses and ovaries of chosen ones differ so much from those of ordinary maids.

'And now the most important thing.' Vilgefortz savoured what he was saying. 'It may worry you, or it may gratify you, but know that you won't give birth to the infant. Who knows, perhaps it would also have been a great chosen one with extraordinary abilities, the saviour of the world and the king of nations? No one, however, is able to guarantee that, and I, furthermore, have no intention of waiting that long. I need blood. More precisely, placental blood. As soon as the placenta develops I shall remove it from you. The rest of my plans and intentions, my splendid one, will not, as you now comprehend, concern you, so there's no point informing you about them, it would only be an unnecessary frustration.'

He fell silent, leaving a masterly pause. Ciri couldn't control her trembling mouth.

'And now,' the sorcerer nodded theatrically, 'I invite you to the chair, Miss Cirilla.'

'It would be worth having that bitch Yennefer watching this.' Bonhart's teeth flashed beneath his grey moustaches. 'She deserves it!'

'Indeed she does.' Small white balls of froth appeared again in

the corners of Vilgefortz's smiling mouth. 'Impregnation is, after all, a sacred thing, solemn and ceremonial, a mystery at which one's entire close family should assist. And Yennefer is, after all, your quasi-mother, and in primitive cultures the mother virtually takes an active part in her daughter's consummation ceremony. Go on, bring her here!'

'But regarding that impregnation . . .' Bonhart bent over Ciri, whom the sorcerer's shaven-headed acolytes had begun to undress. 'Couldn't one, Lord Vilgefortz, do it more normally? As nature intended?'

Skellen snorted, nodding his head. Vilgefortz frowned slightly.

'No,' he responded coolly. 'No, Mr Bonhart. One couldn't.'

Ciri, as though only now realising the gravity of the situation, uttered an ear-splitting scream. Once, and then a second time.

'Well, well.' The sorcerer grimaced. 'We entered the lion's den, bravely, with head and sword held high, and now we're afraid of a small glass tube? For shame, young lady.'

Ciri, not caring about shame, screamed so loudly the laboratory vessels jingled.

And the whole of Stygga Castle suddenly responded with yelling and commotion.

*

'There'll be trouble, boys,' repeated Zadarlik, scraping dried dung from between the stones of the courtyard with the metal-tipped butt of his ranseur. 'Oh, you'll see, there'll be trouble for us poor wretches.'

He looked at his comrades, but none of the guards commented. Neither did Boreas Mun speak. He had remained with the guards at the gate, from choice, not because of orders. He could have, like Silifant, followed Tawny Owl, could have seen with his own eyes what would happen to the Lady of the Lake, what fate she would suffer. But Boreas didn't want to watch it. He preferred to stay here, in the courtyard, beneath the open sky, far from the chambers and halls of the upper castle, where they had taken the girl. He was certain that not even her screams would reach here.

‘Those black birds are a bad sign.’ Zadarlik nodded at the rooks, still sitting on the walls and cornices. ‘That young wench who came here on a black mare is an evil omen. We’re serving Tawny Owl in an evil matter, I tell you. They’re saying, in truth, that Tawny Owl himself isn’t a coroner or important gentleman now, but an outlaw like us. That the emperor has it in cruelly for him. If he seizes us all, boys, there’ll be trouble for us poor wretches.’

‘Aye, aye!’ added another guard, with long moustaches, wearing a hat decorated with black stork feathers. ‘The noose is at hand! It’s no good when the emperor’s angry—’

‘Blow that,’ interjected a third, a new arrival to Stygga Castle with the last party of mercenaries recruited by Skellen. ‘The emperor might not have enough time for us. They say he has other concerns. They say there was a decisive battle somewhere in the north. The Nordlings beat the imperial forces, thrashed them soundly.’

‘In that case,’ said a fourth, ‘perhaps it isn’t so bad that we’re here with Tawny Owl? Always better to be with the victors.’

‘Certainly it’s better,’ said the new one. ‘Tawny Owl, it seems to me, will go far. And we’ll go far with him too.’

‘Oh, boys.’ Zadarlik leaned on his ranseur. ‘You’re as thick as pig shit.’

The black birds took flight with a deafening flapping and cawing. They darkened the sky, wheeling in a flock around the bastion.

‘What the fuck?’ groaned one of the guards.

‘Open the gate, please.’

Boreas Mun suddenly detected a powerful smell of herbs: sage, mint and thyme. He swallowed and shook his head. He closed and opened his eyes. It didn’t help. The thin, grey-haired elderly man resembling a tax collector who had suddenly appeared beside them had no intention of vanishing. He stood and smiled through pursed lips. Boreas’s hair almost lifted his hat up.

‘Open the gate, please,’ repeated the smiling elderly gentleman. ‘Without delay. It really will be better if you do.’

Zadarlik dropped his ranseur with a clank, stood stiffly and moved his mouth noiselessly. His eyes were empty. The remaining

men went closer to the gate, striding stiffly and unnaturally, like automatons. They took down the bar. And opened the hasp and staple.

Four riders burst into the courtyard with a thudding of horseshoes.

One had hair as white as snow, and the sword in his hand flashed like lightning. Another was a fair-haired woman, bending a bow as she rode. The third rider, quite a young woman, carved open Zadarlik's temple with a sweeping blow of a curved sabre.

Boreas Mun picked up the ranseur and shielded himself with the shaft. The fourth rider suddenly towered over him. There were wings of a bird of prey attached to both sides of his helmet. His upraised sword shone.

'Leave him, Cahir,' said the white-haired man sharply. 'Let's save time and blood. Milva, Regis, that way . . .'

'No,' mumbled Boreas, not knowing himself why he was doing it. 'Not that way . . . That's only a dead end. Your way is there, up that staircase . . . To the upper castle. If you wish to rescue the Lady of the Lake . . . then you must hurry.'

'My thanks,' said the white-haired man. 'Thank you, stranger. Regis, did you hear? Lead on!'

A moment later only corpses remained in the courtyard. And Boreas Mun, still leaning on the pikestaff. Which he couldn't release, because his legs were shaking so much.

The rooks circled, cawing, over Stygga Castle, covering the towers and bastions in a shroud-like cloud.

*

Vilgefortz listened with stoical calm and an inscrutable expression to the breathless report of the mercenary who had come running. But his restless and blinking eye betrayed him.

'Last ditch reinforcements.' He ground his teeth. 'Unbelievable. Things like that don't happen. Or they do, but only in crummy, vulgar pageants, and it comes to the same thing. Do me the pleasure, good fellow, of telling me you've made it all up for, shall we say, a lark.'

‘I’m not making it up!’ the hireling said in indignation. ‘I’m speaking the truth! Some horsemen have burst in . . . A whole *hassa* of them—’

‘Very well, very well,’ the sorcerer interrupted. ‘I was joking. Skellen, deal with this matter personally. It will be a chance to demonstrate how much your army, hired with my gold, is worth.’

Tawny Owl leaped up, nervously waving his arms.

‘Aren’t you treating this too lightly, Vilgefortz?’ he yelled. ‘You, it seems, don’t realise the gravity of the situation! If the castle is being attacked, it’s by Emhyr’s army! And that means—’

‘It doesn’t mean anything,’ the sorcerer cut him off. ‘But I know what you have in mind. Very well, if the fact that you have me behind you will improve your morale, have it as you will. Let’s go. You too, Mr Bonhart.’

‘As far as you’re concerned—’ he fixed his terrible eye on Ciri ‘—don’t have any false hopes. I know who’s turned up here with these pathetic reinforcements worthy of a cheap farce. And I assure you, I shall turn this cheap farce into a nightmare.

‘Hey, you!’ he nodded at the servants and acolytes. ‘Shackle the girl in dimeritium, lock and bolt her in a cell, and don’t move an inch from the door. You’ll answer with your lives for her. Understood?’

‘Yes, sire.’

*

They rushed into the corridor, and from the corridor into a large hall full of sculptures; a veritable glyptothek. No one barred their way. They only saw a few lackeys who immediately fled on seeing them.

They ran up some stairs. Cahir kicked a door open, Angoulême rushed inside with a battle cry and with a blow of her sabre knocked off the helmet of a suit of armour she took for a guard standing by the door. She realised her mistake and roared with laughter.

‘Hee, hee, hee! Look at that . . .’

‘Angoulême!’ Geralt took her to task. ‘Don’t just stand there!

Go on!'

A door opened in front of them. Shapes loomed in the doorway. Milva bent her bow and sent off an arrow without a second thought. Somebody screamed. The door was closed, Geralt heard a bolt thudding.

'Go on, go on!' he shouted. 'Don't just stand there!'

'Witcher,' said Regis. 'This running is senseless. I'll go off . . . I'll fly off and do some reconnaissance.'

'Fly.'

The vampire took off as though blown by the wind. Geralt had no time to be surprised.

Again they chanced upon some men, this time armed. Cahir and Angoulême jumped towards them with a yell, and the men bolted, mainly, it seemed, because of Cahir and his impressive winged helmet.

They dashed into the cloister, and the gallery surrounding the inner vestibule. Around twenty paces separated them from the portico leading into the castle when shapes appeared on the other side of the cloister. Loud shouts echoed out. And arrows whistled.

'Take cover!' the Witcher yelled.

Arrows rained down on them. Fletchings fluttered and arrowheads sent up sparks from the floor, chipping the mouldings from the walls and showering them in fine dust.

'Get down! Behind the balustrade!'

They dropped down, hiding pell-mell behind spiral columns carved with leaves. But they didn't get away with it entirely. The Witcher heard Angoulême cry out, and saw as she grabbed her arm, her sleeve, which immediately became blood-soaked.

'Angoulême!'

'It's nothing! It passed through muscle!' the girl shouted back in only a slightly trembling voice, confirming what he had seen. Had the arrowhead shattered the bone, Angoulême would have fainted from the shock.

The archers were shooting from the gallery without let-up and were shouting out, calling for reinforcements. Several of them ran off to the side, to fire at the pinned-down party from an acute angle. Geralt swore, assessing the distance separating them from the

arcade. Things looked bad. But to stay where they were meant death.

‘Let’s make a run for it!’ he yelled. ‘Ready! Cahir, help Angoulême!’

‘They’ll slaughter us!’

‘Run for it! We have to!’

‘No!’ screamed Milva, standing up with bow in hand.

She straightened up, assumed a shooting position; a veritable statue, a marble Amazon with a bow. The marksmen on the gallery yelled.

Milva lowered her head.

One of the archers flew backwards, slamming against the wall, and a bloody splash resembling a huge octopus bloomed on the stone. A cry resounded from the gallery, a roar of anger, fury and horror.

‘By the Great Sun . . .’ groaned Cahir. Geralt squeezed his shoulder.

‘Let’s make a run for it! Help Angoulême!’

The marksmen on the gallery directed all their fire at Milva. The archer didn’t even twitch, although all around her it was dusty with plaster, chips of marble and splinters of shattering shafts. She calmly released the bowstring. Another yell, and another archer tumbled over like a ragdoll, splashing his companions with blood and brains.

‘Now!’ yelled Geralt, seeing the guards fleeing from the gallery, dropping to the floor, hiding from the deadly arrowheads. Only the three bravest were still shooting.

An arrowhead thudded against a pillar, showering Milva in a cloud of plaster dust. The archer blew on her hair, which was falling over her face, and bent her bow.

‘Milva!’ Geralt, Angoulême and Cahir had reached the arcade. ‘Leave it! Run!’

‘One more little shot,’ said the archer with the fletching of an arrow in the corner of her mouth.

The bowstring slapped. One of the three brave men howled, leaned over the balustrade and plummeted downwards onto the

flags of the courtyard. At the sight, courage immediately deserted the others. They fell to the floor and pressed themselves against it. Those who had arrived were in no hurry to come out onto the gallery and expose themselves to Milva's shooting.

With one exception.

Milva measured him up at once. Short, slim, swarthy. With a bracer on his left forearm rubbed to a shine and an archer's glove on his right hand. She saw him lift a shapely composite bow with a profiled, carved riser, saw him tauten it smoothly. She saw the bowstring – tightened to its full draw – cross his swarthy face, saw the red-feathered fletching touch his cheek. She saw him aim carefully.

She tossed her bow up, tightened it smoothly, already aiming as she did so. The bowstring touched her face, the feather of the fletching the corner of her mouth.

*

'Harder, harder, Marishka. All the way to your cheek. Twist the bowstring with your fingers, so the arrow doesn't fall from the rest. Hand tight against your cheek. Aim! Both eyes open! Now hold your breath. Shoot!'

The bowstring, in spite of the woollen bracer, stung her left forearm painfully.

Her father was about to speak when he was seized by a coughing fit. A heavy, dry, painful coughing fit. *He's coughing worse and worse*, thought Marishka Barring, lowering her bow. *More and more horribly, and more and more often. He started coughing yesterday as he was aiming at a buck. And for dinner there was only boiled pigweed. I can't stand boiled pigweed. I hate hunger. And poverty.*

Old Barring sucked in air, wheezing gratingly.

'Your arrow passed a span from the bull's eye, lass! A whole span! And I've told you, ain't I, not to twitch when you're letting the bowstring go? And you're hopping about like a slug's crawled into your arse crack. And you take too long aiming. You're shooting with a weary arm! That's how you waste arrows!'

'But I hit the target! And not a span at all, but half a span from the bull's eye.'

‘Don’t talk back! How the Gods punished me by sending me a clod of a lass instead of a son!’

‘I ain’t a clod!’

‘We’ll soon find out. Shoot one more time. And mark what I told you. You’re to stand like you were sunk into the ground. Aim and shoot swiftly. Why are you making faces?’

‘Because you’re badmouthing me.’

‘It’s my fatherly right. Shoot.’

She drew back the bow, sullen and close to tears. He noticed.

‘I love you, Marishka,’ he said softly. ‘Always mind that.’

She released the bowstring when the fletching had barely touched the corner of her mouth.

‘Well done,’ said her father. ‘Well done, lass’

And coughed horribly, wheezingly.

*

The swarthy archer from the gallery died outright. Milva’s arrow struck him below his left armpit and penetrated deep, more than halfway up the shaft, shattering his ribs, pulverising his lungs and heart.

The swarthy archer’s red-feathered arrow, released a split second, earlier, struck Milva low in the belly and exited at the back, having shattered her pelvis and pulverised her intestines and arteries.

The archer fell to the floor as though rammed.

Geralt and Cahir shouted with one voice. Heedless that at the sight of Milva’s collapse the marksmen from the gallery had once again picked up their bows, they jumped out from the portico protecting them, grabbed the archer and dragged her back, scornful of the hail of arrows. One of the arrowheads rang against Cahir’s helmet. Another, Geralt would have sworn, parted his hair.

Milva left behind her a broad and glistening trail of blood. In the blink of an eye a huge pool had appeared in the place they laid her down. Cahir cursed, his hands shaking. Geralt felt despair

overcoming him. And fury.

‘Auntie,’ howled Angoulême. ‘Auntie, don’t diiiiiieeeee!’

Maria Barring opened her mouth, coughed horrifyingly, spitting blood onto her chin.

‘I love you too, Papa,’ she said quite distinctly.

And died.

*

The shaven-headed acolytes couldn’t cope with the struggling and yelling Ciri, and lackeys rushed to help them. One, kicked between the legs, leaped back, bent over double, and fell to his knees, grabbing his crotch and gasping spasmodically for air.

But that only infuriated the others. Ciri was punched in the neck and slapped in the face. They knocked her over, someone kicked her hard in the hip and someone else sat down on her shins. One of the bald acolytes, a young character with evil green and gold eyes, kneeled on her chest, dug his fingers into her hair and tugged it hard. Ciri howled.

The acolyte also howled. And goggled. Ciri saw streams of blood gushing from his shaven head, staining his white laboratory coat with a macabre design.

The next second, hell broke loose in the laboratory.

Overturned furniture banged. The high-pitched cracking and crunching of breaking glass merged with the hellish moaning of people. The decocts, philtres, elixirs, extracts and other magical substances spilling over the tables and floor mixed up and combined, some of them hissing on contact and belching clouds of yellow smoke. The room was instantly filled with a pungent stench.

Amidst the smoke, through tears brought on by the smell of burning, Ciri saw to her horror a black shape resembling an enormous bat dashing around the laboratory at an incredible speed. She saw the bat in flight slashing the men and saw them falling over screaming. In front of her eyes a lackey trying hard to flee was picked up from the floor and flung onto a table, where he thrashed around, splashed blood, and finally croaked among smashed retorts, alembics, test tubes and flasks.

The mixture of spilled liquids splashed onto a lamp. It hissed, stinking, and flames suddenly exploded in the laboratory. A wave of heat dispersed the smoke. She clenched her teeth so as not to scream.

A slender, grey-haired man dressed elegantly in black was sitting on the steel chair meant for her. The man was calmly biting and sucking on the neck of the shaven-headed acolyte slumped over his knee. The acolyte squealed shrilly and twitched convulsively, his extended legs and arms jerking rhythmically.

Corpse-blue flames were dancing on the metal table-top. Retorts and flasks exploded with a thud, one after another.

The vampire tore his pointed fangs from his victim's neck and fixed his agate-black eyes on Ciri.

'There are occasions,' he said in an explanatory tone, licking blood from his lips, 'when it's simply impossible not to have a drink.

'Don't fear,' he smiled, seeing her expression. 'Don't fear, Ciri. I'm glad I found you. My name's Emiel Regis. I am, although it may seem strange to you, a comrade of the Witcher Geralt. I came here with him to rescue you.'

An armed mercenary rushed into the blazing laboratory. Geralt's comrade turned his head towards him, hissed and bared his fangs. The mercenary howled horrifyingly. The howling went on for a long time before it faded into the distance.

Emiel Regis threw the acolyte's body, motionless and soft as a rag, from his knee, stood up and stretched just like a cat.

'Who'd have thought it?' he said. 'Just some runt, and what good blood inside him! What hidden talents! Come with me, Cirilla, I'll take you to Geralt.'

'No,' mumbled Ciri.

'You don't have to be afraid of me.'

'I'm not,' she protested, bravely fighting with her teeth which insisted on chattering. 'That's not what it's about . . . But Yennefer is imprisoned here somewhere. I have to free her as quickly as possible. I'm afraid that Vilgefortz . . . Mr . . .'

'Emiel Regis.'

'Warn Geralt, good sir, that Vilgefortz is here. He's a sorcerer.

A powerful sorcerer. Geralt has to be on his guard.'

*

'You're to be on your guard,' repeated Regis, looking at Milva's body. 'Because Vilgefortz is a powerful mage. Meanwhile, she's setting Yennefer free.'

Geralt swore.

'Come on!' he yelled, trying to revive the low spirits of his companions with a shout. 'Let's go!'

'Let's go.' Angoulême stood up and wipe away her tears. 'Let's go! It's time to kick a few fucking arses!'

'I feel such strength inside me I could probably lay waste to this entire castle,' hissed the vampire, smiling gruesomely.

The Witcher glanced at him suspiciously.

'Don't go that far,' he said, 'But force your way through to the upper floor and make a bit of a racket to draw their attention away from me. I'll try to find Ciri. It wasn't good, it wasn't good, vampire, that you left her alone.'

'She demanded it,' Regis explained calmly. 'Using a tone and attitude that ruled out any discussion. She astonished me, I admit.'

'I know. Go to the upper floor. Look after yourselves! I'll try to find her. Her, or Yennefer.'

*

He found her, and quite quickly.

He ran into them all of a sudden, completely unexpectedly coming around a bend in a corridor. He saw. And the sight made the adrenaline prick the veins on the backs of his hands.

Several lackeys were dragging Yennefer along the corridor. The sorceress was dishevelled and shackled in chains, which didn't stop her kicking and struggling and swearing like a trooper.

Geralt didn't let the lackeys get over their astonishment. He only struck once, with one short thrust from the elbow. The man

howled like a dog, staggered, smashed his head with a clank and a thud against a suit of plate armour standing in an alcove, and slid down it, smearing blood over the steel plates.

The remaining ones – there were three of them – released Yennefer and leaped aside. Apart from the fourth, who seized the sorceress by the hair and held a knife to her throat, just above her dimeritium collar.

'Don't come any closer!' he howled. 'I'll slit her throat! I'm not joking!'

'Neither am I.' Geralt swung his sword around and looked the thug in the eyes. That was enough for him. He released Yennefer and joined his companions. All of them were now holding weapons. One of them wrenched an antique but menacing-looking halberd from a panoply on the wall. All of them, crouching, were vacillating between attack and defence.

'I knew you'd come,' said Yennefer straightening up proudly. 'Geralt, show these scoundrels what a witcher's sword can do.'

She raised her cuffed hands high, tautening the links of the chain.

Geralt grasped his sihill in both hands, tilted his head slightly and aimed. And smote. So swiftly no one saw the movement of the blade.

The links fell onto the floor with a clank. One of the servants gasped. Geralt grasped the hilt more tightly and moved his index finger under the cross guard.

'Stand still, Yen. Head slightly to one side, please.'

The sorceress didn't even flinch. The sound of metal being struck by the sword was very faint.

The dimeritium collar fell down beside the manacles. Only a single, tiny drop appeared on Yennefer's neck.

She laughed, massaging her wrists. And turned towards the lackeys. None of them could endure her gaze.

The one with the halberd placed the antique weapon gingerly on the floor, as though afraid it would clank.

'Let Tawny Owl,' he mumbled, 'fight someone like that himself. My life is dear to me.'

'They ordered us,' muttered another, withdrawing. 'They

ordered us . . . We were captive . . .'

'After all, we weren't rude to you, madam . . . in your prison . . .' a third licked his lips. 'Testify to that . . .'

'Begone,' said Yennefer. Freed from the dimeritium manacles, erect, with her head proudly raised, she looked like a Titaness. Her unruly black mane seemed to reach up to the vault.

The lackeys fled. Furtively and without looking back. Having shrunk to her normal dimensions, Yennefer fell on Geralt's neck.

'I knew you'd come for me,' she murmured, searching for his mouth with hers. 'That you'd come, whatever might happen.'

'Let's go,' he said after a moment, gasping for air. 'Now for Ciri.'

'Ciri,' she said. And a second later a menacing violet glow lit up in her eyes.

'And Vilgefortz.'

*

A man with a crossbow came around the corner, yelled and shot, aiming at the sorceress. Geralt leaped as though propelled by a spring, brandished his sword and the deflected bolt flew right over the crossbowman's head, so close he had to crouch. He didn't manage to straighten up, though, for the Witcher leaped forward and filleted him like a carp. Two more were still standing in the corridor, also holding crossbows. They also fired, but their hands were shaking too much to find the target. The next moment the Witcher was upon them and they were both dead.

'Which way, Yen?'

The sorceress focused, closing her eyes.

'That way. Up those stairs.'

'Are you sure it's the right way?'

'Yes.'

They were attacked by thugs just around the bend in the corridor, not far from a portal decorated with an archivolt. There were more than ten of them, and they were armed with spears,

partizans and corseques. They were even determined and fierce. In spite of that it didn't take long. Yennefer stabbed one of them in the centre of the chest at once with a fiery arrowhead shot from her hand. Geralt whirled in a pirouette and fell among the others, the dwarven sihill flashing and hissing like a snake. Once four had fallen the rest fled, the corridors echoing with their clanking and stamping.

'Everything in order, Yen?'

'Couldn't be better.'

Vilgefortz stood beneath the archivolt.

'I'm impressed,' he said calmly and resonantly. 'I really am impressed, Witcher. You're naive and hopelessly stupid, but your technique is impressive.'

'Your brigands,' Yennefer replied just as calmly, 'have just beaten a retreat, leaving you at our mercy. Hand Ciri over, and we'll spare your life.'

'Do you know, Yennefer, that that's the second such generous offer I've had today?' the sorcerer grinned. 'Thank you, thank you. And here's my answer.'

'Look out!' yelled Yennefer, jumping aside. Geralt also leaped aside. Just in time. The column of fire shooting from the sorcerer's outstretched hands transformed the place they had been standing a moment earlier into black and fizzing mud. The Witcher wiped soot and the remains of his eyebrows off his face. He saw Vilgefortz extend a hand. He dived aside and flattened himself against the floor behind the base of a column. There was a boom so loud it hurt their ears, and the whole castle was shaken to its foundations.

*

Booming echoed through the castle, the walls trembled and the chandeliers jingled. A large oil portrait in a gilded frame fell with a great clatter.

The mercenaries who ran up from the vestibule had abject fear in their eyes. Stefan Skellen calmed them with a menacing look, and took them to task with his grim expression and voice.

'What's going on there? Talk!'

My Lord Coroner . . .' wheezed one of them. 'There's horror there! There's demons and devils there . . . They're shooting unerringly. . . It's a massacre . . . Death is there . . . It's red with gore everywhere!'

'Some ten men have fallen . . . Perhaps more . . . Over yonder . . . Do you hear, sir?'

There was another boom and the castle shook.

'Magic,' muttered Skellen. 'Vilgefortz . . . Well, we shall see. We'll find out who's beating whom.'

Another hireling came running. He was pale and covered in plaster. For a long time he couldn't utter a word, and when he finally spoke his hands trembled and his voice shook.

'There's . . . There's . . . A monster . . . Lord Coroner . . . Like a great, black flittermouse . . . It was tearing people's heads off before my very eyes . . . Blood was gushing everywhere! And it was darting around and laughing . . . It had teeth like this!'

'We won't escape with our lives . . .' whispered a voice behind Tawny Owl's back.

'Lord Coroner.' Boreas Mun decided to speak. 'They are spectres. I saw . . . the young Graf Cahir aep Ceallach. But he's dead.'

Skellen looked at him, but didn't say anything.

'Lord Stefan . . .' mumbled Dacre Silifant. 'Who are we to fight here?'

'They aren't men,' groaned one of the mercenaries. 'They are sorcerers and hellish devils! Human strength cannot cope against such as them . . .'

Tawny Owl crossed his arms on his chest and swept a bold and imperious gaze over the mercenaries.

'So we shall not get involved in this conflict of hellish forces!' he announced thunderously and emphatically. 'Let demons fight with demons, witches with witches, and ghosts with corpses risen from the grave. We won't interfere with them! We shall wait here calmly for the outcome of the battle.'

The mercenaries' faces brightened up. Their morale rose perceptibly.

'That staircase is the only way out,' Skellen continued in a

powerful voice. ‘We’ll wait here. We shall see who tries coming down it.’

A terrible boom resounded from above and mouldings fell from the vault with an audible rustle. There was a stench of sulphur and burning.

‘It’s too dark here!’ called Tawny Owl, thunderously and boldly, to raise his troops’ spirits. ‘Briskly, light whatever you can! Torches, brands! We have to see well whoever appears on those stairs! Fill those iron cressets with some fuel or other!’

‘What kind of fuel, sir?’

Skellen indicated wordlessly what kind.

‘Pictures?’ a mercenary asked in disbelief. ‘Paintings?’

‘Yes, indeed,’ snorted Tawny Owl. ‘Why are you looking like that? Art is dead!’

Frames were splintered and paintings shredded. The well-dried wood and canvas, saturated with linseed oil, caught fire immediately and flared up with a bright flame.

Boreas Mun watched. His mind completely made up.

*

There was a boom and a flash, and the column they had managed to jump away from at almost the last moment disintegrated. The shaft broke, the capital decorated with acanthus-leaves crashed to the floor, destroying a terracotta mosaic. A ball of lightning hurtled towards them with a hiss. Yennefer deflected it, screaming out a spell and gesticulating.

Vilgefortz walked towards them, his cloak fluttering like a dragon’s wings.

‘I’m not surprised at Yennefer,’ he said as he walked. ‘She is a woman and thus an evolutionary inferior creature, governed by hormonal chaos. But you, Geralt, are not only a man who is sensible by nature, but also a mutant, invulnerable to emotions.’

He waved a hand. There was a boom and a flash. A lightning bolt bounced off the shield Yennefer had conjured up.

‘In spite of your good sense—’ Vilgefortz continued to talk,

pouring fire from hand to hand '—in one matter you demonstrate astounding and foolish perseverance: you invariably desire to row upstream and piss into the wind. It had to end badly. Know that today, here, in Stygga Castle, you have pissed into a hurricane.'

*

A battle was raging somewhere on the lower storeys. Someone screamed horribly, moaned, and wailed in pain. Something was burning. Ciri could smell smoke and burning, and felt a waft of hot air.

Something boomed with such force that the columns holding up the vault trembled and stuccoes fell off the walls.

Ciri cautiously looked around the corner. The corridor was empty. She walked along it quickly and silently, with rows of statues standing in alcoves on her right and left. She had seen those statues once.

In her dreams.

She exited the corridor. And ran straight into a man with a spear. She sprang aside, ready to dodge and somersault. And then she realised it wasn't a man but a thin, grey-haired, stooped woman. And that it wasn't a spear, but a broom.

'A sorceress with black hair is imprisoned somewhere around here.' Ciri cleared her throat. 'Where?'

The woman with the broom was silent for a long time, moving her mouth as though chewing something.

'And how should I know, treasure?' she finally mumbled. 'For I only clean here. Nothing else, just clean up after them,' she repeated, not looking at Ciri at all. 'And all they do is keep dirtying the place. Look for yourself, treasure.'

Ciri looked. There was a smudged zigzag streak of blood on the floor. The streak extended for a few paces and ended beside a corpse huddled up by the wall. Two more corpses lay further on, one curled up in a ball, the other positively indecently spread-eagled. Beside them lay crossbows.

'They keep making a mess.' The woman took a pail and rag, kneeled down and set about cleaning. 'Dirt, nothing but dirt, all the

time dirt. And I must clean and clean. Will there ever be an end to it?'

'No,' Ciri said softly. 'Never. That's what this world's come to.'

The woman stopped cleaning. But didn't raise her head.

'I clean,' she said. 'Nothing more. But I'll tell you, treasure, that you must go straight, and then left.'

'Thank you.'

The woman bowed her head even lower and resumed her cleaning.

*

She was alone. Alone and lost in the maze of corridors.

'Madam Yenneeefeeer!'

Up until then she had kept quiet, afraid of saddling herself with Vilgefortz's men. But now . . .

'Yeeneeeefeeer!'

She thought she'd heard something. Yes, for sure!

She ran into a gallery, and from there into a large hall, between slender pillars. The stench of burning reached her nostrils again.

Bonhart emerged like a ghost from a niche and punched her in the face. She staggered, and he leaped on her like a hawk, seized her by the throat, pinning her to the wall with his forearm. Ciri looked into his fishlike eyes and felt her heart drop downwards to her belly.

'I wouldn't have found you if you hadn't called,' he wheezed out. 'But you called, and longingly, to cap it all off! Have you missed me so? My little darling?'

Still pinning her to the wall, he slipped his hand into the hair on her nape. Ciri jerked her head. The bounty hunter grinned. He ran his hand over her arm, squeezed her breast, and grabbed her roughly by the crotch. Then he released her and pushed her so that she slid down the wall.

And tossed a sword at her feet. Her Swallow. And she knew at

once what he wanted.

'I'd have preferred it in the ring,' he drawled. 'As the crowning achievement, as the grand finale of many beautiful performances. The witcher girl against Leo Bonhart! Eh, people would pay to see something like that! Go on! Pick up the weapon and draw it from the scabbard.'

She did as he said. But she didn't draw the blade, just slung it across her back so the hilt would be within reach.

Bonhart took a step back.

'I thought it would suffice me to gladden my eyes with the sight of that surgery Vilgefortz is preparing for you,' he said. 'I was mistaken. I must feel your life flowing down my blade. I defy witchcraft and sorcerers, destiny, prophecies, the fate of the world, I defy the Elder and Younger Blood. What do all these predictions and spells mean to me? What do I gain from them? Nothing! Nothing can compare with the pleasure—'

He broke off. She saw him purse his lips, saw his eyes flash ominously.

'I'll bleed you to death, witcher girl,' he hissed. 'And afterwards, before you cool off, we'll celebrate our nuptials. You are mine. And you'll die mine. Draw your weapon.'

A distant thud resounded and the castle shuddered.

'Vilgefortz,' Bonhart explained with an inscrutable expression, 'is reducing your witcher rescuers to pulp. Go on, girl, draw your sword.'

Shall I run away, she thought, frozen in terror, *flee to other places, to other times? If only I could get far from him, if only.* She felt shame: *how can I run away? Leave Yennefer and Geralt at their mercy?* But good sense told her: *I'm not much use to them dead . . .*

She focused, pressing her fists to her temples. Bonhart knew immediately what she was planning and lunged for her. But it was too late. There was a buzzing in Ciri's ears, something flashed. *I've done it,* she thought triumphantly.

And at once realised her triumph was premature. She realised it on hearing furious yelling and curses. The evil, hostile and paralysing aura of the place was probably to blame for the fiasco. She hadn't travelled far. Not even out of eyeshot – only to the opposite end of the gallery. Not far from Bonhart. But beyond the

range of his hands and his sword. Temporarily, at least.

Pursued by his roar, Ciri turned and ran.

*

She ran down a long, wide corridor, followed by the dead glances of the alabaster caryatids holding up the arcades. She turned once and then again. She wanted to lose and confuse Bonhart, and furthermore she was heading towards the noises of the battle. Her friends would be where the fighting was raging, she was sure.

She rushed into a large, round room, in the centre of which a sculpture portraying a woman with her face covered, most probably a goddess, stood on a marble plinth. Two corridors led away from the room, both quite narrow. She chose at random. Naturally she chose wrongly.

'The wench!' roared one of the thugs. 'We have her!'

There were too many of them to be able to risk fighting, even in a narrow corridor. And Bonhart was surely nearby. Ciri turned back and bolted. She burst into the room with the marble goddess. And froze.

Before her stood a knight with a great sword, in a black cloak and helmet decorated with the wings of a bird of prey.

The town was burning. She heard the roar of fire, saw flames flickering and felt the heat of the conflagration. The neighing of horses and the screaming of the murdered were in her ears. The black bird's wings suddenly flapped, covering everything . . . *Help!*

Cintra, she thought, coming to her senses. *The Isle of Thanedd. He's followed me all the way here. He's a demon. I'm surrounded by demons, by nightmares from my dreams. Bonhart behind me, him in front of me.*

The shouting and stamping of enemies coming running could be heard behind her.

The knight in the plumed helmet suddenly took a step forward. Ciri overcame her fear. She yanked Swallow from its scabbard.

'You will not touch me!'

The knight moved forward and Ciri noticed in amazement that a fair-haired girl armed with a curved sabre was hiding behind his cloak. The girl flashed past Ciri like a lynx, sending one of the approaching lackeys sprawling with a slash of her sabre. And the black knight, astonishingly, rather than attacking Ciri, slit open another thug with a powerful blow. The remaining ones retreated into the corridor.

The fair-haired girl rushed for the door, but didn't manage to close it. Although she was whirling her sabre menacingly and yelling, the lackeys shoved her back from the portal. Ciri saw one of them stab her with a pilum, saw the girl fall to her knees. Ciri leaped and slashed backhand with Swallow, while the Black Knight ran up on the other side, hacking terribly with his long sword. The fair-haired girl, still on her knees, drew an axe from her belt and hurled it, hitting one of the bruisers right in the face. Then she lunged for the door, slammed it and the knight bolted it.

'Phew,' said the girl. 'Oak and iron! It'll take them some time to chop their way through that!'

'They won't waste time, they'll search for another way,' commented the Black Knight soberly, after which his face suddenly darkened on seeing the girl's blood-soaked trouser leg. The girl waved a hand dismissively.

'Let's be away.' The knight removed his helmet and looked at Ciri. 'I'm Cahir Mawr Dyffryn, son of Ceallach. I came here with Geralt. To rescue you, Ciri. I know it's unbelievable.'

'I've seen more unbelievable things,' Ciri growled. 'You've come a long way . . . Cahir . . . Where's Geralt?'

He looked at her. She remembered his eyes from Thanedd. Dark blue and as soft as silk. Pretty.

'He's rescuing the sorceress,' he answered. 'That—'

'Yennefer. Let's go.'

'Yes!' said the fair-haired girl, putting a makeshift dressing on her thigh. 'We still have to kick a few arses! For auntie!'

'Let's go,' repeated the knight.

But it was too late.

'Run away,' whispered Ciri, seeing who was approaching along the corridor. 'He's the devil incarnate. But he only wants me. He won't come after you . . . Run . . . Help Geralt . . .'

Cahir shook his head.

‘Ciri,’ he said kindly. ‘I’m surprised by what you’re saying. I came here from the end of the world to find you, rescue you and defend you. And now you want me to run away?’

‘You don’t know who you’re up against.’

Cahir pulled up his sleeve, tore off his cloak and wrapped it around his left arm. He brandished his sword and whirled it so fast it hummed.

‘I’ll soon find out.’

Bonhart, seeing the three of them, stopped. But only for a moment.

‘Aha!’ he said. ‘Have the reinforcements arrived? Your companions, witcher girl? Very well. Two less, two more. Makes no difference.’

Ciri had a sudden flash of inspiration.

‘Say farewell to your life, Bonhart!’ she yelled. ‘It’s the end of you! You’ve met your match!’

She must have overdone it and he caught the lie in her voice. He stopped and looked suspiciously.

‘The Witcher? Really?’

Cahir whirled his sword, standing in position. Bonhart didn’t budge.

‘This witch has more of a liking for younger men than I expected,’ he hissed. ‘Just look here, my young blade.’

He pulled his shirt open. Silver medallions flashed in his fist. A cat, a gryphon and a wolf.

‘If you are truly a witcher—’ he ground his teeth ‘—know that your own quack amulet will soon embellish my collection. If you’re not a witcher, you’ll be a corpse before you manage to blink. It would be wise, therefore, to get out of my way and take to your heels. I want this wench; I don’t bear a grudge against you.’

‘You talk big,’ Cahir said calmly, twirling the blade. ‘Let’s see if your bite’s worse than your bark. Angoulême, Ciri. Flee!’

‘Cahir—’

‘Run,’ he corrected himself, ‘and help Geralt.’

They ran. Ciri was holding up the limping Angoulême.

'You asked for it.' Bonhart squinted his pale eyes and moved forward, whirling his sword.

'I asked for it?' Cahir Mawr Dyffryn aep Ceallach repeated dully. 'No. It's what destiny wants!'

They leaped at each other, quickly engaged, surrounding each other with a frantic kaleidoscope of blades. The corridor filled with the clang of iron, seemingly making the marble sculpture tremble and rock.

'You aren't bad,' rasped Bonhart when they came apart. 'You aren't bad, my young blade. But you're no witcher. The little viper deceived me. You're done for. Prepare for death.'

'You talk big.'

Cahir took a deep breath. The clash had convinced him he had faint chance with the fishy-eyed man. This man was too fast and too strong for him. The only chance was that Bonhart was in a hurry to get after Ciri. And he was clearly irritated.

Bonhart attacked again. Cahir parried a cut, stooped, jumped, seized his opponent by the belt, shoved him against the wall and kneed him hard in the crotch. Bonhart caught him by the face, battered him powerfully on the side of the head with his sword pommel; once, twice, thrice. The third blow shoved Cahir back. He saw the flash of the blade. He parried instinctively.

Too slowly.

*

It was a strictly observed tradition in the Dyffryn family that all male members would hold a silent vigil lasting a whole day and night over the body of a fallen kinsman once he was inhumed in the castle armoury. The women – gathered in a remote wing of the castle so as not to disturb the men, not to distract them or disrupt their reflections – would sob, keen and faint. When brought round they sobbed and keened again. And *da capo*.

Sobbing and weeping, even among women, Vicovarian noblewomen, was an unwelcome faux pas and a great dishonour. But among the Dyffryns that and no other was the tradition and no

one ever changed it. Or meant to change it.

The ten-year-old Cahir, the youngest brother of Aillil, who had fallen in Nazair and was then lying in the castle armoury, was not yet a man in terms of customs and traditions. He was not allowed to join the group of men gathered around the open coffin, and he was not permitted to sit in silence with his grandfather Gruffyd, his father Ceallach, his brother Dheran or the whole collection of uncles and cousins. Neither was he permitted, naturally, to sob and faint along with his grandmother, mother, three sisters and the whole collection of aunts and cousins. Cahir clowned about and made mischief on the castle walls along with the rest of his young relatives who had come to Darn Dyffra for the obsequies, funeral and wake. And he pummelled any boys who considered that the bravest of the brave in the fighting for Nazair were their own fathers and older brothers, but not Aillil aep Ceallach.

'Cahir! Come here, my son!'

In the cloister stood Mawr, Cahir's mother, and her sister, his aunt Cinead var Anahid. His mother's face was red and so swollen from weeping that Cahir was terrified. It shocked him that weeping could make such a monster out of such a comely woman as his mother. He made a firm resolution never, ever, to cry.

'Remember, son,' Mawr sobbed, pressing the boy so hard to her breast he couldn't catch his breath. 'Remember this day. Remember who took the life from your dear brother Aillil. The damned Nordlings did it. Your foes, my son. You are ever to hate them. You are to hate that damned, murderous nation!'

'I shall hate them, mother of mine,' Cahir promised, somewhat surprised. Firstly, his brother Aillil had died the praiseworthy and enviable death of a warrior, in battle, with honour. What was one to shed tears over? Secondly, it was no secret that his grandmother Eviva – Mawr's mother – was descended from Nordlings. Papa had more than once called his grandmother in anger 'She-Wolf from the North'. Behind her back, naturally.

Well, but if mother is now ordering me . . .

'I shall hate them,' he pledged eagerly. 'I already hate them! And when I'm big and have a real sword I'll go to war and chop off their heads! You'll see, ma'am!'

His mother took a breath and began sobbing. Aunt Cinead held her up. Cahir clenched his little fists and trembled with hatred.

With hatred for those who had wronged his mamma, making her so ugly.

*

Bonhart's blow clove his temple, cheek and mouth. Cahir dropped his sword and staggered, and the bounty hunter cut him between his neck and collar bone using the force of a half-turn. Cahir tumbled at the feet of the marble goddess, and his blood splashed the statue's plinth, like a pagan sacrifice.

*

There was a boom, the floor trembled beneath feet and a shield fell with a thud from a wall panoply. Acrid smoke trailed and crept along the corridor. Ciri wiped her face. The fair-haired girl she was supporting weighed her down like a millstone.

'Quick . . . We must run quicker . . .'

'I can't run any quicker,' said the girl. And suddenly sat down heavily on the floor. Ciri saw with horror a red puddle begin to spill out and collect beneath the seated girl, beneath her blood-soaked trouser leg.

The girl was as white as a sheet.

Ciri threw herself on her knees beside her, pulled off her scarf and then her belt, trying to apply tourniquets. But the wound was too severe. And too near her groin. The blood kept dripping.

The girl grasped her by the hand, her fingers as cold as ice.

'Ciri . . .'

'Yes.'

'I'm Angoulême. I didn't believe . . . I didn't believe we'd find you. But I followed Geralt . . . Because it's impossible not to follow him. Isn't it?'

'It is. That's how he is.'

'We found you. And rescued you. And Fringilla mocked us . . . Tell me . . .'

‘Don’t say anything. Please.’

‘Tell me . . .’ Angoulême was moving her lips slower and slower, and with greater difficulty. ‘Tell me. You’re a queen, aren’t you . . . In Cintra . . . We’ll be in your good graces, won’t we? Will you make me a . . . countess? Tell me. But don’t lie . . . Can you? Tell me!’

‘Don’t say anything. Save your strength.’

Angoulême sighed, suddenly leaned over forward and rested her brow against Ciri’s shoulder.

‘I knew . . .’ she said quite clearly. ‘I knew that a brothel in Toussaint would be a better fucking way of making a living.’

A long, long time passed before Ciri realised she was holding a dead girl in her arms.

*

She saw him as he approached, being led by the lifeless looks of the alabaster caryatids holding up the arcades. And suddenly understood that flight was impossible, that it was impossible to escape from him. That she would have to face him. She knew it.

But was still too afraid of him.

He drew his weapon. Swallow’s blade sang softly. She knew that song.

She retreated down the wide corridor, and he followed her, holding his sword in both hands. Blood trickled down the blade, heavy drops dripping from the cross guard.

‘Dead,’ he judged, stepping over Angoulême’s body. ‘Well and good. Your young blade has also fallen.’

Ciri felt desperation seizing her. Felt her fingers gripping the hilt so tightly it hurt.

She retreated.

‘You deceived me,’ drawled Bonhart, following her. ‘The young blade didn’t have a medallion. But something tells me somebody *will* be found in this castle who wears one. Someone like that will be found, old Leo Bonhart stakes his life on it, somewhere near the witch Yennefer. But first things first, viper. First of all, us.

You and me. And our nuptials.'

Ciri got her bearings. Describing a short arc with Swallow she took up her position. She began to circle him, quicker and quicker, forcing the bounty hunter to move around on the spot.

'Last time,' he muttered, 'that trick wasn't much use to you. Well? Can't you learn from your mistakes?'

Ciri speeded up. She deceived and beguiled, tantalised and hypnotised with flowing, soft movements of her blade.

Bonhart whirled his sword in a hissing moulinet.

'That doesn't work on me,' he snarled. 'And it bores me!'

He shortened the distance with two rapid strides.

'Play, music!'

He leaped, cut hard. Ciri spun around in a pirouette, jumped, landed confidently on her left foot, and struck at once, without assuming a position. Before the blade had clanged on Bonhart's parry she had spun past, smoothly moving in under the whistling blow. She struck again, without a back swing, using an unnatural, unorthodox bend of the elbow. Bonhart blocked, using the momentum of the parry to immediately slash from the left. She was expecting that, and all she needed was a slight bend of the knees and a sway of her trunk to move her whole body aside from under the blade. She countered and thrust at once. But this time he was waiting for her, and deceived her with a feint. Not meeting a parry, she almost lost her balance, saving herself with a lightning-fast leap, but his sword caught her arm anyway. At first she thought the blade had only cut through her padded sleeve, but a moment later she felt the warm liquid in her armpit and on her arm.

The alabaster caryatids observed them with indifferent eyes.

She drew back and he followed her, hunched, making wide, sweeping movements with his sword. Like the bony Death Ciri had seen on paintings in the temple. *The dance of the skeletons*, she thought. *The Grim Reaper is coming.*

She drew back. The warm liquid was now dripping down her forearm and hand.

'First blood to me,' he said at the sight of the drops splattering star-like on the floor. 'Who'll draw the second blood? My betrothed?'

She retreated.

‘Look around. It’s the end.’

He was right. The corridor ended in nothingness, in an abyss, at the bottom of which could be seen the dust-covered, dirty and smashed up floorboards of the lower storey. This part of the castle was destroyed, there was no floor at all. There was only a framework of load-bearing timbers: posts, ridges and a lattice of beams.

She didn’t hesitate for long. She stepped onto a beam and moved backwards along it, without taking her eyes off Bonhart, watching his every move. That saved her. For he suddenly charged her, running along the beam, slashing with rapid, diagonal blows, whirling his sword in lightning-fast feints. She knew what he was counting on. A wrong parry or mistake with a feint would have upset her balance, and then she would have fallen off the beam, onto the smashed up woodblocks of the lower floor.

This time Ciri didn’t let the feints deceive her. Quite the opposite. She spun around nimbly and feinted a blow from the right, and when for a split second he hesitated, cut with a right seconde, so quickly and powerfully that Bonhart rocked after parrying. And would have fallen if not for his height. He managed to hold on to a ridge by reaching up with his left hand, keeping his balance. But he lost concentration for a split second. And that was enough for Ciri. She lunged, hard, fully extending her arm and blade.

He didn’t even flinch as Swallow’s blade passed with a hiss across his chest and left arm. He immediately countered so viciously that had Ciri not turned a back somersault the blow would probably have cut her in half. She hopped onto the adjacent beam, dropping onto one knee with her sword held horizontally over her head.

Bonhart glanced at his shoulder and raised his left arm, already marked by a pattern of wavy crimson lines. He looked at the thick drops dripping downwards into the abyss.

‘Well, well,’ he said. ‘You do know how to learn from your mistakes.’

His voice trembled with fury. But Ciri knew him too well. He was calm, composed and ready to kill.

He leaped onto her beam, whirling his sword, went for her like a hurricane, treading surely, without wobbling, or even looking at

his feet. The beam creaked, raining down dust and rotten wood.

He pushed on, slashing diagonally. He forced her backwards. He attacked so quickly she couldn't risk a leap or a somersault, so she had to keep parrying and dodging.

She saw a flash in his fishy eyes. She knew what was afoot. He was driving her against a post, to the truss beneath the ridge. He was pushing her back to a place from where there was no escape.

She had to do something. And she suddenly knew what.

Kaer Morhen. The pendulum.

You push off from the pendulum, you take its momentum, its energy. You take its momentum by pushing off. Do you understand?

Yes, Geralt.

All of a sudden, with the speed of a striking viper, she went from a parry to a cut. Swallow's blade groaned, striking against Bonhart's edge. Simultaneously Ciri pushed off and jumped onto the adjacent beam. She landed, miraculously keeping her balance. She took a few quick, light steps and leaped again, back onto Bonhart's beam, landing behind his back. He spun around in time, made a sweeping cut, almost blindly, to where her leap should have carried her. He missed by a hair's breadth, and the force of the blow made him stagger. Ciri attacked like a lightning strike. She lunged, dropping onto one knee. She struck powerfully and surely.

And she froze with her sword held out to the side. Watching calmly as the long, slanting, perfectly straight slit in his jacket began to well up and brim a dense red.

'You . . .' Bonhart staggered. 'You . . .'

He came for her. He was already slow and sluggish. She eluded him by leaping backwards, and he lost his balance. He fell onto one knee but did not plant his other on the beam. And the wood was now wet and slippery. He looked at Ciri for a second. Then he fell.

She saw him tumble onto the parquet floor in a geyser of dust, plaster and blood, saw his sword fly several yards to one side. He lay motionless, spread out, huge and gaunt. Wounded and utterly defenceless. But still terrible.

It took some time but he finally twitched. Groaned. Tried to raise his head. He moved his arms. He moved his legs. He crept to a post and propped his back up against it. He groaned again, feeling

his bloodied chest and belly with both hands.

Ciri leaped down. And fell beside him onto one knee. As softly as a cat. She saw his fishy eyes widen in fear.

'You won . . .' he wheezed, looking at Swallow's blade. 'You won, witcher girl. Pity it wasn't in the arena . . . It would have been some spectacle . . .'

She didn't reply.

'It was I who gave you that sword, do you remember?'

'I remember everything.'

'Surely you won't . . .' he grunted. 'Surely you won't finish me off, will you? You won't do it . . . You won't finish off a beaten and defenceless man . . . I know you, after all, Ciri. You're too . . . noble . . . for that.'

He looked long at her. Very long. Then she bent over. Bonhart's eyes widened even more. But she just tore from his neck the medallions: the wolf, the cat and the gryphon. Then she turned around and walked towards the exit.

He lunged at her with a knife, sprang at her dishonourably and treacherously. And as silent as a bat. Only at the last moment, when the dagger was about to plunge up to the guard in her back, did he roar, putting all his hatred into the bellow.

She dodged the treacherous thrust with a swift half-turn and leap, swung her arm and struck quickly and widely, powerfully, with a full swing, increasing the power with a twist of the hips.

Swallow swished and cut, cut with the very tip of the blade. There was a hiss and a squelch and Bonhart grabbed his throat. His fishy eyes were popping out of his head.

'Didn't I tell you,' Ciri said coldly, 'that I remember everything?'

Bonhart goggled even more. And then fell. He overbalanced and tumbled over backwards, raising dust. And he lay like that, huge, as bony as the Grim Reaper, on the dirty floor, among broken woodblocks. He was still clutching his throat, tightly, with all his might. But although he squeezed hard, his life was draining away fast between his fingers, spreading out around his head in a great, black halo.

Ciri stood over him. Without a word. But allowing him to see

her clearly. So as to take her image, her image alone, with him where he was going.

Bonhart glanced at her, his gaze growing dull and blurred. He was shivering convulsively, scraping his heels over the floorboards. Then he uttered a gurgle of the kind a funnel gives just before it empties.

And it was the last sound he made.

*

There was a bang, and the stained-glass windows exploded with a thud and a clink.

‘Look out, Geralt!’

They jumped aside just in time. A blinding flash of lightning ploughed up the floor, chips of terracotta and sharp shards of mosaic wailed in the air. Another flash of lightning hit the column the Witcher was hiding behind. The column broke into three parts. Half the arcade broke off the vault and crashed onto the floor with a deafening boom. Geralt, lying flat on the floor, shielded his head with his hands, aware of what poor protection they were against more than ten tons of rubble. He had prepared himself for the worst, but things were not too bad. He got up quickly, managed to see the glow of a magical shield above him and realised that Yennefer’s magic had saved him.

Vilgefortz turned towards the sorceress and pulverised the pillar she was sheltering behind. He roared furiously, sewing together a cloud of smoke and dust with threads of fire. Yennefer managed to jump clear, and retaliated, firing at the sorcerer her own flash of lightning, which, nonetheless, Vilgefortz deflected effortlessly and with sheer contempt. He replied with a blow that hurled Yennefer to the floor.

Geralt rushed at him, wiping plaster from his face. Vilgefortz turned his eyes towards him and a hand from which flames exploded with a roar. The Witcher instinctively shielded himself with his sword. The rune-covered dwarven blade protected him, astonishingly, cutting the stream of fire in half.

‘Ha!’ roared Vilgefortz. ‘Impressive, Witcher! And what say you to this?’

The Witcher said nothing. He flew as if he'd been rammed, fell onto the floor and shot across it, only stopping at the base of the column. The column broke up and fell to pieces, again taking a considerable part of the vault with it. This time Yennefer wasn't quick enough to give him magical protection. A huge lump broken off from the arcade hit him in the shoulder. The pain paralysed him for a moment.

Yennefer, chanting spells, sent flash after flash of lightning towards Vilgefortz. None of them hit the target, all harmlessly bouncing off the magical sphere protecting the sorcerer. Vilgefortz stretched out his arms and suddenly spread them. Yennefer cried out in pain and soared up into the air, levitating. Vilgefortz twisted his hands, exactly as though he were wringing out a wet rag. The sorceress howled piercingly. And began to spin.

Geralt sprang up, overcoming the pain. But Regis was quieter.

The vampire appeared out of nowhere in the form of an enormous bat and fell on Vilgefortz with a noiseless glide. Before the sorcerer could protect himself with a spell, Regis had slashed him across the face with his claws, only missing his eye because of its tiny size. Vilgefortz bellowed and waved his arms. Yennefer, now released, tumbled down onto a heap of rubble with an ear-splitting groan, blood bursting from her nose onto her face and chest.

Geralt was now close, was already raising the sihill to strike. But Vilgefortz was not yet defeated and did not mean to surrender. He threw off the Witcher with a great surge of power and shot a blinding white flame at the attacking vampire, which sliced through a column like a hot knife through butter. Regis nimbly avoided the flame and materialised in his normal shape alongside Geralt.

'Beware,' grunted the Witcher, trying to see how Yennefer was. 'Beware, Regis—'

'Beware?' yelled the vampire. 'Me? I didn't come here to beware!'

With an incredible, lightning-fast, tiger-like bound he fell on the sorcerer and grabbed him by the throat. His fangs flashed.

Vilgefortz howled in horror and rage. For a moment it seemed as though it would be the end of him. But that was an illusion. The sorcerer had a weapon in his arsenal for every occasion. And for every opponent. Even a vampire. The hands that seized Regis glowed like red-hot iron. The vampire screamed. Geralt also

screamed, seeing the sorcerer literally tearing Regis apart. He leaped to his aid, but wasn't fast enough. Vilgefortz pushed the mutilated vampire against a column and shot white fire at him from close up out of both hands. Regis screamed, screamed so horribly that the Witcher covered his ears with his hands. The rest of the stained-glass windows exploded with a roar and a smash. And the column simply melted. The vampire melted along with it, fusing into an amorphous lump.

Geralt swore, putting all his rage and despair into the curse. He leaped at Vilgefortz, raising his sihill to strike. But failed. Vilgefortz turned around and struck him with magical energy. The Witcher flew the whole length of the hall and slammed into the wall, sliding down it. He lay like a fish gasping for air, not wondering what was broken, but what was intact. Vilgefortz walked towards him. A six-foot iron bar materialised in his hand.

'I could have reduced you to ashes with a spell,' he said. 'I could have melted you into clinker like I did to that monster a moment ago. But you, Witcher, ought to die differently. In a fight. Not a very honest one, perhaps, but still.'

Geralt didn't believe he'd be able to stand. But he did. He spat blood from his cut lip. He gripped his sword more tightly.

'On Thanedd—' Vilgefortz came closer, whirled the bar in a moulinet '—I only broke you a little bit, sparingly, for it was meant to be a lesson. Since it wasn't learned, this time I'll break you thoroughly, into tiny little bones. So that no one will ever be able to stick you back together again.'

He attacked. Geralt didn't run away. He took on the fight.

The bar flickered and whistled, the sorcerer circled around the dancing Witcher. Geralt avoided the blows and delivered his own, but Vilgefortz deftly parried, and then steel groaned mournfully as it struck steel.

The sorcerer was as quick and agile as a demon.

He tricked Geralt with a twist of his trunk and a feigned blow from the left, and slammed him in the ribs from below. Before the Witcher could get his balance and his breath back he was hit in the shoulder so hard he fell to his knees. He dodged aside, saving his skull from a blow from above, but could not avoid a reverse thrust from below, above the hip. He staggered and struck his back against the wall. He still had enough wits about him to fall to the floor. Just

in time, because the iron bar grazed his hair and slammed into the wall, sending sparks flying.

Geralt rolled over, and the bar struck sparks on the floor right beside his head. The second blow hit him in the shoulder blade. There was shock, and paralysing pain; weakness flowed down to his legs. The sorcerer raised the bar. Triumph burned in his eyes.

Geralt clenched Fringilla's medallion in his fist.

The bar fell with a clang, striking the floor a foot from the Witcher's head. Geralt rolled away and quickly got up on one knee. Vilgefortz leaped forward and struck. The bar missed the target again by a few inches. The sorcerer shook his head in disbelief and hesitated for a second.

He sighed, suddenly understanding. His eyes lit up. He leaped, taking a swing. Too late.

Geralt slashed him hard across the belly. Vilgefortz screamed, dropped the bar, and staggered back, bent over. The Witcher was already upon him. He pushed him with his boot onto the stump of the broken column and cut vigorously, diagonally, from collarbone to hip. Blood gushed on the floor, painting an undulating pattern. The sorcerer screamed and fell to his knees. He lowered his head and looked down at his belly and chest. For a long time he could not tear his eyes away from what he saw.

Geralt waited calmly, in position, with the sihill ready to strike.

Vilgefortz groaned piercingly and raised his head.

'Geraaalt . . .'

The Witcher didn't let him finish.

It was very quiet for a long time.

'I didn't know . . .' Yennefer said at last, scrambling out of a pile of rubble. She looked terrible. The blood trickling from her nose had poured all over her chin and cleavage. 'I didn't know you could cast illusory spells,' she repeated, seeing Geralt's uncomprehending gaze, 'capable even of deceiving Vilgefortz.'

'It's my medallion.'

'Aha.' She looked suspicious. 'A curious thing. But anyway, we're only alive thanks to Ciri.'

'I beg your pardon?'

‘His eye. He never regained full coordination. He didn’t always land his blow. But I mainly owe my life to . . .’

She fell silent, glanced at the remains of the melted column, in which the outline of a shape could be discerned.

‘Who was that, Geralt?’

‘A friend. I’m going to miss him.’

‘Was he a human?’

‘The epitome of humanity. How are you, Yen?’

‘A few broken ribs, concussion, twisted hip joint, bruised spine. Besides that, excellent. And yourself?’

‘More or less the same.’

She looked impassively at Vilgefortz’s head lying exactly in the centre of the floor mosaic. The sorcerer’s small eye, already glazed, looked at them with mute reproach.

‘That’s a nice sight,’ she said.

‘It is,’ he admitted a moment later. ‘But I’ve already seen enough. Will you be able to walk?’

‘With your help, yes.’

*

And they met, all three of them, in a place where the corridors came together, under the arcades. They met beneath the dead gazes of the alabaster caryatids.

‘Ciri,’ said the Witcher. And rubbed his eyes.

‘Ciri,’ said Yennefer, being held up by the Witcher.

‘Geralt,’ said Ciri.

‘Ciri,’ he replied, overcoming a sudden tightening of the throat. ‘Good to see you again.’

‘Madam Yennefer.’

The sorceress freed herself from the Witcher’s arm and straightened up with the greatest of effort.

‘What *do* you look like, girl?’ she said severely. ‘Just look at

you! Tidy up your hair! Don't stoop. Come here please.'

Ciri approached, as stiff as an automaton. Yennefer straightened and smoothed her collar, and tried to wipe the now dried blood from Ciri's sleeve. She touched her hair. And uncovered the scar on her cheek. She hugged her tightly. Very tightly. Geralt saw her hands on Ciri's back. Saw the deformed fingers. He didn't feel anger, resentment or hatred. He felt only weariness. And a huge desire to be done with all of it.

'Mamma.'

'Daughter.'

'Let's go.' He decided to interrupt them. But only after a long while.

Ciri sniffed noisily and wiped her nose with the back of her hand. Yennefer shot an angry look at her, and wiped her eye, which something had probably got into. The Witcher looked down the corridor from where Ciri had exited, as though expecting somebody else to come out of it. Ciri shook her head. He understood.

'Let's get out of here,' he repeated.

'Yes,' said Yennefer. 'I want see the sky.'

'I'll never leave you both,' Ciri said softly. 'Never.'

'Let's get out of here,' he repeated. 'Ciri, hold Yen up.'

'I don't need holding up!'

'Let me, Mamma.'

In front of them was a stairway, a great stairway drowning in smoke, in the twinkling glow of torches and fire in iron cressets. Ciri shuddered. She had seen that stairway before. In dreams and visions.

Down below, far away, armed men were waiting.

'I'm tired,' she whispered.

'Me too,' admitted Geralt, drawing the sihill.

'I've had enough of killing.'

'Me too.'

'Is there no other way out?'

'No. There isn't. Only this stairway. We must, girl. Yen wants to see the sky. And I want to see the sky, Yen and you.'

Ciri looked back, and glanced at Yennefer, who was resting on the balustrade in order not to fall down. She took out the medallions taken from Bonhart. She put the cat around her neck and gave Geralt the wolf.

‘I hope you know it’s just a symbol?’ he said.

‘Everything’s just a symbol.’

She removed Swallow from its scabbard.

‘Let’s go, Geralt.’

‘Let’s go. Keep close beside me.’

Skellen’s mercenaries were waiting at the bottom of the stairway, gripping their weapons in sweaty fists. Tawny Owl sent the first wave up the stairs. The mercenaries’ iron-shod boots thudded on the steps.

‘Slowly, Ciri. Don’t rush. Close to me.’

‘Yes, Geralt.’

‘And calmly, girl, calmly. Remember, without anger, without hatred. We have to get out and see the sky. And the men that are standing in our way must die. Don’t hesitate.’

‘I won’t hesitate. I want to see the sky.’

They got to the first landing without mishap. The mercenaries retreated before them, astonished and surprised by their calm. But after a moment three of them leaped towards them, yelling and whirling their swords. They died at once.

‘Swarm them!’ Tawny Owl bellowed from below. ‘Kill them!’

The next three leaped forward. Geralt quickly sprang out to meet them, deceived them with a feint, and cut one of them from below in the throat. He turned around, made way for Ciri under his right arm, and Ciri smoothly slashed the next soldier in the armpit. The third one tried to save his life by leaping over the balustrade. He was too slow.

Geralt wiped splashes of blood from his face.

‘Calmly, Ciri.’

‘I am calm.’

The next three. A flash of blades, screams, death.

Thick blood crawled downwards, dribbling down the steps.

A soldier in a brass-studded brigantine leaped towards them with a long pike. His eyes were wild from narcotics. Ciri shoved the shaft aside with a diagonal parry and Geralt slashed. He wiped his face. They walked on, not looking back.

The second landing was now close.

'Kill them!' yelled Skellen. 'Have at them! Kiiiilll theeeem!'

Stamping and yelling on the stairs. The flash of blades, screams. Death.

'Good, Ciri. But more calmly. Without euphoria. And close to me.'

'I'll always be close to you.'

'Don't cut from the shoulder if you can from the elbow. Take heed.'

'I am.'

The flash of a blade. Screams, blood. Death.

'Good, Ciri.'

'I want to see the sky.'

'I love you very much.'

'I love you too.'

'Take heed. It's getting slippery.'

The flash of blades, moaning. They walked on, catching up with the blood pouring down the steps. They walked down, always down, down the steps of Stygga Castle.

A soldier attacking them slipped on a bloody step, fell flat on the ground right at their feet and howled for mercy, covering his head with both hands. They passed him without looking.

No one dared to bar their way until the third landing.

'Bows,' Stefan Skellen bellowed from below. 'Fire the crossbows! Boreas Mun was meant to bring the crossbows! Where is he?'

Boreas Mun – which Tawny Owl couldn't have known – was already quite far away. He was riding eastwards, with his forehead against his horse's mane, squeezing as much gallop out of his steed as he could.

Only one of the men sent for the bows had returned.

The man who had decided to shoot had slightly shaking hands and eyes watering from fisstech. The first bolt barely grazed the balustrade. The second didn't even hit the stairs.

'Higher!' yelled Tawny Owl. 'Go higher, you fool! Shoot from up close.'

The crossbowmen pretended he hadn't heard. Skellen cursed at great length, snatched the crossbow from him, leaped onto the stairway, kneeled down and took aim. Geralt quickly covered Ciri with his body. But the girl slipped out from behind him like lightning, so when the bowstring clanged she was already in position. She twisted her sword to the upper quarter and hit the bolt back so hard it somersaulted many times before it fell.

'Very good,' muttered Geralt. 'Very good, Ciri. But if you ever do that again, I'll tan your hide.'

Skellen dropped the crossbow. And suddenly realised he was alone.

All of his men were at the very bottom in a tight little group. None of them were too keen to go up the stairs. There seemed to be fewer than there were before. Once more several ran off somewhere. Probably to fetch crossbows.

And the Witcher and the witcher girl – not hurrying, but not slowing either – walked down, down the blood-covered stairway of Stygga Castle. Close to each other, shoulder to shoulder, tantalising and bamboozling their foes with fast movements of their blades.

Skellen walked backwards. And didn't stop. Right down to the very bottom. When he found himself in the group of his own men he noticed that the retreat was continuing. He swore impotently.

'Lads!' he yelled, and his voice broke discordantly. 'On you go! Have at them! En masse! Go on, have at them! Follow me!'

'Go yourself, sir,' mumbled one of them, raising a hand with fisstech to his nose. Tawny Owl punched him, covering the man's face, sleeve and the front of his jacket in white powder.

The Witcher and the witcher girl passed another landing.

'When they get to the very bottom we'll be able to surround them!' roared Skellen. 'Go on, lads! Have at them! To arms!'

Geralt glanced at Ciri. And almost howled with fury, seeing streaks shining white as silver in her ashen hair. He controlled himself. It wasn't the time for anger.

‘Be careful,’ he said softly. ‘Stay close to me.’

‘I’m always going to be close to you.’

‘It’ll be hot down there.’

‘I know. But we’re together.’

‘We’re together.’

‘I’m with you,’ said Yennefer, following them down the stairs, red and slippery with blood.

‘Form up! Form up!’ roared Tawny Owl.

Several of the men who had run to get crossbows returned. Without them. Very terrified.

The rumble of doors being forced by battle-axes, thudding, the clanking of iron and the sound of heavy steps resounded from all three corridors leading to the stairway. And suddenly soldiers in black helmets, armour and cloaks with the sign of a silver salamander marched out of all three corridors. On being shouted at thunderously and menacingly Skellen’s mercenaries threw their weapons on the floor, one after the other. Crossbows and the blades of glaives and bear spears were aimed at the more hesitant, and they were urged on by even more menacing shouts. Now all of them obeyed, for it was evident that the black-cloaked soldiers were extremely keen to kill somebody and were only waiting for a pretext. Tawny Owl stood at the foot of a column, arms crossed on his chest.

‘Miraculous relief?’ muttered Ciri. Geralt shook his head.

Crossbows and spear blades were also being aimed at them.

‘*Glaeddyvan vort*!’

There was no sense in resisting. Black-cloaked soldiers were swarming like ants at the bottom of the stairs, and the witchers were very, very weary. But they didn’t drop their swords. They placed them carefully on the steps. And then sat down. Geralt felt Ciri’s warm shoulder and heard her breath.

Yennefer descended, walking past corpses and pools of blood, showing the black-cloaked soldiers her unarmed hands. She sat down heavily beside them on a step. Geralt also felt the warmth against his other shoulder. *It’s a pity it can’t always be like this*, he thought. And he knew it couldn’t.

Tawny Owl’s men were tied up and escorted away one after

the other. There were more and more soldiers in black cloaks bearing the salamander. Suddenly, high-ranking officers appeared among them, recognisable by the white plumes and silver edging on their suits of armour. And by the respect which the others showed in parting to let them pass.

The soldiers stood back with even greater respect before one of the officers, whose helmet was particularly sumptuously decorated with silver, bowing before him.

The man stopped in front of Skellen, who was standing at the foot of the column. Tawny Owl – it was very obvious even in the flickering light of the torches and the paintings burning out in the cressets – paled, becoming as white as a sheet.

'Stefan Skellen,' said the officer, in a resonant voice, a voice which sounded right up to the vault of the hall. 'You will be tried in court. And punished for treason.'

Tawny Owl was led away, but his hands weren't tied like the ordinary soldiers' had been.

The officer turned around. A burning rag broke off from a tapestry up above. It fell, swirling like a huge fiery bird. The brightness shone on the silver-edged armour, on the visor extending halfway down the cheeks which was – like all the black-cloaked soldiers' – shaped like horrendous toothed jaws.

Now our turn, thought Geralt. He wasn't mistaken.

The officer looked at Ciri, and his eyes burned in the slits of the helmet, noticing and registering everything. The paleness. The scar on her cheek. The blood on her sleeve and hand. The white streaks in her hair.

Then the Nilfgaardian turned his gaze onto the Witcher.

'Vilgefortz?' he asked in his resonant voice. Geralt shook his head.

'Cahir aep Ceallach?'

Another shake of the head.

'A slaughter,' said the officer, looking at the stairs. 'A bloodbath. Well, he who lives by the sword . . . Furthermore, you've saved the hangmen work. You've travelled a long way, Witcher.'

Geralt didn't comment. Ciri sniffed loudly and wiped her nose with her wrist. Yennefer gave her a scolding look. The Nilfgaardian

also noticed that and smiled.

‘You’ve travelled a long way,’ he repeated. ‘You’ve come here from the end of the world. Following her and for her sake. Even if only for that reason you deserve something. Lord de Rideaux!’

‘Yes sir, Your Imperial Highness!’

The Witcher wasn’t surprised.

‘Please find a discreet chamber in which I shall be able to converse, completely undisturbed, with Sir Geralt of Rivia. During that time please offer all possible comforts and services to the two ladies. Under vigilant and unremitting guard.’

‘Yes, sir, Your Imperial Majesty.’

‘Sir Geralt, please follow me.’

The Witcher stood up. He glanced at Yennefer and Ciri, wanting to calm them and warn them not to do anything foolish. But it wasn’t necessary. They were both terribly tired. And resigned.

*

‘You’ve travelled a long way,’ repeated Emhyr var Emreis, Deithwen Addan yn Carn aep Morvudd, the White Flame Dancing on the Barrows of his Enemies, removing his helmet.

‘I’m not sure,’ Geralt calmly replied, ‘if you haven’t travelled further, Duny.’

‘You’ve recognised me, well, well.’ The emperor smiled. ‘And they say the lack of a beard and my way of holding myself have changed me utterly. Many of the people who used to see me earlier in Cintra came to Nilfgaard later and saw me during audiences. And no one recognised me. But you only saw me once, and that was sixteen years ago. Did I become so embedded in your memory?’

‘I wouldn’t have recognised you, you have indeed changed greatly. I simply worked out who you were. Some time ago. I guessed – not without help and a hint from someone else – what role incest played in Ciri’s family. In her blood. I even dreamed about the most awful, the most hideous incest imaginable in a gruesome nightmare. And well, here you are, in person.’

‘You can barely stand,’ said Emhyr coldly. ‘And deliberate

impertinence is making you even more unsteady. You may sit in the presence of the emperor. I grant you that privilege . . . until the end of your days.'

Geralt sat down with relief. Emhyr continued to stand, leaning against a carved wardrobe.

'You saved my daughter's life,' he said. 'Several times. I thank you for that. On behalf of myself and posterity.'

'You disarm me.'

'Cirilla will go to Nilfgaard.' Emhyr was not bothered by the mockery. 'She will become empress at a suitable moment. In precisely the same way that dozens of girls have become and do become queens. Meaning almost not knowing their spouses. Often not having a good opinion of them on the basis of their first encounter. Often disappointed by the first days and . . . first nights . . . of marriage. Cirilla won't be the first.'

Geralt refrained from comment.

'Cirilla,' continued the emperor, 'will be happy, like most of the queens I was talking about. It will come with time. Cirilla will transfer the love that I do not demand at all onto the son I will beget with her. An archduke, and later an emperor. An emperor who will beget a son. A son, who will be the ruler of the world and will save the world from destruction. Thus speaks the prophecy whose exact contents only I know.

'Naturally,' the White Flame continued, 'Cirilla will never find out who I am. The secret will die. Along with those who know it.'

'That's clear,' Geralt nodded. 'It can't be clearer.'

'You cannot fail to detect the hand of destiny in all of this,' Emhyr said after a long time, 'All of this. Including your activities. From the very beginning.'

'I see rather the hand of Vilgefortz. For it was he who directed you to Cintra, wasn't it? When you were the Enchanted Urcheon? He made Pavetta—'

'You're stumbling in the dark,' Emhyr interrupted brutally, tossing his salamander-decorated cloak over his shoulder. 'You don't know anything. And you don't have to know. I didn't ask you here to tell you my life story. Or to excuse myself before you. The only thing you have earned is the assurance that the girl will not be harmed. I have no debts towards you, Witcher. None—'

‘Yes you do!’ Geralt interrupted brutally. ‘You broke the contract. You went back on your word. They are debts, Duny. You broke a promise as a princeling, and you have a debt as an emperor. With imperial interest. Ten years worth!’

‘Is that all?’

‘That is all. For only that is owed to me, nothing more. But nothing less, either. I was to collect the child when it turned six. You didn’t wait for the promised date. You planned to steal it from me before it passed. The destiny you keep talking about sneered at you, however. You tried to fight that destiny for the following ten years. Now you have her, you have Ciri, your own daughter, whom you once basely deprived of parents, and with whom you now mean to vilely beget incestuous children. Without demanding love. Rightly, as a matter of fact. You do not deserve her love. Just between us, Duny, I don’t know how you will manage to look her in the eyes.’

‘The end justifies the means,’ Emhyr said dully. ‘What I’m doing, I’m doing for posterity. To save the world.’

‘If the world is to be saved like that—’ the Witcher lifted his head ‘—it would be better for it to perish. Believe me, Duny, it’d be better if it perished.’

‘You’re pale,’ Emhyr var Emreis said, almost gently. ‘Don’t get so excited, for you are liable to faint.’

He moved away from the wardrobe, selected a chair and sat down. The Witcher’s head was indeed spinning.

‘The Iron Urcheon,’ the emperor began calmly and quietly, ‘was to be a way of forcing my father to collaborate with the usurper. It was after the coup. My father, the overthrown emperor, was in prison and being tortured. He couldn’t be broken, so another way was tried. A sorcerer hired by the usurper changed me into a monster in front of my father’s eyes. The sorcerer added a little something on his own initiative. Namely humour. Eimyr in our language means an “urcheon”, an old name for a hedgehog.

‘My father didn’t allow himself to be broken and so they murdered him. I, meanwhile, was released into a forest amidst mockery and scorn, and dogs were set on me. I survived. I wasn’t hunted too seriously, for it wasn’t known that the sorcerer had botched his work, and that my human form returned at night. Fortunately, I knew several people of whose loyalty I could be

certain. And at that time I was, for your information, thirteen.

'I had to flee the country. And the fact that I ought to search for a cure to the spell in the North, beyond the Marnadal Stairs, was read in the stars by a slightly crazy astrologer by the name of Xarthisius. Later, when I was emperor, I gave him a tower and apparatus for that. At that time, he had to work on borrowed equipment.

'You know, it's a waste of time getting bogged down in what happened in Cintra. I deny, however, that it supposedly had anything to do with Vilgefortz. Firstly, I didn't know him then, and secondly I had a strong aversion to mages. Even today I don't like them, actually. Ah, while I remember: when I regained the throne I caught up with the sorcerer who had served the usurper and tortured me in front of my father's eyes. I also displayed a sense of humour. The mage's name was Braathens, and in our language that sounds almost the same as "fried".

'Enough digressions, though, let's get back to the matter at hand. Vilgefortz visited me secretly in Cintra, shortly after Ciri's birth. He passed himself off as a trusted friend of people in Nilfgaard who were still loyal to me and had conspired against the usurper. He offered help and soon proved to be capable of helping. When, still mistrustful, I asked about his motives, he bluntly declared he was counting on gratitude. For the favours, privileges and power he would be given by the great Emperor of Nilfgaard. Meaning me. A powerful ruler who would govern half the world. Who would beget an heir who would govern half the world. He intended to rise high himself – or so he declared, without inhibition – at the side of those great rulers. Here he took out some scrolls bound with snake skin and commended the contents to my attention.

'Thus I learned of the prophecy. I learned about the fate of the world and the universe. I found out what I had to do. And came to the conclusion that the end justifies the means.'

'Of course.'

'My affairs were prospering in Nilfgaard, meanwhile.' Emhyr ignored the sarcasm. 'My partisans were gaining more and more influence. Finally, having a group of front line officers and a corps of cadets, they decided to launch a coup d'état. I was needed for that, nonetheless. Me myself. The rightful heir to the throne and crown of the empire, a rightful Emreis with the blood of the

Emreises. I was to be something akin to the standard of the revolution. Just between us, plenty of the revolutionaries cherished the hope that I would be nothing more than that. Those among them who are still alive cannot get over it to this day.

'But, as has been said before, let us leave the digressions. I had to return to home. The time came for Duny, the false prince of Maecht and the phoney duke of Cintra, to demand his inheritance. I hadn't forgotten about the prophecy, however. I had to return with Ciri. And Calanthe was keeping a weather eye on me.'

'She never trusted you.'

'I know. I think she knew something about that prediction. And would have done anything to hamper me, and in Cintra I was in her power. It was clear: I had to return to Nilfgaard, but in a way that no one could guess that I was Duny and Ciri was my daughter. Vilgefortz suggested a way. Duny, Pavetta and their child had to die. Vanish without trace.'

'In a staged shipwreck.'

'That's right. During the voyage from Skellige to Cintra, Vilgefortz was to pull the ship into a magical whirlpool over the Sedna Abyss. Pavetta, Ciri and I were supposed to have previously locked ourselves in a specially secured lifeboat and survive. And the crew—'

'Were meant not to survive,' finished the Witcher. 'And that's how your ruthless path began.'

Emhyr var Emreis said nothing for some time.

'It began earlier,' he finally said, and his voice was soft. 'Regrettably. At the moment it turned out Ciri wasn't on board.'

Geralt raised his eyebrows.

'Unfortunately, I hadn't appreciated Pavetta in my planning.' The emperor's face didn't express anything. 'That melancholy wench with her permanently lowered eyes had seen through me and my plans. She had sent the child ashore in secret before the anchor was weighed. I fell into a fury. As she did. She had an attack of hysteria. During the struggle . . . she fell overboard. Before I could dive after her, Vilgefortz had drawn the ship into his maelstrom. I hit my head against something and lost consciousness. I survived by a miracle, entangled in the ropes. I came to, covered in bandages. I had a broken arm.'

‘I wonder how a man feels after murdering his wife,’ the Witcher said coldly.

‘Lousy,’ replied Emhyr without delay. ‘I felt and I feel lousy and bloody shabby. Even the fact that I never loved her doesn’t change that. The end justifies the means, yet I sincerely do regret her death. I didn’t want it or plan it. Pavetta died by accident.’

‘You’re lying,’ Geralt said dryly, ‘and that doesn’t befit an emperor. Pavetta could not live. She had unmasked you. And would never have let you do what you wanted to do to Ciri.’

‘She would have lived,’ Emhyr retorted. ‘Somewhere . . . far away. There are enough castles . . . Darn Rowan, for instance. I couldn’t have killed her.’

‘Even for an end that was justified by the means?’

‘One can always find a less drastic means.’ The emperor wiped his face. ‘There are always plenty of them.’

‘Not always,’ said the Witcher, looking him in the eyes. Emhyr avoided his gaze.

‘That’s exactly what I thought,’ Geralt said, nodding. ‘Finish your story. Time’s passing.’

‘Calanthe guarded little Ciri like the apple of her eye. I couldn’t even have dreamed of kidnapping her. My relations with Vilgefortz had cooled considerably, and I still had a dislike of other mages . . . But my military men and aristocracy were urging me hard towards war, towards an attack on Cintra. They vouched that the people were demanding it, that the people wanted living space, that listening to the *vox populi* would be a kind of imperial test. I decided to kill two birds with one stone. By capturing both Cintra and Ciri in one go. You know the rest.’

‘I do,’ Geralt nodded. ‘Thank you for the conversation, Duny. I’m grateful that you were willing to devote your time to me. But I cannot delay any longer. I am very tired. I watched the death of my friends who followed me here to the end of the world. They came to rescue your daughter. Not even knowing her. Apart from Cahir, none of them even knew Ciri. But they came here to rescue her. For there was something in her that was decent and noble. And what happened? They found death. I consider that unjust. And if anyone wants to know, I don’t agree with it. Because a story where the decent ones die and the scoundrels live and carry on doing what they want is full of shit. I don’t have any more strength, Emperor.

Summon your men.'

'Witcher—'

'The secret has to die with those who know it. You said it yourself. You don't have a choice. It's not true that you have plenty of them. I'll escape from any prison. I'll take Ciri from you. There's no price I wouldn't pay to take her away. As you well know.'

'I do.'

'You can let Yennefer live. She doesn't know the secret.'

'She would pay any price to rescue Ciri,' Emhyr said gravely. 'And avenge your death.'

'True,' the Witcher nodded. 'Indeed, I'd forgotten how much she loves Ciri. You're right, Duny. Well, you can't run from destiny. I have a request.'

'Yes.'

'Let me say goodbye to them both. Then I'll be at your disposal.'

Emhyr stood by the window, staring at the mountain peaks.

'I cannot decline you. But—'

'Don't worry. I won't tell Ciri anything. I'd be harming her by telling her who you are. And I couldn't harm her.'

Emhyr said nothing for a long time, still turned towards the window.

'Perhaps I do have a debt to you.' He turned on his heel. 'So hear what I will offer you in payment. Long, long ago, in former times, when people still had honour, pride and dignity, when they valued their word, and were only afraid of shame, it happened that persons of honour, when sentenced to death, and to escape the shameful hand of the executioner, would enter a bath of hot water and open their veins. Is it possible—?'

'Order the bath filled.'

'Is it possible,' the emperor calmly continued, 'that Yennefer might wish to accompany you in that bath?'

'I'm almost certain of it. But you must ask. She has quite a rebellious nature.'

'I know.'

*

Yennefer agreed at once.

'The circle is closed,' she added, looking down at her wrists. 'The serpent Ouroboros has sunk its teeth into its own tail.'

*

'I don't understand!' Ciri hissed like an infuriated cat. 'I don't understand why I have to go with him. Where to? What for?'

'Daughter,' Yennefer said softly. 'This, and no other, is your destiny. Understand that it simply can't be otherwise.'

'And you?'

'Our destiny awaits us.' Yennefer looked at Geralt. 'This is the way it has to be. Come here, my daughter. Hug me tightly.'

'They want to murder you, don't they? I don't agree! I've only just got you back! It's not fair!'

'He who lives by the sword,' Emhyr var Emreis said softly, 'dies by the sword. They fought against me and lost. But they lost with dignity.'

Ciri was standing before him in three strides, and Geralt silently sucked in air. He heard Yennefer's gasp. *Dammit*, he thought, *everybody can see it! All his black-uniformed army can see what can't be hidden! The same posture, the same sparkling eyes, the same grimace. Arms crossed on the chest identically. Fortunately, extremely fortunately, she inherited her ashen hair from her mother. But anyhow, when you scrutinise them, it's clear whose blood . . .*

'But you won,' said Ciri, glaring at him passionately. 'You won. And do you think it was with dignity?'

Emhyr var Emreis didn't reply. He just smiled, eyeing the girl with a clearly contented gaze. Ciri clenched her teeth.

'So many have died. So many people have died because of all this. Did they lose with dignity? Is death dignified? Only a beast could think like that. Though I looked on death from close up it

wasn't possible to turn me into a beast. And it won't be possible.'

He didn't answer. He looked at her, and it seemed he was drinking her in with his gaze.

'I know what you're plotting,' she hissed, 'Know what you want to do with me. And I'll tell you right now: I won't let you touch me. And if you . . . If you . . . I'll kill you. Even tied up. When you fall asleep I'll tear your throat out with my teeth.'

With a rapid gesture, the imperator quietened the rumble gathering among the officers surrounding them.

'What is destined, shall be,' he drawled, not taking his eyes off Ciri. 'Say goodbye to your friends, Cirilla Fiona Elen Riannon.'

Ciri looked at the Witcher. Geralt shook his head. The girl sighed.

She and Yennefer hugged and whispered for a long time. Then Ciri went closer to Geralt.

'Pity,' she said quietly. 'Things were looking more promising.'

'Much more.'

They hugged each other.

'Be brave.'

'He won't have me,' she whispered. 'Don't worry. I'll escape from him. I have a way—'

'You may not kill him. Remember, Ciri. You may not.'

'Don't worry. I wasn't thinking about killing at all. You know, Geralt, I've had enough of killing. There's been too much of it.'

'Too much. Farewell, Witcher Girl.'

'Farewell, Witcher.'

'Just don't cry.'

'Easier said than done.'

*

Emhyr var Emreis, Imperator of Nilfgaard, accompanied Yennefer and Geralt all the way to the bathroom. Almost to the edge of a large, marble pool, full of steaming, fragrant water.

‘Farewell,’ he said. ‘You don’t have to hurry. I’m going, but I’m leaving people here who I shall instruct and to whom I shall issue orders. When you’re ready, just call, and a lieutenant will give you a knife. But I repeat: you don’t have to hurry.’

‘We appreciate your favour,’ Yennefer nodded gravely. ‘Your Imperial Majesty?’

‘Yes?’

‘Please, as far as possible, don’t harm my daughter. I wouldn’t want to die with the thought that she’s crying.’

Emhyr was silent for a long time. A very long time. Leaning against a window. With his head turned away.

‘Madam Yennefer,’ he finally answered, and his face was very strange. ‘You may be certain I shall not harm your and Witcher Geralt’s daughter. I’ve trampled human bodies and danced on the barrows of my foes. And I thought I was capable of anything. But what you suspect me of, I simply wouldn’t be capable of doing. I know it now. So I thank you both. Farewell.’

He went out, quietly closing the door behind him. Geralt sighed.

‘Shall we undress?’ He glanced at the steaming pool. ‘The thought that they’ll haul me out of here as a naked corpse doesn’t especially delight me.’

‘And, can you believe it, to me it’s all the same.’ Yennefer threw off her slippers and unfastened her dress with swift movements. ‘Even if it’s my last bath, I’m not going to bathe in my clothes.’

She pulled her blouse over her head and entered the pool, energetically splashing water around.

‘Well, Geralt? Why are you standing there like a statue?’

‘I’d forgotten how beautiful you are.’

‘You forget easily. Come on, into the water.’

When he sat down beside her she immediately threw her arms around his neck. He kissed her, stroking her waist, above and below the water.

‘Is it,’ he asked for form’s sake, ‘an appropriate time?’

‘Any time,’ she muttered, putting a hand under the water and

touching him, ‘is the right time for this. Emhyr repeated twice that we don’t have to hurry. What would you prefer to spend doing during the last minutes given to you? Weeping and wailing? That’s undignified, isn’t it? Examining your conscience? That’s banal and stupid, isn’t it?’

‘That’s not what I meant.’

‘So what did you mean?’

‘The cuts will be painful if the water cools down,’ he murmured, caressing her breasts.

‘It’s worth paying in pain—’ Yennefer put her other hand in the water ‘—for pleasure. Are you afraid of pain?’

‘No.’

‘Neither am I. Sit on the edge of the pool. I love you, but I’m not bloody going to do it underwater.’

*

‘Oh my, oh my,’ said Yennefer, tilting her head back so that her hair, damp from the steam, spread over the edge like little black vipers. ‘Oh my . . . oh.’

*

‘I love you, Yen.’

‘I love you, Geralt.’

‘It’s time. We’ll call them.’

‘We’ll call them.’

They called. First the Witcher called, and then Yennefer called. Then, not having heard any reaction, they yelled in unison.

‘Now! We’re ready! Give us that knife! Heeey! Dammit! The water’s cooling down!’

‘Get out of there,’ said Ciri, peeping into the bathroom. ‘They’ve all gone.’

‘What?’

‘I’m telling you. They’ve gone. Apart from us three there isn’t a living soul here. Get dressed. You look awfully funny in the nude.’

*

As they were dressing, their hands began to tremble. Both Geralt’s and Yennefer’s. They had great difficulty coping with the hooks and eyes, clasps and buttons. Ciri was jabbering away.

‘They rode away. Just like that. All of them, as many as there were of them. They took everyone from here, mounted their horses and rode away. As fast as they could.’

‘Didn’t they leave anybody?’

‘Nobody at all.’

‘That’s staggering,’ whispered Geralt. ‘It’s staggering.’

‘Has anything happened—’ Yennefer cleared her throat ‘—to explain it?’

‘No,’ Ciri quickly replied. ‘Nothing.’

She was lying.

*

At first she put on a brave front. Erect, with head haughtily raised and stony-faced, she pushed away the gloved hands of the black-cloaked knights, looking boldly and defiantly at the menacing nose-guards and visors of their helmets. They didn’t touch her any longer, particularly since they were stopped from doing so by the growl of an officer, a broad-shouldered soldier with silver braid and a white heron-feather plume.

She walked towards the exit, escorted on both sides. With her head proudly raised. Heavy boots thudded, mail shirts clanked and weapons jingled.

After a dozen paces she looked back for the first time. After the next few the second time. *Why, I’ll never, ever see them again.* The thought flashed with terrifying and cool clarity beneath her crown. *Neither Geralt nor Yennefer. Never.*

That awareness immediately, all at once, wiped away the mask of feigned courage. Ciri's face contorted and grimaced, her eyes filled with tears and her nose ran. The girl fought with all her strength, but in vain. A wave of tears breached the dam of pretence.

The Nilfgaardians with salamanders on their cloaks looked at her in silence and amazement. Some of them had seen her on the bloody staircase, all of them had seen her in conversation with the emperor. The witcher girl with a sword, the unvanquished witcher girl, arrogantly challenging the imperator to his face. And now they were surprised to see a snivelling, sobbing child.

She was aware of it. Their eyes burned her like fire, pricked her like pins. She fought, but ineffectively. The more powerfully she held back her tears, the more powerfully they exploded.

She slowed down and then stopped. The escort also stopped. But only for a moment. On the growling command of an officer iron hands grasped her by the upper arms and wrists. Ciri, sobbing and swallowing back tears, looked back for the last time. Then they dragged her. She didn't resist, but sobbed louder and louder and more and more despairingly.

They were stopped by Emperor Emhyr var Emreis, that dark-haired man with a face which awoke strange, vague memories in her. They released her when he gave a curt order. Ciri sniffed and wiped her eyes with her sleeve. Seeing him approaching, she stopped sobbing and raised her head haughtily. But now – she was aware of it – it just looked ridiculous.

Emhyr looked at her for a long while. Without a word. Then he approached her. And held out a hand. Ciri, who always reacted to gestures like that by pulling away involuntarily, now, to her great amazement, didn't react. To her even greater amazement she found his touch wasn't unpleasant at all.

He touched her hair, as though counting the snow-white streaks. He touched her cheek, disfigured by the scar. Then he hugged her and stroked her head and back. And she, overwhelmed by weeping, let him, although she held her arms as stiffly as a scarecrow.

'It's a strange thing, destiny,' she heard him whisper. 'Farewell, my daughter.'

*

‘What did he say?’

Ciri’s face grimaced slightly.

‘He said*: va faill, luned*. In the Elder Speech: farewell, girl.’

‘I know,’ Yennefer nodded. ‘What then?’

‘Then . . . Then he let me go, turned around and walked away. He shouted some orders. And everybody went. They passed me, utterly indifferently, with stamping, thudding and the clanking of armour echoing down the corridor. They mounted their horses and rode away, I heard the neighing and tramping of hooves. I’ll never understand that. For if I were to wonder—’

‘Ciri.’

‘What?’

‘Don’t wonder about it.’

*

‘Stygga Castle,’ repeated Philippa Eilhart, looking at Fringilla Vigo from under her eyelashes. Fringilla didn’t blush. During the past three months she had managed to manufacture a magical cream which made the blood vessels contract. Thanks to the cream she didn’t blush, no matter how embarrassed she was.

‘Vilgefortz’s hide-out was in Stygga Castle,’ confirmed Assire var Anahid. ‘In Ebbing, above a mountain lake, whose name my informer, a simple soldier, was unable to recall.’

‘You said: “was”—’ Francesca Findabair observed.

‘Was,’ Philippa interrupted in mid-sentence. ‘Because Vilgefortz is dead, my dear ladies. He and his accomplices, the entire gang, are no more. That favour was done for us by no other than our good friend the Witcher, Geralt of Rivia. Whom we didn’t appreciate. None of us. About whom we were mistaken. All of us. Some of us less seriously, others more.’

All the sorceresses looked at Fringilla in unison, but the cream really did act effectively. Assire var Anahid sighed. Philippa tapped her hand on the table.

‘Although the multitude of activities connected to the war and the preparations for the peace negotiations excuse us,’ she said dryly, ‘we ought to admit that the fact of being thoroughly outmanoeuvred in the case of Vilgefortz is a defeat for the lodge. That must never happen to us again, my dear ladies.’

The lodge – with the exception of the ashen-pale Fringilla Vigo – nodded.

‘Right now,’ continued Philippa, ‘the Witcher Geralt is somewhere in Ebbing. Along with Yennefer and Ciri, whom he freed. We ought to ponder over how to find them—’

‘And that castle?’ Sabrina Glevissig interrupted. ‘Haven’t you forgotten something, Philippa?’

‘No, no I haven’t. The legend, if it should arise, ought to have a single, faithful version. Thus I’d like to ask you to do it, Sabrina. Take Keira and Triss with you. Sort out the matter. So that no trace remains.’

*

The roar of the explosion was heard as far away as in Maecht, and the flash – since it took place at night – was visible even in Metinna and Geso. The series of further tectonic shocks were perceptible even further away. At the remotest ends of the world.

***Congreve**, Estella or Stella, the daughter of Baron Otto de Congreve, espoused to the Count of Liddertal, managed his estates extremely judiciously following his early death, owing to which she amassed a considerable fortune. Enjoying the great estimation of Emperor Emhyr var Emreis (q.v.), she was a greatly important personage at his court. Although she held no position, it was known that the emperor was always in the habit of gracing her voice and opinion with his attention and consideration. Owing to her great affection for the young Empress Cirilla Fiona (see also), whom she loved like her own daughter, she was jokingly called the 'empress mother'. Having survived both the emperor and the empress, she died in 1331, and her immense estate was left in her will to distant relatives, a side branch of the Liddertals called the White Liddertals. They, however, being careless and giddy-headed people, utterly squandered it.*

Effenberg and Talbot,

Encyclopaedia Maxima Mundi, vol. III

CHAPTER TEN

The man stealing up to the camp, to give him his due, was as spry and cunning as a fox. He changed his position so swiftly, and moved so agilely and quietly, that he could have sneaked up on anyone. Anyone. But not Boreas Mun. Boreas Mun had too much experience in the matter of stalking.

'Come out, fellow!' he called, trying hard to colour his voice with self-assured and confident arrogance. 'Those tricks of yours are in vain. I see you. You're over there.'

One of the megaliths, a ridge of which bristled on the hillside, twitched against the deep blue, starry sky. It moved. And assumed human form.

Boreas turned some meat roasting on a spit, for he could smell burning. He laid his hand on his bow's riser, pretending to be leaning carelessly.

'My belongings are meagre.' He wove a gruff, metallic thread of warning into his apparently calm tone. 'There are a few of them. But I'm attached to them. I shall defend them to the death.'

'I'm no bandit,' said the man, who had pretended to be a menhir, in a deep voice. 'I'm a pilgrim.'

The pilgrim was tall and powerfully built, easily measuring seven feet, and in order to balance him on a weighing scales Boreas would have bet anything that a weight of at least five-and-twenty stone would have been required. His pilgrim's staff, a pole as thick as a cart shaft, looked like a walking cane in his hand. Boreas Mun was indeed amazed how such a huge clodhopper was able to steal up so agilely. He was also somewhat alarmed. His bow, a composite seventy-pounder, with which he could down an elk at four dozen paces, suddenly seemed a small, fragile child's toy.

'I'm a pilgrim,' repeated the powerful man. 'I mean no—'

'And the other man,' Boreas interrupted sharply. 'Let him come out too.'

'What oth—?' stammered the pilgrim and broke off, seeing a slender silhouette, noiseless as a shadow, emerging from the gloom on the other side. This time Boreas Mun wasn't at all amazed. The

other man – his way of moving immediately betrayed it to the tracker's trained eye – was an elf. And it is no disgrace to be sneaked up on by an elf.

'I ask for forgiveness,' said the elf in a strangely un-elven, slightly husky voice. 'I hid from both of you gentlemen not from evil intentions, but from fear. I'd turn that spit over.'

'Indeed,' said the pilgrim, leaning on his staff and sniffing audibly. 'The meat's cooked more than enough on that side.'

Boreas turned the spit, sighed and cleared his throat. And sighed again.

'Sit you down, gentlemen,' he decided. 'And wait. The animal will be done any minute. Ha, verily, he's a fool who denies meat to travellers on the road.'

The fat dribbled onto the fire with a hiss, the fire flared up. It became brighter.

The pilgrim was wearing a felt hat with a broad brim, whose shadow quite effectively covered his face. A turban made from colourful cloth, not covering his face, served as headgear for the elf. When they saw his face in the glare of the campfire, both men – Boreas and the pilgrim – shuddered. But didn't utter so much as a gasp, not even a soft one, at the sight of the face, once no doubt elfinly beautiful, now disfigured by a hideous scar running diagonally across his forehead, brow, nose and cheek to his chin.

Boreas Mun cleared his throat and turned the spit again.

'This sweet fragrance lured you to my campfire,' he stated rather than asked. 'Didn't it, gentlemen?'

'Indeed.' The pilgrim tipped the brim of his hat and his voice changed a little. 'I smelled out the roast from far away, with all due modesty. But I remained cautious. They were roasting a woman on a campfire I approached two days ago.'

'That's true,' confirmed the elf. 'I was there the next morning, I saw human bones in the ashes.'

'The next morning,' the pilgrim repeated in a slow, drawling voice, and Boreas would have bet anything that a nasty smile had appeared on the face concealed by the shadow of the hat. 'Have you been tracking me in secret for long, Master Elf?'

'Aye.'

‘And what stopped you revealing yourself?’

‘Good sense.’

‘The Elskerdeg pass—’ Boreas Mun turned the spit and interrupted the awkward silence ‘—is a place that doesn’t enjoy the best of reputations. I’ve also seen bones on campfires, skeletons on stakes. Men hanged from trees. This place is full of the savage followers of cruel cults. And creatures just waiting to eat you. According to hearsay.’

‘It’s not hearsay,’ the elf corrected him. ‘It’s the truth. And the further into the mountains towards the east, the worse it’ll be.’

‘Are you gentlemen also travelling eastwards? Beyond Elskerdeg? To Zerrikania? Or perhaps even further, to Hakland?’

Neither the pilgrim nor the elf replied. Boreas hadn’t really expected an answer. Firstly, the question had been indiscreet. Secondly, it had been stupid. From where they were it was only possible to go back or eastwards. Through Elskerdeg. Where he too was headed.

‘Roast’s ready.’ Boreas opened a butterfly knife with a deft flourish, meant to impress. ‘Go ahead, gentlemen. Help yourselves.’

The pilgrim had a cutlass, and the elf a dagger, which also didn’t resemble a kitchen knife at all. But all three blades, sharpened for more menacing purposes, served to carve meat that day. For some time all that could be heard was crunching and munching. And the sizzling of chewed bones thrown into the embers.

The pilgrim belched in a dignified manner.

‘Strange little creature,’ he said, examining the shoulder blade which he had gnawed clean and licked until it looked as though it had been kept for three days in an anthill. ‘It tasted a bit like goat, and it was as tender as coney . . . I don’t recall eating anything like that.’

‘It was a skrekk,’ said the elf, crunching the gristle with a crack. ‘Neither do I recall eating it at any time.’

Boreas cleared his throat quietly. The barely audible note of sarcastic merriment in the elf’s voice proved he knew that the roast came from an enormous rat with bloodshot eyes and huge teeth, only the tail of which measured three ells. The tracker had by no means hunted the gigantic rodent. He had shot it in self-defence,

but had decided to roast it. He was a sensible and clear-headed man. He wouldn't have eaten a rat scavenging on rubbish heaps and eating scraps. But it was a good three hundred miles from the narrow passage of the Elskerdeg pass to the nearest community capable of generating waste. The rat – or, as the elf had said, skrekk – must have been clean and healthy. It hadn't had any contact with civilisation. So there was nothing it could have been soiled by or infected with.

Soon the last, smallest bone, chewed and sucked clean, landed in the embers. The moon rose over the jagged range of the Fiery Mountains. The wind fed the fire and sparks shot up, dying out and fading amidst the countless twinkling stars.

'Long on the road, gentlemen?' Boreas Mun risked another none-too-discreet question, 'Here, in the Wildernesses? Left the Solveiga Gate behind you long since, if you'll pardon my asking?'

'Long since, long since,' said the pilgrim, 'is a relative thing. I passed through Solveiga the second day after the September full moon.'

'Me on the sixth day,' said the elf.

'Ha,' continued Boreas Mun, encouraged by the reaction. 'It's a wonder we've only met up now, because I also walked that way, or actually rode, for I still had a horse then.'

He fell silent, driving away the unpleasant thoughts and recollections linked to the horse and its loss. He was sure his accidental companions must also have had similar adventures. If they'd been walking the whole time they never would have caught up with him here, near Elskerdeg.

'I venture, thus,' he continued, 'that you set off right after the war, after the Peace of Cintra was concluded, gentlemen. It's none of my business, naturally, but I dare suppose that you were not pleased by the order and vision of the world created and established in Cintra.'

The lengthy silence that fell by the campfire was interrupted by distant howling. A wolf, probably. Although in the vicinity of the Elskerdeg pass you could never be certain.

'If I'm to be frank,' the elf spoke up unexpectedly, 'I didn't have the grounds to be pleased with the world and its image following the Peace of Cintra. Not to mention the new order.'

‘In my case it was similar,’ said the pilgrim, crossing his powerful forearms on his chest. ‘Though I came to realise it, as a friend said, *post factum*.’

Silence reigned for a long time. Even whatever had been howling on the pass was silent.

‘At first,’ continued the pilgrim – although Boreas and the elf had been ready to bet he would not – ‘At first, everything indicated that the Peace of Cintra would bring favourable changes, would create quite a tolerable world order. If not for everyone, then at least for me . . .’

‘If my memory serves me—’ Boreas cleared his throat ‘—the kings arrived in Cintra in April?’

‘The second of April, to be precise,’ the pilgrim corrected him. ‘It was, I recall, a full moon.’

*

Along the walls, positioned below the dark beams supporting a small gallery, hung rows of shields with colourful representations of the heraldic emblems and coats of arms of the Cintran nobility. A first glance revealed the differences between the now somewhat faded arms of the ancient families and those of families ennobled more recently during the reigns of Dagorad and Calanthe. The newer ones had vivid and not yet cracked paint, and no peppering of woodworm holes was visible on them.

Whereas the escutcheons of the more recently ennobled Nilfgaardian families, rewarded during the capture of the castle and the five-year imperial administration, had the most vivid colours.

When we regain Cintra, thought King Foltest, *it will be necessary to make sure the Cintrans don’t destroy those shields in a fervour of revival. Politics is one thing, the hall’s decor another. Changes in regimes cannot be a justification for vandalism.*

So everything began here, thought Dijkstra, looking around the great hall. *The celebrated betrothal banquet, during which the Steel Urcheon appeared and demanded the hand of Princess Pavetta . . . And Queen Calanthe engaged the Witcher . . .*

How bizarre are the twists of human fate, thought the spy, surprising himself at the banality of his own musings.

Five years ago, thought Queen Meve, *five years ago, the brain of Calanthe, the Lioness of the blood of the Cerbins, splashed onto the floor of the courtyard, this very courtyard I can see from the windows. Calanthe, whose proud portrait we saw in the corridor, was the penultimate living carrier of the royal blood. After her daughter, Pavetta, drowned, the only one left was her granddaughter. Cirilla. Unless the news that Cirilla is also dead is true.*

'Please.' Cyrus Engelkind Hemmelfart, the Hierarch of Novigrad, accepted on grounds of age, position and universal respect *per acclamationem* as the chairman of the meeting, beckoned with a trembling hand. 'Please take your seats.'

They found their chairs, which were marked by mahogany plaques, and sat down at the round table. Meve, Queen of Rivia and Lyria. Foltest, King of Temeria, and his vassal, King Venzlav of Brugge. Demavend, King of Aedirn. Henselt, King of Kaedwen. King Ethain of Cidaris. Young King Kistrin of Verden. Duke Nitert, head of the Redanian Regency Council. And Count Dijkstra.

We must rid ourselves of that spy, remove him from the conference table, thought the hierarch. *King Henselt and King Foltest, why, even young Kistrin, have taken the liberty of making sour remarks, so at any moment there'll be a* démarche *from the Nilfgaardian representatives. Sigismund Dijkstra is a man of unseemly breeding, and furthermore a person with a dirty past and bad reputation, a* persona turpis*. One cannot let the presence of a* persona turpis *infect the atmosphere of the negotiations.*

The head of the Nilfgaardian delegation, Baron Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen, who had been allotted a place at the round table immediately opposite Dijkstra, greeted the spy with a polite diplomatic bow.

Seeing that everybody was now seated, the Hierarch of Novigrad also sat down. Not without the help of pages supporting him by his trembling arms. The hierarch sat down on a chair made for Queen Calanthe many years before. The chair had an impressively high and richly decorated backrest, making it stand out among the other ones.

*

So it was here, thought Triss Merigold, looking around the chamber,

staring at the tapestries, paintings and numerous hunting trophies, and the antlers of a horned animal totally unfamiliar to her. *It was here, after the infamous shambles in the throne room, where the famous private conversation between Calanthe, the Witcher, Pavetta and the Enchanted Urcheon occurred. When Calanthe gave her agreement to that bizarre marriage. And Pavetta was already pregnant. Ciri was born almost eight months later . . . Ciri, the heir to the throne . . . The Lion Cub from the Lioness' blood . . . Ciri, my little sister. Who's still somewhere far away in the South. Fortunately, she's no longer alone. She's with Geralt and Yennefer. She's safe.*

Unless they've lied to me again.

'Sit down, dear ladies,' urged Philippa Eilhart, who had been scrutinising Triss closely for some time. 'In a short while the rulers of the world will begin making their inaugural speeches one after another; I wouldn't want to miss a word.'

The sorceresses, interrupting their furtive gossiping, quickly took their seats. Sheala de Tancarville, in a boa of silver fox, which gave a feminine accent to her severe male outfit. Assire var Anahid, in a dress of mauve silk, which extremely gracefully combined modest simplicity with chic elegance. Francesca Findabair, regal, as usual. Ida Emean aep Sivney, mysterious, as usual. Margarita Laux-Antille, distinguished and serious. Sabrina Glevissig in turquoise. Keira Metz in green and daffodil yellow. And Fringilla Vigo. Dejected. Sad. And pale with a truly deathly, morbid, utterly ghastly paleness.

Triss Merigold was sitting beside Keira, opposite Fringilla. A painting depicting a horseman galloping headlong down a road between an avenue of alders hung above the head of the Nilfgaardian sorceress. The alders were holding out their monstrous arm-like boughs towards the rider, sneeringly smiling with the ghastly maws of their hollows. Triss shuddered involuntarily.

The three-dimensional telecommunicator standing in the middle of the table was active. Philippa Eilhart used a spell to focus the image and sound.

'Ladies, as you can see and hear,' she said, not without a sneer, 'the rulers of the world are, at this very moment, getting down to deciding the fate of it in the throne room of Cintra, plumb beneath us, one floor lower. And we, here, one floor above them, will be watching over so that the boys don't go too wild.'

*

Other howlers joined the howler howling in Elskerdeg. Boreas had no doubt. They weren't wolves.

'I hadn't expected much from those Cintran talks either,' he said, in order to revive the dead conversation. 'Why, no one I know expected any good to come of them.'

'The simple fact that the negotiations began was important,' calmly protested the pilgrim. 'A simple fellow, and I indeed am just such a fellow, if I may say so, thinks simply. A simple fellow knows that the warring kings and emperors aren't that furious with each other. If they could have, if they'd had the strength, they'd have killed each other. That they've stopped trying to kill each other, and instead of that have sat down to a round table? That means they have no more power. They are, to put it simply, powerless. And the result of that powerlessness is that no armed men are attacking a simple fellow's homestead; they aren't killing, aren't mutilating, aren't burning down buildings, they aren't cutting children's throats, aren't raping wives, or driving people into captivity. No. Instead of that they've gathered in Cintra and are negotiating. Let's rejoice!'

The elf finished poking with his stick a log in the fire that was shooting sparks and looked askance at the pilgrim.

'Even a simple fellow,' he said, not concealing the sarcasm, 'even if he's joyful, why, even euphoric, ought to understand that politics is also a war, just conducted a little differently. He ought to understand that negotiations are like trade. They have the same self-propelling mechanism. Negotiated successes are bought with concessions. You win some, you lose some. In other words, in order for some people to be bought, others have to be sold.'

'Indeed,' the pilgrim said after a while. 'It's so simple and obvious that every man understands it. Even a simple one.'

*

'No, no and once more, no!' yelled King Henselt, banging both fists on the table so hard he knocked over a goblet and made the inkwells jump. 'No discussions on that subject! No horse-trading in

this matter! That's the end, that's that, *deireadh*!'

'Henselt.' Foltest spoke calmly, soberly and very placatingly. 'Don't make things difficult. And don't embarrass us in front of His Excellency with your yelling.'

Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen, negotiator for the Empire of Nilfgaard, bowed with a false smile which was meant to imply that the King of Kaedwen's antics were neither shocking nor bothering him.

'We are negotiating with the Empire,' continued Foltest, 'and amongst ourselves we've suddenly begun to bite each other like dogs? It's a disgrace, Henselt.'

'We've reached agreement with Nilfgaard in matters as difficult as Dol Angra and Riverdell,' said Dijkstra apparently casually. 'It would be stupid—'

'I won't have such remarks!' roared Henselt, this time so loudly that not even a buffalo would have matched him. 'I won't put up with such remarks, particularly from spies, of all people! I'm the king, for fuck's sake!'

'That's quite plain,' snorted Meve. Demavend, his back to them, was looking at the escutcheons on the wall, smiling contemptuously, quite as if the game was not about his kingdom.

'Enough,' panted Henselt, eyes roving around. 'Enough, enough by the Gods, or my blood will boil. I said: not a span of land. No, but no, repossession! I won't agree to my kingdom being reduced by so much as a span, even half a span of land! The Gods entrusted me with the honour of Kaedwen and only to the Gods will I give it up! The Lower Marches is our land . . . Our . . . eth . . . ethic . . . ethnic land. The Lower Marches have belonged to Kaedwen for centuries . . .'

'Upper Aedirn,' Dijkstra spoke again, 'has belonged to Kaedwen since last year. To be precise, since the twenty-fourth of July last year. From the moment a Kaedwenian occupying force invaded it.'

'I request,' Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen said without being asked, 'for it to be minuted *ad futuram rei memoriam* that the Empire of Nilfgaard had nothing to do with that annexation.'

'Apart from the fact that it was pillaging Vengerberg at the time.'

'*Nihil ad rem*!'

‘Indeed?’

‘Gentlemen!’ Foltest admonished.

‘The Kaedwenian Army,’ rasped Henselt, ‘entered the Lower Marches as liberators! My soldiers were welcomed there with flowers! My soldiers—’

‘Your *bandits*.’ King Demavend’s voice was calm, but it was apparent from his face how much effort it was costing him. ‘Your brigands, who invaded my kingdom with a murderous *hassa*, murdered, raped and looted. Gentlemen! We have gathered here and have been debating for a week, we’re debating about what the future face of the world should be. By the Gods, is it to be a face of crime and pillage? Is the murderous *status quo* to be maintained? Are plundered goods to remain in the hands of the thug and the marauder?’

Henselt seized a map from the table, tore it up with a violent movement and hurled it towards Demavend. The King of Aedirn didn’t even move.

‘My army,’ wheezed Henselt, and his face took on the colour of good, old wine, ‘captured the Marches from the Nilfgaardians. Your woeful kingdom didn’t even exist then, Demavend. I shall say more: had it not been for my army you wouldn’t even have a kingdom today. I’d like to see you driving the Black Cloaks over the Yaruga and beyond Dol Angra without my help. Thus the statement that you’re king by my grace wouldn’t be much of an exaggeration. But here my generosity ends! I said I won’t give up even a span of my land. I won’t let my kingdom be diminished.’

‘Nor I!’ Demavend stood up. ‘We shall not reach agreement, then!’

‘Gentlemen.’ Cyrus Hemmelfart, the Hierarch of Novigrad, who had been slumbering until then, suddenly spoke in a placatory manner. ‘Some kind of compromise is surely possible—’

‘The Empire of Nilfgaard,’ began again Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen, who liked to butt in out of the blue, ‘will not accept any deal that would be damaging to the Land of Elves in Dol Blathanna. If necessary, I shall read you once again the contents of the memorandum . . .’

Henselt, Foltest and Dijkstra snorted, but Demavend looked at the imperial ambassador calmly and almost benignly.

‘For the general good and for peace,’ he declared, ‘I recognise the autonomy of Dol Blathanna. Not as a kingdom, but as a duchy. The condition is that Duchess Enid an Gleanna pays liege homage to me and obligates herself to grant equal rights and privileges to humans and elves. I’m prepared to do that, as I have said, *pro publico bono*.’

‘Spoken like a true king,’ said Meve.

‘*Salus publica lex suprema est,’* said Hierarch Hemmelfart, who had also been searching for some time for the chance to show off his knowledge of diplomatic jargon.

‘I shall add, nonetheless,’ continued Demavend, looking at the pompous Henselt, ‘that the concession regarding Dol Blathanna is not a precedent. It is the only encroachment on the integrity of my lands to which I shall agree. I shall not recognise any other partition. The Kaedwenian Army that invaded my borders as an aggressor and invader has one week to abandon the illegally occupied fortalices and castles of Upper Aedirn. That is the condition of my further participation in this conference. And because *verba volant*, my secretary shall submit to the minutes an official *démarche* in the case.’

‘Henselt?’ Foltest looked hesitantly at the bearded king.

‘Never!’ roared the King of Kaedwen, knocking over a chair and hopping like a chimpanzee stung by a hornet. ‘I’ll never give up the Marches! Over my dead body! Never! Nothing will make me! No force! No fucking force!’

And in order to prove he was also well-born and educated he howled: ‘*Non possumus!*’

*

‘I’ll give him *non possumus*, the old fool!’ snorted Sabrina Glevissig in the upstairs chamber. ‘You need not worry, ladies, I’ll force that blockhead to recognise the repossession demands in the case of Upper Aedirn. The Kaedwenian Army will leave before ten days are up. The matter is clear. No two ways about it. If any of you doubted it I have the right to feel piqued, indeed.’

Philippa Eilhart and Sheala de Tancarville expressed their acknowledgement by bowing. Assire var Anahid gave her thanks

with a smile.

'All that remains today,' said Sabrina, 'is to settle the matter of Dol Blathanna. We know the contents of Emperor Emhyr's memorandum. The kings down below still haven't had the chance to discuss that matter, but have signalled their preferences. And the most – I would say – interested party has taken a stance. That's King Demavend.'

'Demavend's stance,' said Sheala de Tancarville, wrapping the silver fox boa around her neck, 'bears the features of a far-reaching compromise. It's a positive, considered and balanced stance. Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen will have considerable difficulty trying to argue in the direction of greater concessions. I don't know if he'll want to.'

'He will,' Assire var Anahid stated calmly. 'Because those are the instructions he has from Nilfgaard. He will invoke *ad referendum* and submit notes. He'll argue for at least a day. After that time has passed he'll begin to make concessions—'

'That's normal,' Sabrina Glevissig cut her off. 'It's normal that they'll finally find some common ground and agree on something. We won't wait for that, we'll decide right away what they'll ultimately be permitted to do. Francesca! Say something! It's about your country, after all.'

'Just for that reason—' the Daisy of the Valleys smiled very beautifully '—just for that reason I'm keeping quiet, Sabrina.'

'Get over your pride,' Margarita Laux-Antille said gravely. 'We have to know what we can allow the kings.'

Francesca Findabair smiled even more beautifully.

'For the sake of peace and *pro bono publico*,' she said, 'I agree to King Demavend's offer. From this moment you may stop addressing me as Your Royal Highness, my dear girls; an ordinary "Your Enlightenment" will suffice.'

'Elven jokes,' Sabrina grimaced, 'don't amuse me at all, probably because I don't understand them. What about Demavend's other conditions?'

Francesca fluttered her eyelashes.

'I agree to the re-immigration of human settlers and the return of their estates,' she said gravely. 'I guarantee equality to all races . . .'

'For the love of the Gods, Enid,' laughed Philippa Eilhart.

‘Don’t agree to everything! Set some conditions!’

‘I shall.’ The elf suddenly grew more serious. ‘I don’t agree to liege homage. I want Dol Blathanna as a freehold. No vassal duties apart from an oath of loyalty and no actions to the detriment of the suzerain.’

‘Demavend won’t agree,’ Philippa commented curtly. ‘He won’t waive the income and rent that the Valley of Flowers gave him.’

‘In that matter—’ Francesca raised her eyebrows ‘—I’m prepared to negotiate bilaterally; I’m sure we can achieve consensus. The freehold doesn’t demand payment, but it doesn’t forbid nor exclude it either.’

‘And what about familial inheritance?’ Philippa Eilhart kept digging. ‘What about primogeniture? By agreeing to a freehold, Foltest will want a guarantee of the duchy’s indivisibility.’

‘My complexion and figure may indeed beguile Foltest,’ Francesca smiled again, ‘but I’m surprised at you, Philippa. The age when falling pregnant was a possibility is far, far behind me. Regarding primogeniture and fideicommissum Demavend ought not to be afraid. For I shall be the *ultimus familiae* of the dynasty of Dol Blathanna’s monarchs. But in spite of the age difference Demavend sees as advantageous, we will be resolving the issue of inheritance not with him, but rather his grandchildren. I assure you, ladies, there will be no moot points in this matter.’

‘Not in this one,’ agreed Assire var Anahid, looking into the sorceress’s elven eyes. ‘And what about the matter of the Squirrel commando units? What about the elves who fought for the Empire? If I’m not mistaken, this mainly concerns your subjects, Madam Francesca?’

The Daisy of the Valleys stopped smiling. She glanced at Ida Emean, but the silent elf from the Blue Mountains avoided her gaze.

‘*Pro publico bono*—’ she began and broke off. Assire, also very serious, nodded her understanding.

‘What to do?’ she said slowly. ‘Everything has its price. War demands casualties. Peace, it turns out, does too.’

*

‘Aye, true in every respect,’ the pilgrim repeated pensively, looking at the elf sitting with head lowered. ‘Peace talks are a market. A country fair. So that some people can be bought, others must be sold. Thus the world runs its course. The point is not to pay too high a price . . .’

‘And not to sell oneself too cheaply,’ finished the elf, without raising his head.

*

‘Traitors! Despicable good-for-nothings!’

‘Whoresons!’

‘*An’badraigh aen cuach*!’

‘Nilfgaardian dogs!’

‘Silence!’ roared Hamilcar Danza, slamming an armoured fist onto the balustrade of the cloister. The archers on the gallery pointed their crossbows at the elves crowded into the cul-de-sac.

‘Calm down!’ Danza roared even more loudly. ‘Enough! Quieten down, gentlemen officers! A little more dignity!’

‘Do you have the audacity to talk of dignity, blackguard?’ yelled Coinneach Dá Reo. ‘We spilled blood for you, accursed Dh’oine! For you and your emperor, who received an oath of fealty from us! And this is how you repay it? You hand us over to those murderers from the North? As felons! As criminals!’

‘Enough, I said!’ Danza slammed his fist hard onto the balustrade again. ‘Acknowledge this *fait accompli*, gentle-elves! The agreements reached in Cintra, as conditions of the peace treaty being concluded, impose on the Empire the duty to turn over war criminals to the Nordlings—’

‘Criminals?’ shouted Riordain. ‘Criminals? You wretched Dh’oine!’

‘War criminals,’ repeated Danza, paying no attention whatsoever to the unrest below him. ‘Any officers who stand accused of proven charges of terrorism, murdering civilians, killing and torturing captives, massacring the wounded in field hospitals—’

‘You whoresons!’ yelled Angus Bri Cri. ‘We killed, because we

were at war!'

'We killed on your orders!'

'*Cuach'te aep arse, bloede Dh'oine!*'

'It has been ruled!' repeated Danza. 'Your insults and shouts won't change anything. Please go to the guardhouse one at a time and put up no resistance while being manacled.'

'We should have stayed when they were fleeing across the Yaruga.' Riordain ground his teeth. 'We should have stayed and fought on in the commando units. But we, idiots, fools, dolts, kept our soldierly oath! Serves us right!'

Isengrim Faoiltiarna, the Iron Wolf, the most celebrated, now almost legendary commander of the Squirrels, presently an imperial colonel, tore the silver lightning bolts of the Vrihedd Brigade from his sleeve and spaulder, stony-faced, and threw them down in the courtyard. The other officers followed his example. Hamilcar Danza frowned from the gallery as he watched this.

'An irresponsible demonstration,' he said. 'Furthermore, in your place I wouldn't rid myself so lightly of imperial insignia. I feel the duty to inform you that as imperial officers, during the negotiations of the conditions of the peace treaty, you were guaranteed fair trials, lenient sentences and a swift amnesty . . .'

The elves crowded into the cul-de-sac roared in unison with laughter that thundered and boomed amidst the walls.

'I also draw your attention to the fact,' Hamilcar Danza added calmly, 'that it's only you we are handing over to the Nordlings. Thirty-two officers. And not one of the soldiers you commanded. Not one.'

The laughter in the cul-de-sac ceased in an instant.

*

The wind blew on the campfire, stirring up a shower of sparks and blowing smoke into their eyes. Again, howling could be heard from the pass.

'They prostituted everything.' The elf broke the silence. 'Everything was for sale. Honour, loyalty, our bonds, vows, everyday decency . . . They were simply chattels, having a value as

long as there was a trade in them and a demand. And once there wasn't, they weren't worth a straw and were discarded. Onto the dust heap.'

'Onto the dust heap of history,' the pilgrim nodded. 'You're right, master elf. That's how it was back then in Cintra. Everything had its price. And was worth as much as it could be traded for. The market opened every morning. And like a real market, now and again there'd be unexpected booms and crashes. And just like a real market, one couldn't help but get the impression somebody was pulling the strings.'

*

'Am I hearing right?' Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen asked in a slow, drawling voice, expressing disbelief in his tone and facial expression. 'Do my ears deceive me?'

Berengar Leuvaarden, special imperial envoy, didn't deign to reply. Sprawled in an armchair, he continued to contemplate the ripples of wine as he rocked his goblet.

Shilard puffed himself up, then assumed a mask of contempt and superiority. Which said, *either you're lying, blackguard, or you wish to trick me, test me out. In both cases I've seen through you*.

'So am I to understand,' he said, sticking his chest out, 'that after far-reaching concessions in the matter of borders, in the matter of prisoners of war and the repayment of spoils, in the matter of the officers of the Vrihedd Brigade and the Scoia'tael commando units, the emperor orders me to compromise and accept the Nordlings' impossible claims regarding the repatriation of settlers?'

'You understood perfectly, Baron,' replied Berengar Leuvaarden, drawing out his syllables characteristically. 'Indeed, I'm full of admiration for your perspicacity.'

'By the Great Sun, Lord Leuvaarden, do you in the capital ever consider the consequences of your decisions? The Nordlings are already whispering that our empire is a giant with feet of clay! Now they're crying that they've defeated us, beaten us, driven us away! Does the emperor understand that to make further concessions means to accept their arrogant and excessive ultimatums? Does the

Emperor understand that if they treat this as a sign of weakness it may have lamentable results in the future? Does the Emperor understand, finally, what fate awaits those several thousand settlers of ours in Brugge and Lyria?'

Berengar Leuvaarden stopped rocking his goblet and fixed his coal-black eyes on Shilard.

'I have given you an imperial order, Baron,' he muttered through his teeth. 'When you've carried it out and returned to Nilfgaard you may ask the emperor yourself why he's so unwise. Perhaps you mean to reprimand the emperor. Scold him. Chide him. Why not? But alone. Without my mediation.'

Aha, thought Shilard. *Now I know. The new Stefan Skellen is sitting before me. And I must behave with him as with Skellen*.

But it's obvious he didn't come here without a goal. An ordinary courier could have brought the order.

'Well,' he began, apparently freely, in a positively familiar tone. 'Woe to the vanquished! But the imperial order is clear and precise, and it shall be carried out thus. I shall also try hard to make it look like the result of negotiations and not abject submissiveness. I know something about that. I've been a diplomat for thirty years. With four generations before me. My family is one of the wealthiest, most prominent. . . and influential—'

'I know, I know, to be sure.' Leuvaarden interrupted him with a slight smirk. 'That's why I'm here.'

Shilard bowed slightly. And waited patiently.

'The difficulties in understanding,' began the envoy, rocking his goblet, 'occurred because you, dear Baron, chose to think that victory and conquest are based on senseless genocide. On thrusting a standard somewhere in the blood-soaked ground and crying: "All this is mine, I have captured it!" A similar opinion is, regrettably, quite widespread. For me though, sir, as also for the people who gave me my powers, victory and conquest depend on diametrically different things. Victory should look thus: the defeated are compelled to buy goods manufactured by the victors. Why, they do it willingly, because the victors' goods are better and cheaper. The victors' currency is stronger than the currency of the defeated, and the vanquished trust it much more than their own. Do you understand me, Baron Fitz-Oesterlen? Are you beginning slowly to differentiate the victors from the vanquished? Do you comprehend

whom woe actually betides?'

The ambassador nodded to confirm he did.

'But in order to consolidate the victory and render it binding,' Leuvaarden continued a moment later, drawing out his syllables, 'peace must be concluded. Quickly and at any cost. Not some truce or armistice, but peace. A creative compromise. A constructive accord. And without the imposition of trade embargoes, retorsions of customs duty and protectionism.'

Shilard nodded again to confirm he knew what it was about.

'Not without reason have we destroyed their agriculture and ruined their industry,' Leuvaarden continued in a calm, drawling, unemotional voice. 'We did it in order for them to have to buy our goods owing to a scarcity of theirs. But our merchants and goods won't get through hostile and closed borders. And what will happen then? I shall tell you what will happen then, my dear Baron. A crisis of over-production will occur, because our manufactories are working at full tilt. The maritime trading companies who entered into collaboration with Novigrad and Kovir would also suffer great losses. Your influential family, my dear baron, has considerable shares in those companies. And the family, as you are no doubt aware, is the basic unit of society. Are you aware of that?'

'I am.' Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen lowered his voice, although the chamber was tightly sealed against eavesdropping. 'I understand, I comprehend. Though I'd like to be certain I'm carrying out the emperor's order . . . Not that of some . . . corporation . . .'

'Emperors pass,' drawled Leuvaarden. 'And corporations survive. And will survive. But that's a truism. I understand your anxieties, Baron. You can be certain, sir, that I'm carrying out an order issued by the emperor. Aimed at the empire's good and in its interest. Issued, I don't deny it, as a result of advice given to the emperor by a certain corporation.'

The envoy opened his collar and shirt, demonstrating a golden medallion on which was depicted a star set in a triangle surrounded by flames.

'A pretty ornament,' Shilard confirmed with a smile and a slight bow that he understood. 'I'm aware it is very expensive . . . and exclusive . . . Can they be had anywhere?'

'No,' stated Berengar Leuvaarden with emphasis. 'You have to earn them.'

*

‘If you permit, m’lady and gentlemen.’ The voice of Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen assumed a special tone, already familiar to the debaters, that signified that what the ambassador was about to say was considered by him to be of the utmost importance. ‘If you permit, m’lady and gentlemen, I shall read the *aide memoire* sent to me by His Imperial Highness Emhyr var Emreis, by grace of the Great Sun, the Emperor of Nilfgaard . . .’

‘Oh no. Not again.’ Demavend ground his teeth, and Dijkstra just groaned. This did not escape Shilard’s attention, because it couldn’t have.

‘The note is long,’ he admitted. ‘So I shall precis it, rather than read it. His Imperial Highness expresses his great gladness concerning the course of the negotiations, and as a peace-loving man joyfully receives the compromises and reconciliations achieved. His Imperial Highness wishes further progress in the negotiations and a resolution to them to the mutual benefit of—’

‘Let us get down to business then,’ Foltest interrupted in mid-sentence. ‘And briskly!’ Let’s finish it to our mutual benefit and return home.’

‘That’s right,’ said Henselt, who had the furthest to go. ‘Let’s finish, for if we dally we’re liable to be caught by the winter!’

‘One more compromise awaits us,’ reminded Meve. ‘A matter which we have barely touched on several times. Probably for fear that we’re liable to fall out over it. It’s time to overcome that fear. The problem won’t vanish just because we’re afraid of it.’

‘Indeed,’ confirmed Foltest. ‘So let’s get to work. Let’s settle the status of Cintra, the problem of succession to the throne, of Calanthe’s heir. It’s a difficult problem, but I don’t doubt we’ll cope with it. Shall we not, Your Excellency?’

‘Oh.’ Fitz-Oesterlen smiled diplomatically and mysteriously. ‘I’m certain that the matter of the succession to the throne of Cintra will go like clockwork. It’s an easier matter than you all suppose, m’lady and gentlemen.’

*

‘I submit for consideration,’ announced Philippa Eilhart in quite an indisputable tone, ‘the following project: we shall turn Cintra into a trust territory. We’ll grant Foltest of Temeria a mandate.’

‘That Foltest is getting too big for his boots,’ Sabrina Glevissig grimaced. ‘He has too large an appetite. Brugge, Sodden, Angren—’

‘We need—’ Philippa cut her off ‘—a strong state at the mouth of the Yaruga. And on the Marnadal Stairs.’

‘I don’t deny it.’ Sheala de Tancarville nodded. ‘It’s of necessity to us. But not to Emhyr var Emreis. And compromise – not conflict – is our aim.’

‘A few days ago,’ reminded Francesca Findabair, ‘Shilard suggested building a demarcation line, dividing Cintra into spheres of influence; into northern and southern zones—’

‘Nonsense and childishness,’ snorted Margarita Laux-Antille. ‘Such divisions are senseless, are only the seeds of conflicts.’

‘I think Cintra ought to be turned into a jointly governed principality,’ said Sheala. ‘With power exercised by appointed representatives of the northern kingdoms and the Empire of Nilfgaard. The city and port of Cintra will receive the status of a free city . . . Would you like to say something, my dear Madam Assire? Please do. I admit I usually prefer discourses consisting of full, complete utterances, but please proceed. We’re listening.’

All of the sorceresses, including Fringilla Vigo, who was as white as a sheet, fixed their eyes on Assire var Anahid. The Nilfgaardian sorceress wasn’t disconcerted.

‘I suggest we concentrate on other problems,’ she declared in her soft, pleasant voice, ‘Let’s leave Cintra in peace. I have so far been unable to inform you all of certain matters about which I’ve received reports. The matter of Cintra, distinguished sisters, has already been solved and taken care of.’

‘I beg your pardon?’ Philippa’s eyes narrowed. ‘What do you mean by that, if one may ask?’

Triss Merigold gasped loudly. She had already guessed, already knew what was meant by it.

*

Vattier de Rideaux was downhearted and morose. His charming and wonderful lover, the golden-haired Cantarella, had dropped him, suddenly and unexpectedly, without giving any arguments or explanations. For Vattier it was a blow, an awful blow, following which he moped about dejectedly, and was agitated, distracted and stupefied. He had to be very attentive, be very guarded, so as not to blot his copybook, nor make a faux pas in conversation with the emperor. Times of great changes did not favour the agitated and incompetent.

'We have already repaid the Guild of Merchants for their invaluable help,' said Emhyr var Emreis, frowning. 'We've given them enough privileges, more than they received from the previous three emperors combined. As regards Berengar Leuvaarden, we're also indebted to him for his help in uncovering the conspiracy. He has received a senior and remunerative position. But if it turns out he is incompetent he'll be kicked out, in spite of his services. It would be well if he knew that.'

'I'll do my utmost, Your Highness. And what about Dijkstra? And that mysterious informer of his?'

'Dijkstra would rather die than reveal who his informer is. It would indeed be worth repaying him for that invaluable news . . . But how? Dijkstra won't accept anything from me.'

'If I may, Your Imperial Majesty—'

'Speak.'

'Dijkstra will accept information. Something he doesn't know and would like to. Your Highness can repay him with information.'

'Well done, Vattier.'

Vattier de Rideaux sighed with relief. He turned his head away and took a deep breath. For which reason he was first to notice the ladies approaching. Stella Congreve, the Countess of Liddertal, and the fair-haired girl entrusted into her care.

'They're coming.' He gestured with a movement of his eyebrows. 'Your Imperial Majesty, may I take the liberty of reminding . . . Reasons of state . . . The empire's interests—'

'Stop.' Emhyr var Emreis cut him off truculently. 'I said I'd ponder it. I'll think the matter over and make a decision. And after taking it I'll inform you what the decision is.'

‘Yes, Your Imperial Majesty.’

‘What else?’ The White Flame of Nilfgaard impatiently slapped a glove against the hip of a marble nereid adorning the fountain’s pedestal. ‘Why are you still here, Vattier?’

‘The matter of Stefan Skellen—’

‘I shall not show mercy. Death to the traitor. But after an honest and thorough trial.’

‘Yes, Your Imperial Majesty.’

Emhyr didn’t even glance at him as he bowed and walked away. He was looking at Stella Congreve. And the fair-haired girl.

Here comes the interest of the empire, he thought. *The bogus princess, the bogus queen of Cintra. The bogus ruler of the mouth of the River Yarra, which means so much to the empire. Here she approaches, eyes lowered, terrified, in a white, silk dress and green gloves with a peridot necklace on her slight décolletage. Back then in Darn Rowan, I complimented her on that dress, praised the choice of jewellery. Stella knows my taste. But what am I to do with the young thing? Put her on a pedestal?*

‘Noble ladies.’ He bowed first. In Nilfgaard – apart from in the throne room – courtly respect and courtesy regarding women even applied to the emperor.

They responded with deep curtseys and lowered heads. They were standing before a courteous emperor, but still an emperor.

Emhyr had had enough of etiquette.

‘Stay here, Stella,’ he ordered dryly. ‘And you, girl, will accompany me on a stroll. Take my arm. Head up. Enough, I’ve had enough of those curtseys. It’s just a walk.’

They walked down an avenue, amidst shrubs and hedges barely in leaf. The imperial bodyguard, soldiers from the elite Impera Brigade, the famous Salamanders, stayed on the sidelines, but always on the alert. They knew when not to disturb the emperor.

They passed a pond, empty and melancholy. The ancient carp released by Emperor Torres had died two days earlier. *I’ll release a new, young, strong, beautiful specimen*, thought Emhyr var Emreis, *I’ll order a medal with my likeness and the date to be attached to it.* Vaesse deireadh aep eigean. *Something has ended, something is beginning. It’s a new era. New times. A new life. So let there be a new carp too,*

dammit.

Deep in thought, he almost forgot about the girl on his arm. About her warmth, her lily-of-the-valley fragrance and the interest of the empire. In that order, and no other.

They stood by the pond, in the middle of which an artificial island rose out of the water, and on it a rock garden, a fountain and a marble sculpture.

'Do you know what that figure depicts?'

She didn't reply right away. 'Yes, Your Imperial Majesty. It's a pelican, which pecks its own breast open to feed its young on its blood. It is an allegory of noble sacrifice. And also—'

'I'm listening to you attentively.'

'—and also of great love.'

'Do you think—' he turned her to face him and pursed his lips '—that a torn-open breast hurts less because of that?'

'I don't know . . .' she stammered. 'Your Imperial Majesty . . . I . . .'

He took hold of her hand. He felt her shudder; the shudder ran along his hand, arm and shoulder.

'My father,' he said, 'was a great ruler, but never had a head for legends or myths, never had time for them. And always mixed them up. Whenever he brought me here, to the park, I remember it like yesterday, he always said that the sculpture shows a pelican rising from its ashes. Well, girl, at least smile when the emperor tells a funny story. Thank you. That's much better. The thought that you aren't glad to be walking here with me would be unpleasant to me. Look me in the eyes.'

'I'm glad . . . to be able to be here . . . with Your Imperial Majesty. It's an honour for me, I know . . . But also a great joy. I'm enjoying—'

'Really? Or is it perhaps just courtly flattery? Etiquette, the good school of Stella Congreve? A line that Stella has ordered you to learn by heart? Admit it, girl.'

She was silent, and lowered her eyes.

'Your emperor has asked you a question,' repeated Emhyr var Emreis. 'And when the emperor asks no one can dare be silent. No one can dare to lie either, of course.'

‘Truly,’ she said melodiously. ‘I’m truly glad, Your Imperial Majesty.’

‘I believe you,’ Emhyr said a moment later. ‘I believe you. Although I’m surprised.’

‘I also . . .’ she whispered back. ‘I’m also surprised.’

‘I beg your pardon? Don’t be shy, please.’

‘I’d like to be able . . . to go for walks more often. And talk. But I understand . . . I understand that it’s not possible.’

‘You understand well.’ He bit his lip. ‘Emperors rule their empires, but two things they cannot rule: their hearts and their time. Those two things belong to the empire.’

‘I know that only too well,’ she whispered.

‘I shall not be staying here long,’ he said after a moment of oppressive silence. ‘I must ride to Cintra and grace with my person the ceremony of the peace treaty being signed. You will return to Darn Rowan . . . Raise your head, girl. Oh no. That’s the second time you’ve sniffed in my presence. And what’s that in your eyes? Tears? Oh, those are serious breaches of etiquette. I will have to express my most serious discontent to the Countess of Liddertal. Raise your head, I said . . .’

‘Please . . . forgive Madam Stella . . . Your Imperial Majesty. It’s my fault. Only mine. Madam Stella has taught me . . . And prepared me well.’

‘I’ve noticed and appreciate that. Don’t worry, Stella Congreve isn’t in danger of my disfavour. And never has been. I was making fun of you. Reprehensibly.’

‘I noticed,’ whispered the girl, paling, horrified by her own audacity. But Emhyr just laughed. Somewhat stiffly.

‘I prefer you like that,’ he stated. ‘Believe me. Bold. Just like —’

He broke off. Like my daughter, he thought. A sense of guilt tormented him like a dog worrying at him.

The girl didn’t take her eyes off him. *It’s not just Stella’s work*, thought Emhyr. *It really is her nature. In spite of appearances she’s a diamond that’s hard to scratch. No. I won’t let Vattier murder this child. Cintra is Cintra, and the interest of the empire is the interest of the empire, but this matter seems only to have one sensible and honourable*

solution.

‘Give me your hand.’

It was an order delivered in a stern voice and tone. But in spite of that he couldn’t help but get the impression it was carried out willingly. Without compulsion.

Her hand was small and cool. But wasn’t trembling now.

‘What’s your name? Just please don’t say it’s Cirilla Fiona.’

‘Cirilla Fiona.’

‘I feel like punishing you, girl. Severely.’

‘I know, Your Imperial Majesty. I deserve it. But I . . . I have to be Cirilla Fiona.’

‘One might suppose you regret you are not she,’ he said, not letting go of her hand.

‘I do,’ she whispered. ‘I do regret I am not she.’

‘Indeed?’

‘If I were . . . the real Cirilla . . . the emperor would look more favourably on me. But I’m only a counterfeit. A poor imitation. A double, not worthy of anything. Nothing . . .’

He turned around suddenly and grabbed her by the arms. And released her at once. He took a step back.

‘Yearning for a crown? Power?’ he was speaking softly, but quickly, pretending not to see as she denied it with abrupt movements of her head. ‘Honours? Accolades? Luxuries—’

He broke off, breathing heavily. Pretending he couldn’t see the girl still shaking her lowered head, still denying further hurtful accusations, perhaps all the more hurtful because of being unexpressed.

He breathed out deeply and loudly.

‘Do you know, little moth, that what you see before you is a flame?’

‘I do, Your Imperial Majesty.’

They were silent for a long time. The scent of spring suddenly made them feel light-headed. Both of them.

‘In spite of appearances,’ Emhyr finally said dully, ‘being empress is not an easy job. I don’t know if I’ll be able to love you.’

She nodded to show she also knew. He saw a tear on her cheek. Just like in Stygga Castle, he felt the tiny shard of cold glass lodged in his heart shift.

He hugged her, pressed her hard to his chest, stroked her hair, which smelled of lilies-of-the-valleys.

'My poor little one . . .' he said in an unfamiliar voice. 'My little one, my poor raison d'état.'

*

Bells rang throughout Cintra. In a stately manner, deeply, solemnly. But somehow strangely mournfully.

Unusual looks, thought Hierarch Hemmelfart, looking, like everybody else, at the hanging portrait which measured, like all the others, at least one yard by two. *Strange looks. I'm absolutely certain she's some kind of half-breed. I'd swear she has the blood of the accursed elves in her veins.*

Pretty, thought Foltest, *prettier than the miniature the people from the intelligence service showed me. Ah well, portraits usually flatter.*

Utterly unlike Calanthe, thought Meve. *Utterly unlike Roegner. Utterly unlike Pavetta . . . Hmmm . . . There've been rumours . . . But no, that's impossible. She must have royal blood, must be the rightful ruler of Cintra. She must. It is demanded by raison d'état. And history.*

She's not the one I saw in my dreams, thought Esterad Thyssen, King of Kovir, who had recently arrived in Cintra. *She's certainly not that one. But I shan't tell that to anyone. I'll keep it to myself and my Zuleyka. Zuleyka and I shall decide how we shall use the knowledge those dreams gave us.*

She was almost my wife, that Ciri, thought Kistrin of Verden. *I'd have been Duke of Cintra then, according to custom the heir to the throne . . . And I'd probably have perished like Calanthe. It was fortunate, oh, it was fortunate that she ran away from me then.*

Not even for a moment did I believe in the tale of great love at first sight, thought Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen. *Not even for a moment. And yet Emhyr is marrying that girl. He's rejecting the chance for reconciliation with the dukes. Instead of the daughter of one of the Nilfgaardian dukes he's taking Cirilla of Cintra for his wife. Why? In order to seize that*

miserable little country, half of which, if not more, I would anyway have gained for the empire in negotiations. To seize the mouth of the Yaruga, which is in any case under the dominion of a Nilfgaardian-Novigradian-Koviran maritime trading company.

I don't understand anything of this raison d'état.

I suspect they aren't telling me everything.

Sorceresses, thought Dijkstra. *It's the sorceresses' handiwork. But let it be. It was clearly written that Ciri would become the Queen of Cintra, the wife of Emhyr and the Empress of Nilfgaard. Destiny clearly wanted that. Fate.*

Let it be, thought Triss Merigold. *May it remain like that. Well and good. Ciri will be safe now. They'll forget about her. They'll let her live.*

The portrait finally ended up in its place, and the servants who had hung it stood back and removed the ladders.

In the long row of darkened and somewhat dusty paintings of the rulers of Cintra, beyond the collection of Cerbins and Corams, beyond Corbett, Dagorad and Roegner, beyond the proud Calanthe and the melancholy Pavetta, hung the last portrait. Depicting the currently reigning gracious monarch. The successor to the throne and to the royal blood.

The portrait of a slim girl with fair hair and a sad gaze. Wearing a white dress with green gloves.

Cirilla Fiona Elen Riannon.

The Queen of Cintra and the Empress of Nilfgaard.

Destiny, thought Philippa Eilhart, feeling Dijkstra's eyes on her.

Poor child, thought Dijkstra, looking at the portrait. *She probably thinks it's the end of her worries and misfortunes. Poor child.*

The bells of Cintra rang, frightening the seagulls.

*

'Shortly after the end of the negotiations and the signing of the Peace of Cintra—' the pilgrim picked up the story '—a grand holiday, a celebration lasting several days, was held in Novigrad, the crowning moment of which was a great and ceremonial military

parade. The day, as befitted the first day of a new era, was truly beautiful . . .'

'Are we to understand,' the elf asked sarcastically, 'that you were present there, sir? At that parade?'

'In truth, I was a little late.' The pilgrim clearly wasn't the type to be disconcerted by sarcasm. 'The day, as I said, was beautiful. It promised thus from the very dawn.'

*

Vascoigne, the commandant of Drakenborg – until recently deputy to the chief of political affairs – impatiently struck his whip against the side of his boot.

'Faster over there, faster,' he urged. 'The next ones are waiting! After that peace treaty signed in Cintra we're snowed under here.'

The hangmen, having put the nooses around the condemned men's necks, stepped back. Vascoigne whacked his whip against his boot.

'If any of you has anything to say,' he said dryly, 'now is your last chance.'

'Long live freedom,' said Cairbre aep Diared.

'The trial was fixed,' said Orestes Kopps, marauder, robber and killer.

'Kiss my arse,' said Robert Pilch, deserter.

'Tell Lord Dijkstra I'm sorry,' said Jan Lennep, secret agent, condemned for bribery and thievery.

'I didn't mean to . . . I really didn't mean to,' sobbed Istvan Igalffy, the fort's former commandant, removed from his position and arraigned before the tribunal for acts committed against female prisoners, as he tottered on a birch stump.

The sun, as blinding as liquid gold, exploded above the fort's palisade. The gallows poles cast long shadows. A beautiful, new sunny day rose over Drakenborg.

The first day of a new era.

Vascoigne hit his whip against his boot. He raised and lowered his hand.

Stumps were kicked out from under feet.

*

All the bells of Novigrad tolled, their deep and plaintive sounds echoing against the roofs and mansards of merchants' residences, the echoes fading amongst the narrow streets. Rockets and fireworks shot up high. The crowd roared, cheered, threw flowers, tossed up their hats, waved handkerchiefs, favours, flags, why, even trousers.

'Long live the Free Company!'

'Hurraaaah!'

'Long live the condottieri!'

Lorenzo Molla saluted the crowd, blowing kisses to beautiful townswomen.

'If they're going to pay bonuses as effusively as they cheer,' he shouted over the tumult, 'then we'll be rich!'

'Pity,' said Julia Abatemarco, with a lump in her throat. 'Pity Frontino didn't live to see this . . .'

They walked their horses through the town's main street, Julia, Adam 'Adieu' Pangratt and Lorenzo Molla, at the head of the Company, dressed in their best regalia, formed up into fours so even that none of the groomed and gleaming horses stuck their muzzles even an inch out of line. The condottieri's horses were, like their riders, calm and proud; they weren't frightened by the crowd's cheers and shouts, reacting with slight, faint, almost imperceptible jerks of their heads at the wreaths and flowers flying at them.

'Long live the condottieri!'

'Long live Adieu Pangratt! Long live Pretty Kitty!'

Julia furtively wiped away a tear, catching a carnation thrown from the crowd.

'I never dreamed . . .' she said. 'Such a triumph . . . Pity Frontino . . .'

‘You’re a romantic,’ smiled Lorenzo Molla. ‘You’re getting emotional, Julia.’

‘I am. Attention, by my troth! Eyes leeeft! Look!’

They sat up straight in the saddle, turning their heads towards the review stand and the thrones and seats arranged there. *I see Foltest*, thought Julia. *That bearded one is probably Henselt of Kaedwen, and that handsome one Demavend of Aedirn. That matron must be Queen Hedwig . . . And that pup beside her is Prince Radovid, son of the murdered king . . . Poor boy . . .*

*

‘Long live the condottieri! Long live Julia Abatemarco! Hurrah for Adieu Pangratt! Hurrah for Lorenzo Molla!’

‘Long live Constable Natalis!’

‘Long live the kings! Long live Foltest, Demavend and Henselt!’

‘Long live Dijkstra!’ roared some toady.

‘Long live His Holiness!’ yelled several voices paid to do so. Cyrus Engelkind Hemmelfart, the Hierarch of Novigrad, stood up and greeted the crowd and the marching army with arms raised, rather inelegantly turning his rear towards Queen Hedwig and the minor Radovid, obscuring them with the tails of his voluminous robes.

No one’s going to shout ‘Long live Radovid’, thought the prince, blocked by the hierarch’s fat backside. *No one’s even going to look at me. No one will raise a cry in honour of my mother. Nor mention my father; they won’t shout his glory. Today, on the day of triumph, on the day of reconciliation, of the alliance to which my father, after all, contributed. Which was why he was murdered.*

He felt someone’s eyes on the nape of his neck. As delicate as something he didn’t know – or did, but only from his dreams. Something like the soft, hot caress of a woman’s lips. He turned his head. He saw the dark, bottomless eyes of Philippa Eilhart fixed on him.

Just you wait, thought the prince, looking away. *Just you wait.*

No one could have predicted then or guessed that this thirteen-year-old boy – now a person without any significance in a

country ruled by the Regency Council and Dijkstra – would grow into a king. A king, who – after paying back all the insults borne by himself and his mother – would pass into history as Radovid V the Stern.

The crowd cheered. Flowers rained down under the hooves of the parading horses of the condottieri.

*

'Julia?'

'Yes, Adieu.'

'Marry me. Be my wife.'

Pretty Kitty delayed her answer a long time, as she recovered from her astonishment. The crowd cheered. The Hierarch of Novigrad, sweaty, gasping for air, like a large, fat catfish, blessed the townspeople and the procession, town and world from the viewing stand.

'But you *are* married, Adam Pangratt!'

'I'm separated. I'll get a divorce.'

Julia Abatemarco didn't answer. She turned her head away. Astonished. Disconcerted. And very happy. God knows why.

The crowd cheered and threw flowers. Rockets and fireworks exploded with a crack over the rooftops.

The bells of Novigrad moaned plaintively.

*

A woman, thought Nenneke. *When I sent her away to war she was a girl. She's returned a woman. She's confident. Self-aware. Serene. Composed. Feminine.*

She won that war. By not allowing the war to destroy her.

'Debora,' Eurneid continued her litany in a soft, but sure voice, 'died of typhus in a camp at Mayena. Prine drowned in the Yaruga when a boat full of casualties capsized. Myrrha was killed by Squirrel elves, during an attack on a field hospital at Armeria . . .

Katje—’

‘Go on, my child,’ Nenneke urged her on gently.

‘Katje—’ Eurneid cleared her throat ‘—met a wounded Nilfgaardian in hospital. She went back to Nilfgaard with him after the peace was concluded, when prisoners of war were exchanged.’

‘I always say,’ sighed the stout priestess, ‘that love knows no borders or cordons. What about Iola the Second?’

‘She’s alive,’ Eurneid hurried to assure her. ‘She’s in Maribor.’

‘Why doesn’t she come back?’

The novice bowed her head.

‘She won’t return to the temple, Mother,’ she said softly. ‘She’s in the hospital of Mr Milo Vanderbeck, the surgeon, the halfling. She said she wants to tend the sick. That she’ll only devote herself to that. Forgive her, Mother Nenneke.’

‘Forgive her?’ the priestess snorted. ‘I’m proud of her.’

*

‘You’re late,’ Philippa Eilhart hissed. ‘You’re late for a ceremony graced by kings. By a thousand devils, Sigismund, your arrogance regarding etiquette is well known enough for you not to have to flaunt it so blatantly. Particularly today, on a day like this . . .’

‘I had my reasons.’ Dijkstra responded to the look of Queen Hedwig and the raised eyebrows of the Hierarch of Novigrad with a bow. He noticed the grimace on the face of priest Willemer and the expression of contempt on the impossibly handsome countenance of King Foltest.

‘I have to talk to you, Phil.’

Philippa frowned.

‘In private, most probably?’

‘That would be best.’ Dijkstra smiled faintly. ‘If, however, you consider it appropriate, I’ll agree to a few additional pairs of eyes. Let’s say those of the beautiful ladies of Montecalvo.’

‘Hush,’ hissed the sorceress from behind her smiling lips.

‘When can I expect an audience?’

‘I’ll think about it and let you know. Now leave me in peace. This is a stately ceremony. It’s a great celebration. Let me remind you of that, if you hadn’t noticed yourself.’

‘A great celebration?’

‘We’re on the threshold of a new era, Dijkstra.’

The spy shrugged.

The crowd cheered. Fireworks shot into the sky. The bells of Novigrad tolled, tolled for the triumph, for the glory. But somehow they sounded strangely mournful.

*

‘Hold the reins, Jarre,’ said Lucienne. ‘I’ve grown hungry, I’d like a bite of something. Here, I’ll wrap the strap over your arm. I know one’s not much use.’

Jarre felt a blush of shame and humiliation burning on his face. He still hadn’t got used to it. He still had the impression that the whole world didn’t have anything better to do than stare at his stump, at the sleeve sewn up over it. That the whole world didn’t think of anything else but to look at his disability, to falsely sympathise with the cripple and falsely pity him, and secretly disdain him and treat him as something that unpleasantly disturbs the nice order by repulsively and blatantly existing. By daring to exist.

Lucienne, he had to hand it to her, differed a little from the whole world in this respect. She neither pretended she couldn’t see it, nor adopted an affected style of humiliating help and even more humiliating pity. Jarre was close to thinking that the fair-haired young wagoner treated him naturally and normally. But he drove that thought away. He didn’t accept it.

For he still hadn’t managed to treat himself normally.

The wagon carrying military invalids creaked and rattled. Hot weather had come after a short period of rain, and the ruts created by military convoys had dried out and hardened into ridges and humps of fantastic shapes, over which the vehicle being pulled by four horses had to trundle. The wagon positively jumped over the bigger ruts, creaking, the coach body rocking like a ship in a storm. The swearing of the crippled soldiers – mainly lacking legs – was as

exquisite as it was filthy, and in order not to fall Lucienne hung on to Jarre and hugged him, generously giving the boy her magical warmth, extraordinary softness and the exciting mixture of the smell of horses, leather straps, hay, oats and young, intense, girlish sweat.

The wagon lurched out of another pothole and Jarre took in the slack from the reins wound around his wrist. Lucienne, taking bites in turn from a hunk of bread and a sausage, cuddled up to his side.

'Well, well.' She noticed his brass medallion and disgracefully exploited the fact that his hand was taken up by the reins. 'Did they take you in too? A forget-me-not amulet? Oh, whoever invented that trinket was a real trickster. There was great demand for them during the war, probably second only to vodka. And what girl's name is inside it? Let's take a gander—'

'Lucienne.' Jarre blushed like a beetroot and felt as though the blood would gush from his cheeks at any moment. 'I must ask you . . . not to open it . . . Forgive me, but it's personal. I don't want to offend you, but . . .'

The wagon bounced, Lucienne cuddled up to him, and Jarre shut up.

'Ci . . . ri . . . lla,' the wagoner spelled it out with difficulty, but it surprised Jarre, who hadn't suspected the peasant girl of such far-reaching talents.

'She won't forget you.' She slammed the medallion shut, let go of the chain and looked at the boy. 'That Cirilla, I mean. If she really loved you. Foolish spells and amulets. If she really loved you, she won't forget, she'll be faithful. She'll wait.'

'What for?' Jarre lifted his stump.

The girl squinted her cornflower-blue eyes slightly.

'If she really loved you,' she repeated firmly, 'she's waiting, and the rest's codswallop. I know it.'

'Do you have such great experience in this regard?'

'None of your business—' now it was Lucienne's turn to blush slightly '—what I've had and with whom. And don't think I'm one of those what you only have to nod at and she's ready to have some exspermience in the hay. But I know what I know. If you love a fellow, you love all of him and not just bits. Then it's a hill of beans

even if he's lost one of those bits.'

The wagon jumped.

'You're simplifying it a bit,' Jarre said through clenched teeth, greedily sniffing up the girl's fragrance. 'You're simplifying it a lot and you're idealising it a lot, Lucienne. You deign not to notice even a detail so slight that a man's ability to support a wife and family depends on whether he's in one piece. A cripple isn't capable —'

'Hey, hey, hey!' she bluntly interrupted him. 'Don't be blubbering on me frock. The Black Cloaks didn't tear your head off, and you're a brainbox, you toil with your noggin. What you staring at? I'm from the country, but I have ears and eyes. Quick enough to notice a detail so slight as someone's manner of speech, that's truly lordly and learned. And what's more . . .'

She bent her head and coughed. Jarre also coughed. The wagon jumped.

'And what's more,' the girl finished, 'I've heard what the others said. That you're a scribe. And the priest at a temple. Then see for yourself that that hand's . . . A trifle. And that's that.'

The wagon hadn't bounced for some time, but Jarre and Lucienne seemed not to notice it at all. And it didn't bother them at all.

'I seem to attract scholars,' the girl said after a longer pause, 'There was one . . . Once . . . Made advances towards me . . . He was book-learned and schooled in academies. You could tell it from his name alone.'

'And what was it?'

'Semester.'

'Hey there, miss,' Gefreiter Corncrake called from behind their backs. He was a nasty, gloomy man, wounded during the fighting for Mayena. 'Crack the whip above the geldings' rumps, miss, your cart's crawling along like snot down a wall!'

'I swear,' added another cripple, scratching himself on a stump covered in shiny scar tissue visible under a rolled up trouser leg, 'this wilderness is getting me down! I'm really missing a tavern, since, I tell you, I'd verily love a beer. Can't we go any brisker?'

'We can.' Lucienne turned around on the box. 'But if the shaft or a hub breaks on a clod, then for a Sunday or two you'll not be

drinking beer but rainwater or birch juice, waiting for a lift. You can't walk, and I'm not going to take you on my back, am I?'

'That's a great pity,' Corncrake grinned. 'For I dream at night of you taking me. On your back, I mean from behind. I like it like that. And you, miss?'

'You arsehole of a cripple!' Lucienne yelled. 'You stinking old goat! You—'

She broke off, seeing the faces of all the invalids sitting on the wagon suddenly covered in a deathlike pallor.

'Damn,' sobbed one of them. 'And we were so close to home . . .'

'We're done for,' said Corncrake quietly and utterly without emotion. Simply stating the fact.

And they said – the thought flashed through Jarre's head – *that there weren't any more Squirrels. That they'd all been killed. That the elven question, as they said, had been solved.*

There were six horsemen. But after a closer look it turned out there were six horses, but eight riders. Two of the steeds were carrying a pair of riders. All the horses were treading stiffly and out of rhythm, their heads drooping. They looked miserable.

Lucienne gasped loudly.

The elves came closer. They looked even worse than the horses.

Nothing remained of their pride, of their hard-earned, supercilious, charismatic otherness. Their clothing – usually even on guerrillas from the commando units smart and beautiful – was dirty, torn and stained. Their hair – their pride and joy – was dishevelled, matted with sticky filth and clotted blood. Their large eyes, usually vain and lacking in any expression, were now abysses of panic and despair.

Nothing remained of their otherness. Death, terror, hunger and homelessness had made them become ordinary. Very ordinary.

They had even stopped being frightening.

For a moment Jarre thought they would pass them, would simply cross the road and disappear into the forest on the other side, not gracing the wagon or its passengers with even a glance. That all that would remain of them would be that utterly non-elven,

unpleasant, foul smell, a smell that Jarre knew only too well from the field hospitals – the smell of misery, urine, dirt and festering wounds.

They passed them without looking.

But not all of them.

An elf woman with long, dark hair caked together with congealed blood stopped her horse right beside the wagon. She sat in the saddle leaning over awkwardly, protecting an arm in a blood-soaked sling around which flies buzzed and swarmed.

'Toruviel,' said one of the elves, turning around. '*En'ca digne, luned.*'

Lucienne instantly realised, understood, what it was about. She understood what the elf woman was looking at. The peasant girl had been familiar from childhood with the blue-grey, swollen spectre, the apparition of famine, lurking around the corner of her cottage. So she reacted instinctively and unerringly. She held out the bread towards the elf woman.

'*En'ca digne*, Toruviel,' repeated the elf. He was the only one of the entire commando unit to have the silver lightning bolts of the Vrihedd Brigade on the torn sleeve of his dust-covered jacket.

The invalids on the wagon, until then petrified and frozen in their tracks, suddenly twitched, as though animated by a magic spell. Quarter loaves of bread, rounds of cheese, pieces of fatback and sausage appeared – as if by magic – in the hands that they held out towards the elves.

And for the first time in a thousand years elves were holding their hands out towards humans.

And Lucienne and Jarre were the first people to see elves crying. To see them choking on their sobs, not even trying to wipe away the tears flowing down their dirty faces. Giving the lie to the claim that elves supposedly had no lachrymal glands at all.

'*En'ca . . . digne*,' repeated the elf with the lightning bolts on his sleeve, in a faltering voice.

And then he held out a hand and took the bread from Corncrake.

'Thank you,' he said hoarsely, struggling to adapt his lips and tongue to the foreign language. 'Thank you, human.'

After some time, noticing that it had all gone, Lucienne clicked her tongue at the horses and flicked the reins. The wagon creaked and rattled. No one spoke.

It was well on towards evening when the highway began to teem with armoured horsemen. They were commanded by a woman with completely white, close-cropped hair, with an evil, fierce face disfigured by scars, one of which crossed her cheek from her temple to the corner of her mouth, and another of which, describing a horseshoe, encircled her eye socket. The woman also lacked a large part of her right ear, and her left arm below the elbow ended in a leather sleeve and a brass hook to which her reins were attached.

The woman, staring malevolently at them with a glare full of vindictiveness, asked about the elves. About the Scoia'tael. About terrorists. About fugitives, survivors of a commando unit destroyed two days back.

Jarre, Lucienne and the invalids, avoiding the gaze of the white-haired, one-armed woman, spoke, mumbling indistinctly that no, they hadn't encountered anyone or seen anyone.

You're lying, thought White Rayla, once Black Rayla. *You're lying, I know you are. You're lying out of pity.*

But it doesn't matter anyway.

For I, White Rayla, have no pity.

*

'Hurraaaah, up with the dwarves! Long live Barclay Els!'

'Long liiiive the dwaaarves!'

The Novigrad streets thudded beneath the heavy, iron-shod boots of the old campaigners of the Volunteer Regiment. The dwarves marched in a formation typical for them, in fives, and the hammers on their standard fluttered over the column.

'Long live Mahakam! *Vivant* the dwarves!'

'Glory to them! And fame!'

Suddenly someone in the crowd laughed. Several others joined in. And a moment later everybody was roaring with laughter.

'It's an insult . . .' Hierarch Hemmelfart gasped for air. 'It's a

scandal . . . It's unpardonable . . .'

'Vile people,' hissed priest Willemer.

'Pretend you can't see it,' Foltest advised calmly.

'We shouldn't have economised on their pay,' Meve said sourly. 'Or refused them rations.'

The dwarven officers kept their countenance and form, standing erect and saluting in front of the review stand. Whereas the non-commissioned officers and soldiers of the Volunteer Regiment expressed their disapproval of the budget cuts applied by the kings and the hierarch. Some crooked their elbows as they passed the stand, while others demonstrated their other favourite gesture: a fist with the middle finger stuck stiffly upwards. In academic circles that gesture bore the name *digitus infamis.* The plebs had a cruder name for it.

The blushes on the faces of the kings and the hierarch demonstrated that they knew both names.

'We ought not to have insulted them by our miserliness,' Meve repeated. 'They're an ambitious nation.'

*

The howler in Elskerdeg howled; the howling turned into a horrifying wailing call. None of the men sitting by the campfire turned his head around.

Boreas Mun was the first to speak after a long silence.

'The world has changed. Justice has been done.'

'Well, you might be exaggerating with that justice.' The pilgrim smiled slightly. 'I would agree, though, that the world has in some way adapted itself to the basic law of physics.'

'I wonder if we have the same law in mind,' the elf said in a slow, drawling voice.

'Every action causes a reaction,' said the pilgrim.

The elf snorted, but it was quite a friendly snort.

'That's a point for you, human.'

*

‘Stefan Skellen, son of Bertram Skellen, you, who were Imperial Coroner, be upstanding. The High Tribunal of the Eternal Empire by grace of the Great Sun has found you guilty of the crimes and illegitimate acts of which you have been charged, namely: treason and participation in a conspiracy intended to bring about a murderous assault on the statutory order of the Empire, and also on the person of the Imperial Majesty. Your guilt, Stefan Skellen, has been confirmed and proven, and the Tribunal has not found extenuating circumstances. His Royal Imperial Majesty has thus not granted you an imperial pardon.

‘Stefan Skellen, son of Bertram Skellen. You will be taken from the courtroom to the Citadel, from where, when the apposite time comes, you will be led out. As a traitor, unworthy of treading the soil of the Empire, you will be placed on a wooden cart and horses will pull you to Millennium Square on that cart. As a traitor, unworthy of breathing the air of the Empire, you will be hanged by the neck on a gallows by the hand of an executioner, between heaven and earth. And you will hang until you are dead. Your corse will be cremated and the ashes tossed to the four winds.

‘O Stefan Skellen, son of Bertram, traitor. I, the head of the Highest Tribunal of the Empire, sentencing you, utter your name for the last time. May it henceforth be forgotten.’

*

‘It works! It works!’ shouted Professor Oppenhauser, rushing into the dean’s office. ‘It works, gentlemen! Finally! Finally! It functions. It rotates. It works! It works!’

‘Really?’ Jean La Voisier, Professor of Chemistry, called Rotten Eggs by his students, asked bluntly and quite sceptically. ‘It can’t be! And what, out of interest, works?’

‘My perpetual motion machine!’

‘A *perpetum mobile*?’ Edmund Bumbler, venerable Zoology lecturer, asked curiously. ‘Indeed? You aren’t exaggerating, my dear colleague?’

‘Not in the slightest!’ yelled Oppenhauser, and leaped like a

goat. ‘Not a bit! It works! The machine works. I set it in motion and it works. It runs continuously. Without stopping. Permanently. Forever and ever. It can’t be described, colleagues, you must see it! Come to my lab, quickly!’

‘I’m having my breakfast,’ protested Rotten Eggs, but his protest was lost in the hubbub and general excited commotion. Professors, magisters and bachelors threw coats and fur coats over their gowns and ran for the exit, led by Oppenhauser, still shouting and gesticulating. Rotten Eggs pointed his *digitus infamis* at them and returned to his roll and forcemeat.

The small group of scholars, constantly being joined by more scholars greedy to see the fruits of Oppenhauser’s thirty years of labours, briskly covered the distance separating them from the laboratory of the famous physicist. They were just about to open the door when the ground suddenly shook. Perceptibly. Powerfully, actually. Very powerfully, actually.

It was a seismic wave, one of the series of earthquakes caused by the destruction of Stygga Castle, Vilgefortz’s hide-out, by the sorceresses. The seismic wave had come all the way to Oxenfurt from distant Ebbing.

Dozens of pieces of glass exploded with a crash from the stained-glass window on the frontage of the Department of Fine Arts. The bust of Nicodemus de Boot, the academy’s first rector, scrawled over with rude words, fell from its plinth. The cup of herb tea with which Rotten Eggs was washing down his roll and forcemeat fell from the table. A first-year physics student, Albert Solpietra, fell from a plantain tree in the academy grounds that he had climbed to impress some female medical students.

And Professor Oppenhauser’s perpetum mobile, his legendary perpetual motion engine, turned over once more and stopped. Forever.

And it was never possible to start it again.

*

‘Long live the dwarves! Long live Mahakam!’

What kind of mixed bunch is this, what gang of ruffians? thought Hierarch Hemmelfart, blessing the parade with a trembling hand.

Who's being cheered here? Venal condottieri, obscene dwarves; what a bizarre bunch! Who won this war, after all, them or us? By the Gods, I must draw the kings' attention to this. When historians and writers get down to their work, their scribblings ought to be censored. Mercenaries, witchers, hired brigands, non-humans and all other suspicious elements are to vanish from the chronicles of humanity. Are to be deleted, expunged. Not a word about them. Not a word.

And not a word about him either, he thought, pursing his lips and looking at Dijkstra, who was observing the parade with a distinctly bored expression.

It will be necessary, thought the hierarch, *to issue the kings with instructions regarding Dijkstra. His presence is an insult to decent people.*

He's a heathen and a scoundrel. May he disappear without trace. And may he be forgotten.

*

Over my dead body, you sanctimonious purple hog, thought Philippa Eilhart, effortlessly reading the hierarch's feverish thoughts. *You'd like to rule, you'd like to dictate and influence? You'd like to decide things? Over my dead body.*

All you can make judgements about are your piles, which don't count for much beyond your own arse.

And Dijkstra will remain. As long as I need him.

*

You'll make a mistake one day, thought priest Willemer, looking at Philippa's shining, crimson lips. *One day, one of you will make a mistake. Your vainglory, arrogance and hubris will be your undoing. And your scheming. Your immorality. The baseness and perversion you give yourselves unto, in which you live. It will come to light. The stench of your sins will spread when you make a mistake. Such a moment has to come.*

And even if you don't make a mistake, an opportunity will arise to blame you for something. Some misfortune, some disaster, some pestilence, perhaps a plague or an epidemic, will fall on humanity . . .

Then your guilt will descend on you. You will not be blamed for having been unable to prevent the plague, but for being unable to remove its effects.

You shall be to blame for everything.

And then fires will be lit under stakes.

*

The stripy old tomcat, called Ginger because of its colouring, was dying. Dying hideously. He was rolling around, writhing, scratching the ground, vomiting blood and mucus, racked by convulsions. On top of that he had bloody diarrhoea. He was meowing, although it was beneath his dignity. Meowing mournfully, softly. He was weakening fast.

Ginger knew why he was dying. Or at least guessed what was killing him.

Several days before, a strange freighter, an old and very dirty hulk, a neglected tub, almost a wreck, had called at the port of Cintra. '*Catriona'* announced the barely visible letters on the hulk's prow. Ginger – naturally – couldn't read the letters. A rat climbed down the mooring line to alight on the quay from the strange old tub. A single rat. The rat was hairless, lousy and sluggish. And only had one ear.

Ginger killed the rat. He was hungry, but instinct prevented him from eating the hideous creature. However, several fleas, big, shiny fleas, teeming in the rodent's fur, managed to crawl onto Ginger and settle in his coat.

'What's up with that sodding cat?'

'Someone probably poisoned it. Or put a spell on it!'

'Ugh, abomination! He doesn't half stink, the scoundrel. Get him off those steps, woman!'

Ginger stiffened and silently opened his bloody maw. He no longer felt the kicks or pokes of the broom with which the housewife was now thanking him for eleven years of catching mice. Kicked out of the yard, he was dying in a gutter frothing with soap suds and urine. He died, wishing that those ungrateful people would also fall ill. And suffer like him.

His wishes were about to come true. And on a great scale. A great scale indeed.

The woman who had kicked and swept Ginger from the yard stopped, lifted her frock and scratched her calf below the knee. It was itchy.

A flea had bitten her.

*

The stars over Elskerdeg twinkled intensively. They formed the backdrop against which the sparks from the campfire were dying out.

‘Neither can the Peace of Cintra,’ said the elf, ‘nor yet the bombastic Novigradian parade, be considered a watershed or a milestone. What kind of notions are they? Political authority cannot create history with the help of acts or decrees. Neither can political authority assess history, give grades or characterise it, although in its pride no authority would ever acknowledge that truth. One of the more extreme signs of your human arrogance is so-called historiography, the attempts to give opinions and pass sentences about what you call “ancient history”. It’s typical for you people, and results from the fact that nature gave you an ephemeral, insectile, ant-like life, and an average lifespan of less than a hundred years. You, however, try to adapt the world to that insectile existence. And meanwhile history is a process that occurs ceaselessly and never ends. It’s impossible to separate history into episodes, from here to there, from here to there, from date to date. You can’t define history, nor change it with a royal address. Even if you’ve won a war.’

‘I won’t enter into a philosophical dispute,’ said the pilgrim. ‘As it’s been said before, I’m a simple and not very eloquent fellow. But I dare observe two things. Firstly, a lifespan as short as insects protects us, people, from decadence, and inclines us to respect life, live intensively and creatively in order to make the most of every moment of life and enjoy it. I speak and think like a man, but after all, the long-lived elves thought likewise, going to fight and die in the Scoia’tael commando units. If I’m wrong, please correct me.’

The pilgrim waited a suitable length of time, but no one corrected him.

‘Secondly,’ he continued, ‘it seems to me that political authority, although unable to change history, may by its actions produce quite a fair illusion and appearance of such an ability. Political power has methods and instruments to do so.’

‘Oh, yes,’ replied the elf, turning his face away. ‘Here you’ve hit the nail on the head, master pilgrim. Power has methods and instruments. Which are in no way open to discussion.’

*

The galley’s side struck the seaweed- and shell-covered piles. Mooring ropes were thrown. Shouts, curses and commands resounded.

Seagulls shrieked as they scavenged for the refuse floating in the port’s dirty green water. The quayside was teeming with people. Mainly uniformed.

‘End of the voyage, gentlemen elves,’ said the Nilfgaardian commander of the convoy. ‘We’re in Dillingen. Everybody off! You’re being waited for here.’

It was a fact. They were being waited for.

None of the elves – and certainly not Faoiltiarna – had any faith in the assurances of fair trials or amnesties. The Scoia’tael and officers of the Vrihedd Brigade had no illusory hopes about the fate awaiting them on the far side of the Yaruga. In the majority of cases they had become accustomed to it, accepted it stoically, with resignation even. Nothing, they thought, could astonish them now.

They were mistaken.

They were chased from the galley, jingling and clanking their manacles, driven onto the jetty and then onto the quay, between a double line of armed mercenaries. There were also civilians there, whose sharp eyes flashed quickly, flitting from face to face, from figure to figure.

Selectors, thought Faoiltiarna. He wasn’t mistaken.

He couldn’t expect, naturally, his disfigured face to be overlooked. And he wasn’t.

‘Mr Isengrim Faoiltiarna? The Iron Wolf? What a pleasant surprise! Come this way, come this way!’

The mercenaries dragged him out of the ranks.

'*Va fail!*' Coinneach Dá Reo shouted to him. He had been recognised and hauled out by other soldiers wearing gorgets with the Redanian eagle. '*Se'ved, se caerme dea*!'

'You'll be seeing each other,' hissed the civilian who had selected Faoiltiarna, 'but probably in hell. They're already waiting for him in Drakenborg. Hullo, stop! Isn't that by chance Mr Riordain? Seize him!'

In all, they pulled out three of them. Just three. Faoiltiarna understood and suddenly – to his surprise – began to be afraid.

'*Va fail!*' Angus Bri Cri, shouted to his comrades as he was pulled out of the rank, manacles jingling. '*Va fail, fraeren!*'

A mercenary shoved him roughly.

They weren't taken far. They only got to one of the sheds close to the harbour. Right next to the dock, over which a forest of masts swayed.

The civilian gave a sign. Faoiltiarna was pushed against a post, under a beam over which a rope was slung. An iron hook was attached to the rope. Riordain and Angus were sat down on two stools on the dirt floor.

'Mr Riordain, Mr Bri Cri,' said the civilian coldly. 'You have been given an amnesty. The court decided to show mercy.

'But justice must be done,' he added, not waiting for a reaction. 'And the families of those whom you murdered have paid for it to happen, gentlemen. The verdict has been reached.'

Riordain and Angus didn't even manage to cry out. Nooses were thrown over their necks, they were throttled, knocked down along with the stools and dragged across the floor. As they vainly tried with their manacled hands to tear off the nooses biting into their necks, the executioners kneeled on their chests. Knives flashed and fell, blood spurted. Now even the nooses were unable to stifle their screams, their hair-raising shrieks.

It lasted a long time. As always.

'Your sentence, Mr Faoiltiarna, was equipped with an additional clause,' said the civilian, turning his head slowly, 'Something extra—'

Faoiltiarna had no intention of waiting for that something

extra. The manacle's clasp, which the elf had been working on for two days and nights, now fell from his wrist as though tapped by a magic wand. With a terrible blow of the heavy chain he knocked down both mercenaries guarding him. Faoiltiarna – in full flight – kicked the next one in the face, lashed the civilian with the manacles, hurled himself straight at the cobweb-covered window of the shed and flew through it taking the frame and casing with him, leaving blood and shreds of clothing on the nails. He landed on the planks of the jetty with a thud. He turned, tumbled forward, rolled over and dived into the water, between the fishing boats and launches. The heavy chain, still attached to his right wrist, was dragging him down to the bottom. Faoiltiarna fought. He fought with all his strength for his life, which not so long before he hadn't thought he cared about.

'Catch him!' yelled the mercenaries, rushing from the shed. 'Catch him! Kill him!'

'Over there!' yelled others, running up along the jetty. 'There, he came up there!'

'To the boats!'

'Shoot!' roared the civilian, trying with both hands to stop the blood gushing from his eye socket. 'Kill him!'

The strings of crossbows twanged. Seagulls flew up shrieking. The dirty green water between the launches seethed with crossbow bolts.

*

'*Vivant!*' The parade stretched out and the crowd of Novigradians were now displaying signs of fatigue and hoarseness. '*Vivant!* Long live the army!'

'Hurrah!'

'Glory to the kings! Glory!'

Philippa Eilhart looked around to see that no one was listening, then leaned over towards Dijkstra.

'What do you want to talk to me about?'

The spy also looked around.

‘About the assassination of King Vizimir carried out last July.’

‘I beg your pardon?

‘The half-elf who committed that murder—’ Dijkstra lowered his voice even more ‘—was by no means a madman, Phil. And wasn’t acting alone.’

‘What are you saying?’

‘Hush.’ Dijkstra smiled. ‘Hush, Phil.’

‘Don’t call me Phil. Do you have any proof? What kind? Where did you get it?’

‘You’d be surprised, Phil, if I told you where. When can I expect an audience, Honourable Lady?’

Philippa Eilhart’s eyes were like two black, bottomless lakes.

‘Soon, Dijkstra.’

The bells tolled. The crowd cheered hoarsely. The army paraded. Petals covered the Novigradian cobbles like snow.

*

‘Are you still writing?’

Ori Reuven started and made a blot. He had served Dijkstra for nineteen years but was still not accustomed to the noiseless movements of his boss, appearing from God knows where and God knows how.

‘Good evening, hem, hem, Your Hon—’

‘*Men from the Shadows*.’ Dijkstra read the title page of the manuscript, which he had picked up unceremoniously from the table. ‘*The History of the Royal Secret Services, written by Oribasius Gianfranco Paolo Reuven, magister* . . . Oh, Ori, Ori. An old fellow, and such foolishness—’

‘Hem, hem . . .’

‘I came to say goodbye, Ori.’

Reuven looked at him in surprise.

‘You see, my loyal comrade,’ continued the spy, without waiting for his secretary to cough anything up, ‘I’m also old, and it

turns out I'm also foolish. I said one word to one person. Just one person. And just one word. It was one word too many and one person too many. Listen carefully, Ori. Can you hear them?'

Ori Reuven shook his head, his eyes wide open in amazement. Dijkstra said nothing for a time.

'You can't hear,' he said after a moment. 'But I can hear them. In all the corridors. Rats are running through the city of Tretogor. They're coming here. They're coming on soft little rat's paws.'

*

They came out of the shadows, out of the darkness. Dressed in black, masked, as nimble as rats. The sentries and bodyguards from the antechambers dropped without moaning under the quick thrusts of daggers with narrow, angular blades. Blood flowed over the floors of Tretogor Castle, spilled over the tiles, stained the woodblocks, soaked into the Vengerbergian carpets.

They approached along all the corridors and left corpses behind them.

'He's there,' said one of them, pointing. The scarf shrouding his face up to his eyes muffled his voice. 'He went in there. Through the chancery where Reuven, that coughing old coot, works.'

'There's no way out of there.' The eyes of the other one, the commander, shone in the slits of his black, velvet mask. 'The chamber behind the chancery is windowless. There's no way out.'

'All of the other corridors are covered. All the doors and windows. He can't escape. He's trapped.'

'Forward!'

The door gave away to kicks. Daggers flashed.

'Death! Death to the bloody killer!'

'Hem, hem?' Ori Reuven raised his myopic, watery eyes above the papers. 'Yes? How can I, hem, hem, help you gentlemen?'

The murderers smashed open the door to Dijkstra's private chambers, scurried around them like rats, searching through all the nooks and crannies. Tapestries, paintings and panels were torn from the walls, fell onto the floor. Daggers slashed curtains and

upholsteries.

'He's not here!' yelled one of them, rushing into the chancery. 'He's not here!'

'Where is he?' rasped the gang leader, leaning over Ori, staring at him through the slits in his black mask. 'Where is that bloodthirsty dog?'

'He's not here,' Ori Reuven replied calmly. 'You can see for yourself.'

'Where is he? Talk! Where's Dijkstra?'

'Am I,' coughed Ori, 'hem, hem, my brother's keeper?'

'Die, old man!'

'I'm old. Sick. And very weary. Hem, hem. I fear neither you nor your knives.'

The murderers ran from the chamber. They vanished as quickly as they had appeared.

They didn't kill Ori Reuven. They were paid killers. And there hadn't been the slightest mention of Ori Reuven in their orders.

Oribasius Gianfranco Paolo Reuven, master at law, spent six years in various prisons, constantly interrogated by various investigators, asked about all sorts of apparently senseless things and matters.

He was released after six years. He was very ill by then. Scurvy had taken away all his teeth, anaemia his hair, glaucoma his eyesight, and asthma his breath. The fingers of both hands had been broken during the interrogations.

He lived for less than a year after being freed. He died in a temple poorhouse. In misery. Forgotten.

The manuscript of the book *Men from the Shadows, the History of the Royal Secret Services* vanished without trace.

*

The sky in the east brightened. A pale glow appeared above the hills, the harbinger of the dawn.

Silence had reigned by the campfire for a long time. The

pilgrim, the elf and the tracker looked into the dying fire in silence.

Silence reigned in Elskerdeg. The howling phantom had gone away, bored by its vain howling. The phantom must have finally understood that the three men sitting by the campfire had seen too many atrocities lately to worry about any old spectre.

'If we are to travel together we must abandon mistrust,' Boreas Mun said suddenly, looking into the campfire's ruby glow. 'Let's leave behind us what was. The world has changed. There's a new life in front of us. Something has ended, something is beginning. Ahead of us—'

He broke off and coughed. He was not accustomed to speeches like that, was afraid of looking ridiculous. But his accidental companions weren't laughing. Why, Boreas positively sensed friendliness emanating from them.

'The pass of Elskerdeg is ahead of us,' he ended in a more confident voice, 'and beyond the pass Zerrikania and Hakland. There's a long and dangerous road ahead of us. If we are to travel together . . . Let's abandon mistrust. I am Boreas Mun.'

The pilgrim in the wide-brimmed hat stood up, straightening his great frame, and shook the hand being held out towards him. The elf also stood up. His horrifyingly disfigured face contorted strangely.

After shaking the tracker's hand the pilgrim and the elf held out their right hands towards each other.

'The world has changed,' said the pilgrim. 'Something has ended. I am . . . Sigi Reuven.'

'Something is beginning.' The elf twisted his ravaged face into something that according to all evidence was a smile. 'I am . . . Wolf Isengrim.'

They shook hands, quickly, firmly, downright violently. For a moment it looked more like the preliminaries to a fight than a gesture of reconciliation. But only for a moment.

The log in the campfire shot out sparks, celebrating the event with a joyful firework.

'God strike me down—' Boreas Mun smiled broadly '—if this isn't the start of a beautiful friendship.'

. . . along with the other Martyr Sisters, St Philipa was also calumniated for betraying the kingdom, for fomenting tumults and sedition, for inciting the people and plotting an insurrection. Wilmerius, a heretic and cultist, and self-appointed high priest, ordered the Saint to be seized, thrown into a dark and foul prison beset with cold and stench, calling on her to confess her sins and declare those that she had committed. And Wilmerius showed St Philipa divers instruments of torture and menaced her greatly, but the Saint merely spat in his countenance and accused him of sodomy.

The heretic ordered her stripped of her raiment and thrashed mercilessly with leather straps and for splinters to be driven under her fingernails. And then he asked and called on her to disavow her faith and the Goddess. But the Saint merely laughed and advised him to distance himself.

Then he ordered her dragged to the torture chamber and her whole body to be harrowed with iron gaffs and hooks and her sides scorched with candles. And although thus tormented, the Saint in her mortal corps showed immortal forbearance. Until the torturers were enfeebled and withdrew in great horror, but Wilmerius fiercely admonished them and ordered them further to torture her and soundly belabour her. They then began to scorch St Philipa with red hot irons, dislocate her members from the joints and rend the woman's breast with pincers. And in this suffering she, having confessed nothing, expired.

And the godless, shameless Wilmerius, about whom you may read in the works of the Holy Fathers, met such a punishment that lice and wyrms spread over him and overcame him until he was decayed all over and expired. And he reeked like a cur such that he needs must be cast into a river without burial.

For which praise and a martyr's crown are due to St Philipa, and glory forever to the Great Mother Goddess, and to us a lesson and a warning, Amen.

The Life of St Philipa the Martyr of Mons Calvus, copied from the martyr scribes, in the Tretorian Breviary summarised, drawn from many Holy Fathers who praise her in their writings.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

They rushed like the wind, like mad things, at breakneck speed. They rode through the days, now burgeoning with spring. The horses carried them in a light-footed gallop, and the people, straightening their necks and backs from toiling on the soil, watched them as they went, uncertain of what they had seen: riders or apparitions?

They rode through the nights, dark and wet from the warm rain, and the people, woken and sitting up on their pallets, looked around, terrified, fighting the choking pain that rose in their throats and chests. People sprang up, listening to the thud of shutters, to the crying of those wrested from sleep, to the howling of dogs. They pressed their faces to the parchment in their windows, uncertain of what they had seen: riders, or apparitions?

After Ebbing, tales of the three demons began to circulate.

*

The three riders appeared from God knows where and God knows how, completely astonishing Peg Leg and giving him no chance to flee. Neither was there any help to call for. A good five hundred paces separated the cripple from the outermost buildings of the small town. And even had it been closer, there was a slender chance that any of Jealousy's inhabitants would bother about someone calling for help. It was siesta time, which in Jealousy usually lasted from late morning until early evening. Aristoteles Bobeck, nicknamed Peg Leg, the local beggar and philosopher, knew only too well that Jealousy residents didn't react to anything during siesta time.

There were three riders. Two women and a man. The man had white hair and wore a sword slung across his back. One of the women, more mature and dressed in black and white, had raven-black hair, curled in locks. The younger one, whose straight hair was the colour of ash, had a hideous scar on her left cheek. She was sitting on a splendid black mare. Peg Leg felt he'd seen a mare like that before.

It was the younger one that spoke first.

‘Are you from around here?’

‘It wasn’t me!’ Peg Leg said, teeth chattering. ‘I’m nobbut gathering mushrooms! Forgive me, don’t harm a cripple—’

‘Are you from round here?’ she repeated, and her green eyes flashed menacingly. Peg Leg cowered.

‘Aye, noble lady,’ he mumbled. ‘I’m a local, right enough. I was born here, in Birka, I mean in Jealousy. And I shall no doubt die here—’

‘Last year, in the summer and autumn, were you here?’

‘Where should I have bin?’

‘Answer when I ask you.’

‘I was, good lady.’

The black mare shook its head and pricked up its ears. Peg Leg felt the eyes of the other two – the black-haired woman and the white-haired man – pricking him like hedgehog’s spines. The white-haired man scared him the most.

‘A year ago,’ continued the girl with the scar, ‘in the month of September, the ninth of September to be precise, in the first quarter of the moon, six young people were murdered here. Four lads . . . and two girls. Do you recall?’

Peg Leg swallowed. For some time he had suspected, and now he knew, now he was certain.

The girl had changed. And it wasn’t just that scar on her face. She was completely different to how she had been when she was screaming, tied to a hitching post, watching as Bonhart cut off the heads of the murdered Rats. Quite different to how she had been in the Chimera’s Head when Bonhart undressed and beat her. Only the eyes . . . The eyes hadn’t changed.

‘Talk,’ the other – black-haired – woman urged him. ‘You were asked a question.’

‘I remember, my lord and ladies,’ confirmed Peg Leg. ‘How could I not remember? Six youngsters were killed. By truth, it was last year. In September.’

The girl said nothing for a long time, looking not at him, but somewhere in the distance, over his shoulder.

‘So you must know . . .’ she finally said with effort. ‘You must know where those boys and those girls were buried. By which fence . . . On what rubbish tip or muck heap . . . Or if their bodies were cremated . . . If they were taken to the forest and left for the foxes and wolves . . . You’ll show me that place. You’ll take me there. Understand?’

‘I understand, noble lady. Come with me. For it’s not far at all.’

He hobbled, feeling on his neck the hot breath of their horses. He didn’t look back. Something told him he shouldn’t.

‘Here it is,’ he finally pointed. ‘This is our Jealousy boneyard, here in this grove. And the ones you was asking about, Miss Falka, they lie over there.’

The girl gasped audibly. Peg Leg glanced furtively, and saw her face changing. The white-haired man and the black-haired woman were silent and their faces inscrutable.

The girl looked long at the small barrow. It was orderly, level, tidy, edged by blocks of sandstone and slabs of spar and slate. The fir branches that the burial mound had been decorated with had turned brown. The flowers that had once been laid there were dry and yellowed.

The girl dismounted.

‘Who?’ she asked dully, still looking, not turning her head away.

‘Well, many Jealousy people helped.’ Peg Leg cleared his throat. ‘But chiefly the widow Goulue. And young Nycklar. The widow was always a good and sincere dame . . . And Nycklar . . . His dreams tormented him terribly. They wouldn’t give him rest. Until ’e’d given the murdered ones a decent burial—’

‘Where shall I find them? The widow and Nycklar?’

Peg Leg said nothing for a long time.

‘The widow is buried there, beyond that crooked little birch,’ he said at last, looking without fear into the girl’s green eyes. ‘She died of pneumonia in the winter of the year. And Nycklar joined the army somewhere in foreign parts . . . Folks say he fell in the war.’

‘I forgot,’ she whispered. ‘I forgot that destiny tied both of them to me.’

She approached the small burial mound and knelt down, or rather fell onto one knee. She bent over low, very low, her forehead almost touching the stones around the base. Peg Leg saw the white-haired man make a movement, as though meaning to dismount, but the black-haired woman caught him by the arm, stopping him with a gesture and a look.

The horses snorted, shook their heads, the rings of their bits jingling.

The girl knelt for a long, long time at the foot of the burial mound, bent over, and her mouth moved in some silent litany.

She staggered as she stood up. Peg Leg held her up instinctively. She flinched hard, jerked her elbow away, and looked at him malevolently through her tears. But she didn't say a word. She even thanked him with a nod when he held her stirrup for her.

'Yes, noble Miss Falka,' he dared to say. 'Fate ran a strange course. You were in grievous strife then, in bitter times . . . Few of us here in Jealousy thought you'd get out of it alive . . . And finally you're healthy today, my lady, and Goulue and Nycklar are in the beyond. There's not even anyone to thank, eh? To repay for the burial mound—'

'My name's not Falka,' she said harshly. 'My name's Ciri. And as far as thanks are concerned—'

'Feel honoured by her,' the black-haired woman interjected coldly, and there was something in her voice that made Peg Leg tremble.

'Grace, gratitude and reward have befallen you, you and your entire settlement. You know not even how great,' said the black-haired woman, slowly enunciating her words. 'For the burial mound. For your humanity, and for your human dignity and decency.'

*

On the ninth of April, soon after midnight, the first residents of Claremont were awoken by a flickering brightness, a red blaze, that struck and flooded into the windows of their homesteads. The rest of the town's residents were roused from their beds by screams, commotion and the insistent sounds of the bell tolling the alarm.

Only one building was burning. It was huge and wooden, formerly a temple, once consecrated to a deity whose name even the oldest grandmothers couldn't remember. A temple, now converted into an amphitheatre, where animal-baiting, fights and other entertainment was held, capable of hauling the small town of Claremont out of its boredom, depression and drowsy torpor.

It was the amphitheatre that was now burning in a sea of roaring fire, shaking from explosions. Ragged tongues of flame, several yards long, shot from all the windows.

'Fiiiire!' roared the merchant Houvenaghel, the owner of the amphitheatre, running and waving his arms around, his great paunch wobbling. He was wearing a nightcap and a heavy, karakul coat he had thrown over his nightshirt. He was kneading the dung and mud of the street with his bare feet.

'Fiiiire! Heeeelp! Waaaaaateeer!'

'It's a divine punishment,' pronounced one of the oldest grandmothers authoritatively. 'For those rumpuses they held in the house of worship . . .'

'Yes, yes, madam. No doubt about it!'

A glow emanated from the roaring theatre, horse urine steamed and stank, and sparks hissed in puddles. A wind had got up from God knows where.

'Put out the fiiiire!' Houvenaghel howled desperately, seeing it spreading to the brewery and granary. 'Heeeelp! Fetch buckets! Fetch buuuuckets!'

There was no shortage of volunteers. Why, Claremont even had its own fire brigade, equipped and maintained by Houvenaghel. They tried to put the fire out doggedly and with dedication. But in vain.

'We can't cope . . .' groaned the chief of the fire brigade, wiping his blistered face. 'That's no ordinary fire . . . It's the devil's work!'

'Black magic . . .' another fireman choked on the smoke.

From inside the amphitheatre could be heard the terrible cracking of rafters, ridges and posts breaking. There was a roar, a bang and a crash, a great column of fire and sparks exploded into the sky, and the roof caved in and fell onto the arena. Meanwhile, the whole building listed over — you could say it was bowing to the

audience, which it was entertaining and diverting for the last time, pleasing it with a stunning, truly fiery spectacle.

And then the walls collapsed.

The efforts of the fire fighters and rescuers meant half of the granary and about a quarter of the brewery were saved.

A foul-smelling dawn arose.

Houvenaghel sat in the mud and ash, in his soot-covered nightcap and karakul coat. He sat and wept woefully, whimpering like a child.

The theatre, brewery and granary he owned were insured, naturally. The problem was that the insurance company was also owned by Houvenaghel. Nothing, not even a tax swindle, could have made good even a fraction of the losses.

*

'Where to now?' asked Geralt, looking at the column of smoke, a smudged streak discolouring the sky glowing pink in the dawn. 'Who do you still have to pay back, Ciri?'

She glanced at him and he immediately regretted his question. He suddenly desired to hug her, dreamed of embracing her, cuddling her, stroking her hair. Protecting her. Never allowing her to be alone again. To encounter evil. To encounter anything that would make her desire revenge.

Yennefer remained silent. Yennefer had spent a lot of time silent lately.

'Now,' Ciri said calmly, 'we're going to ride to a settlement called Unicorn. The name comes from a straw unicorn: the poor, ridiculous, miserable effigy that looks after the village. I want the residents to have, as a souvenir of what happened, a . . . Well, if not a more valuable, then at least a more tasteful totem. I'm counting on your help, Yennefer, for without magic . . .'

'I know, Ciri. And after that?'

'The swamps of Pereplut. I hope I can find my way . . . To a cottage amidst the swamps. We'll find the remains of a man in a cottage. I want those remains to be buried in a decent grave.'

Geralt still said nothing. And didn't lower his gaze.

'After that,' Ciri continued, holding his stare without the slightest difficulty, 'we'll stop by the settlement of Dun Dare. The inn there was probably burned down, and the innkeeper may have been murdered. Because of me. Hatred and vengeance blinded me. I shall try somehow to make it up to his family.'

'There's no way of doing that,' he said, still looking.

'I know,' she replied at once, hard, almost angrily. 'But I shall stand before them in humility. I shall remember the expression in their eyes. I hope the memory of those eyes will stop me making a similar mistake. Do you understand that, Geralt?'

'He understands, Ciri,' said Yennefer. 'Both of us, believe us, understand you very well, daughter. Let's go.'

*

The horses bore them like the wind. Like a magical gale. Alarmed by the three riders flashing by, a traveller on the road raised his head. A merchant on a cart with his wares, a villain fleeing from the law, and a wandering settler driven by politicians from the land he had settled, having believed other politicians, all raised their heads. A vagabond, a deserter and a pilgrim with a staff raised their heads. They raised their heads, amazed, alarmed. Uncertain of what they had seen.

Tales began to circulate around Ebbing and Geso. About the Wild Hunt. About the Three Spectral Riders. Stories were made up and spun in the evenings in rooms smelling of melting lard and fried onions, village halls, smoky taverns, roadhouses, crofts, tar kilns, forest homesteads and border watchtowers. Tales were spun and told. About war. About heroism and chivalry. About friendship and hatred. About wickedness and betrayal. About faithful and genuine love, about the love that always triumphs. About the crimes and punishments that always befall criminals. About justice that is always just.

About truth, which always rises to the surface like oil.

Tales were told; people rejoiced in them. Enjoyed the fairy-tale fictions. Because, indeed, all around, in real life, things happened entirely back to front.

The legend grew. The listeners – in a veritable trance – drank in the carefully measured words of the storyteller telling of the Witcher and the sorceress. Of the Tower of the Swallow. Of Ciri, the witcher girl with the scar on her face. Of Kelpie, the enchanted black mare.

Of the Lady of the Lake.

That came later, years later. Many, many years later.

But right now, like a seed swollen after warm rain, the legend was sprouting and growing inside people.

*

May came, suddenly. First at night, which flared up and sparkled with the distant fires of Beltane. When Ciri, strangely excited, leaped onto Kelpie and galloped towards the campfires, Geralt and Yennefer took advantage of the opportunity for a moment of intimacy. Undressing only as much as was absolutely necessary, they made love on a sheepskin coat flung onto the ground. They made love hurriedly and with abandon, in silence, without a word. They made love quickly and haphazardly. Just to have more of it.

And when they had both calmed down, trembling and kissing away each other's tears, they were greatly surprised how much happiness such hurried lovemaking had brought them.

*

'Geralt?'

'Yes, Yen.'

'When I . . . When we weren't together, did you go with any other women?'

'No.'

'Not once?'

'Not once.'

'Your voice didn't even waver. So I don't know why I don't believe you.'

‘I only ever thought about you, Yen.’

‘Now I believe you.’

*

May came unexpectedly. During the daytime, too. Dandelions spattered and dotted the meadows yellow, and the trees in the orchards became fluffy and heavy with blossom. The oak woods, too distinguished to hurry, remained dark and bare, but were already being covered in a green haze and at the edges grew bright with green splashes of birch.

*

One night, when they were camping in a valley covered in willows, the Witcher was woken by a dream. A nightmare, where he was paralysed and defenceless, and a huge grey owl raked his face with its talons and searched for his eyes with its curved beak. He awoke. And wasn’t sure if he hadn’t been transported from one nightmare into another.

There was a brightness billowing over their camp that the snorting horses took fright at. There was something inside the brightness, something like a dark interior, something shaped like a castle hall with a black colonnade. Geralt could see a large table around which sat ten shapes. Ten women.

He could hear words. Snatches of words.

. . . bring her to us, Yennefer. We order you.

You may not order me. You may not order her! You have no power over her!

I’m not afraid of them, Mamma. They can’t do anything to me. If they want, I’ll stand before them.

. . . is meeting the first of June, at the new moon. We order you both to appear. We warn you that we shall punish disobedience.

I shall come right away, Philippa. Let her stay with him a little longer. Let him not be alone. Just a few days. I shall come immediately. As a hostage of goodwill.

Comply with my request, Philippa. Please.

The brightness pulsated. The horses snorted wildly, banging their hooves.

The Witcher awoke. This time for real.

*

The following day Yennefer confirmed his fears. After a long conversation conducted with Ciri in private.

'I'm going away,' she said dryly and without any preliminaries. 'I must. Ciri's staying with you. For some time at least. Then I'll summon her and she'll also go away. And then we'll all meet again.'

He nodded. Reluctantly. He'd had enough of silent assent. Of agreeing to everything she communicated to him, with everything she decided. But he nodded. He loved her, when all was said and done.

'It's an imperative that cannot be opposed,' she said more gently. 'Neither can it be postponed. It simply has to be taken care of. I'm doing it for you, in any case. For your good. And especially for Ciri's good.'

He nodded.

'When we meet again,' she said even more gently, 'I'll make up for everything, Geralt. The silence, too. There's been too much silence, too much silence between us. And now, instead of nodding, hug me and kiss me.'

He did as he was asked. He loved her, when all was said and done.

*

'Where to now?' Ciri asked dryly, a short while after Yennefer had vanished in the flash of the oval teleporter.

'The river . . .' Geralt cleared his throat, fighting the pain behind his breastbone that was taking his breath away. 'The river

we're riding up is the Sansretour. It leads to a country I must show you. For it's a fairy-tale country.'

Ciri turned gloomy. He saw her clench her fists.

'Every fairy tale ends badly,' she drawled. 'And there aren't any fairy-tale lands.'

'Yes there are. You'll see.'

*

It was the day after the full moon when they saw Toussaint bathed in greenery and sunshine. When they saw the hills, the slopes and the vineyards. The roofs of the castles' towers glistening after a morning shower.

The view didn't disappoint. It was stunning. It always was.

'How beautiful it is,' said Ciri, enraptured. 'Oh my! Those castles are like children's toys . . . Like icing decorations on a birthday cake. It makes me want to lick them!'

'Architecture by Faramond himself,' Geralt informed her knowledgeably. 'Wait till you see the palace and grounds of Beauclair close up.'

'Palace? We're going to a palace? Do you know the king here?'

'Duchess.'

'Does the duchess,' she asked sourly, observing him intently under her fringe, 'have green eyes, perhaps? And short, black hair —?'

'No.' He cut her off, looking away. 'She looks completely different. I don't know where you got that from—'

'Leave it, Geralt, will you? What is it about this duchess, then?'

'As I said, I know her. A little. Not too well and . . . not too close, if you want to know. But I *do* know the duchess's consort, or rather a candidate for the duchess's consort. You do too, Ciri.'

Ciri jabbed Kelpie with a spur, making her dance around the highway.

'Don't torment me any longer!'

‘Dandelion.’

‘Dandelion? And the duchess? How come?’

‘It’s a long story. We left him here, at the side of his beloved. We promised to visit him, returning after—’

He fell silent and turned gloomy.

‘You can’t do anything about it,’ Ciri said softly. ‘Don’t torment yourself, Geralt. It’s not your fault.’

Yes it is, he thought. *It’s mine. Dandelion’s going to ask. And I’ll have to answer.*

Milva. Cahir. Regis. Angoulême.

A sword is a double-edged weapon.

Oh, by the Gods, I’ve had enough of this. Enough. Time I was done with this!

‘Let’s go, Ciri.’

‘In these clothes?’ she croaked. ‘To a palace—?’

‘I don’t see anything wrong with our clothes,’ he cut her off. ‘We aren’t going there to present our credentials. Or to a ball. We can even meet Dandelion in the stables.

‘Anyhow,’ he added, seeing her looking sulky, ‘I’m going to the bank in the town first. I’ll take a little cash out, and there are countless tailors and milliners in the cloth halls in the town square. You can buy what you want and dress as you wish.’

‘Have you got so much cash?’ she tilted her head mischievously.

‘You can buy what you want,’ he repeated. ‘Even ermine. And basilisk-leather slippers. I know a shoemaker who ought to have some of it left in stock.’

‘How did you make so much money?’

‘By killing. Let’s ride, Ciri, and not waste time.’

*

Geralt made a transfer and prepared a letter of credit, received a cheque and some cash in the branch of the Cianfanellis’ bank. He

wrote some letters that were to be taken by the express courier service heading over the Yaruga. He politely excused himself from the luncheon the attentive and hospitable banker wanted to entertain him with.

Ciri was waiting in the street, watching the horses. The street, empty a moment earlier, now teemed with people.

'We must have happened on some feast or other.' Ciri gestured with her head towards a crowd heading for the town square. 'A fair, perhaps . . .'

Geralt looked keenly ahead.

'It's not a fair.'

'Ah . . .' she also looked, standing up in the stirrups. 'It's not another—'

'Execution,' he confirmed. 'The most popular amusement since the war. What have we seen so far, Ciri?'

'Desertion, treason, cowardice in the face of the enemy,' she quickly recited. 'And financial cases.'

'For supplying mouldy hardtack to the army.' The Witcher nodded. 'The life of an enterprising merchant is tough in wartime.'

'They aren't going to execute a tradesman here.' Ciri reined back Kelpie, who was already submerged in the crowd as though in a rippling field of corn. 'Just look, the scaffold's covered in a cloth, and the executioner has a fresh new hood on. They'll be executing somebody important, at least a baron. So it probably *is* cowardice in the face of the enemy.'

'Toussaint didn't have an army in the face of any foe.' Geralt shook his head, 'No, Ciri, I think it's economics again. They're executing somebody for swindles in the trade of their famous wine, the basis of the economy here. Let's ride on, Ciri. We won't watch.'

'Ride on? How exactly?'

Indeed, riding on was impossible. In no time at all they had become stuck in the crowd gathered in the square, and were mired in the throng. There was no chance of their getting to the other side of the square. Geralt swore foully and looked back. Unfortunately, retreat was also impossible, for the wave of people pouring into the square had totally clogged up the street behind them. For a moment the crowd carried them like a river, but the movement stopped when the common folk came up against the serried wall of

halberdiers surrounding the scaffold.

'They're coming!' somebody shouted, and the crowd buzzed, swayed and took up the cry. 'They're coming!'

The clatter of hooves and the rattle of a wagon faded and was lost amidst the throng's beelike humming. So they were astonished when a rack wagon pulled by two horses trundled out of a side street. And on it, having difficulty keeping his balance, stood . . .

'Dandelion . . .' groaned Ciri.

Geralt suddenly felt bad. Very bad.

'That's Dandelion,' Ciri repeated in an unfamiliar voice. 'Yes, it's him.'

It's unfair, thought the Witcher. *It's one big, bloody injustice. It can't be like this. It shouldn't be like this. I know it was stupid and naive to think that anything ever depended on me, that I somehow influenced the fate of this world, or that this world owes me something. I know it was a naive, arrogant opinion . . . But I know it! There's no need to convince me about it! It doesn't have to be proved to me! Particularly like this . . .*

It's unfair!

'It can't be Dandelion,' he said hollowly, looking down at Roach's mane.

'It *is* Dandelion,' Ciri said again. 'Geralt, we have to do something.'

'What?' he asked bitterly. 'Tell me what.'

Some soldiers pulled Dandelion from the wagon, treating him, however, with astonishing courtesy, without brutality, with positive reverence, the most they were capable of. They untied his hands before the steps leading to the scaffold. Then he nonchalantly scratched his behind and climbed the steps without being urged.

One of the steps suddenly creaked and the railing, made of a rough pole, cracked. Dandelion almost lost his balance.

'That needs fixing, dammit!' he yelled. 'You'll see, one day somebody will kill themselves on these steps. And that wouldn't be funny.'

Dandelion was intercepted on the scaffolding by two hangman's assistants in sleeveless leather jerkins. The executioner, as broad in the shoulders as a castle keep, looked at the condemned

man through slits in his hood. Beside him stood a character in a sumptuous, though funereally black outfit. He also wore a funereal expression.

'Good gentlemen and burghers of Beauclair and the surroundings!' he read thunderously and funereally from an unrolled parchment. 'It is known that Julian Alfred Pankratz, Viscount de Lettenhove, alias Dandelion—'

'Pancratts what?' Ciri whispered a question.

'—by sentence of the Ducal High Court has been found guilty of all the crimes, misdeeds and offences of which he is accused, namely: lèse-majesté, treason, and furthermore sullying the dignity of the noble estate through perjury, lampooning, calumny and slander, also roistering and indecency as well as debauchery, in other words harlotry. Thus the tribunal has adjudged to punish Viscount Julian *et cetera*, primo: by defacing his coat of arms, by painting diagonal black lines on his escutcheon. Secundo: by the confiscation of his property, lands, estates, copses, forests and castles . . .'

'Castles,' groaned the Witcher. 'What castles?'

Dandelion snorted insolently. The expression on his face demonstrated emphatically that he was heartily amused by the confiscation announced by the tribunal.

'Tertio: the chief penalty. Anna Henrietta, reigning over us as Her Enlightenment the Duchess of Toussaint and Lady of Beauclair, has deigned to commute the punishment provided for the above-mentioned crimes of being dragged behind horses, broken on the wheel and quartered, to beheading by axe. May justice be done!'

The crowd raised several incoherent shouts. The women standing in the front row began to hypocritically wail and falsely lament. Children were lifted up or carried on shoulders so as not to miss any of the spectacle. The executioner's assistants rolled a stump into the centre of the scaffold and covered it with a napkin. There was something of a commotion, since it turned out someone had swiped the wicker basket for the severed head, but another one was quickly found.

Four ragged street urchins had spread out a kerchief beneath the scaffold to catch blood on it. There was great demand for that kind of souvenir, you could earn good money from them.

'Geralt.' Ciri didn't raise her lowered head. 'We have to do

something . . .’

He didn’t answer.

‘I wish to address the townspeople,’ Dandelion proudly declared.

‘Make it short, Viscount.’

The poet stood on the edge of the scaffold and raised his hands. The crowd murmured and fell silent.

‘Hey, people,’ called Dandelion. ‘What cheer? How go you?’

‘Ah, muddling along,’ muttered someone, after a long silence, in a row towards the back.

‘That’s good,’ the poet nodded. ‘I’m greatly content. Well, now we may begin.’

‘Master executioner,’ the funereal one said with artificial emphasis. ‘Do your duty!’

The executioner went closer, kneeled down before the condemned man in keeping with the ancient custom, and lowered his hooded head.

‘Forgive me, good fellow,’ he requested gravely.

‘Me?’ asked Dandelion in astonishment. ‘Forgive you?’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘Not a chance.’

‘Eh?’

‘I’ll never forgive you. Why should I? Have you heard him, the prankster! He’s about to cut my head off, and I’m supposed to forgive him? Are you mocking me or what? At a time like this?’

‘How can you, sir?’ asked the executioner, saddened. ‘For there’s a law . . . And a custom . . . The condemned man must forgive the executioner in advance. Good sir! Expunge my guilt, absolve my sin . . .’

‘No.’

‘No?’

‘No!’

‘I won’t behead him,’ the executioner declared gloomily, getting up from his knees. ‘He must forgive me, otherwise there’s

nothing doing.'

'Lord Viscount.' The funereal clerk caught Dandelion by the elbow. 'Don't make things difficult. People have gathered, they're waiting . . . Forgive him. He's asking politely, isn't he?'

'I won't forgive him, and that's that!'

'Master executioner!' The funereal man approached the executioner. 'Chop off his head without being forgiven, eh? I'll see you right . . .'

Without a word, the executioner held out a hand a large as a frying pan. The funereal man sighed, reached into a pouch and tipped some coins out into his hand. The executioner looked at them for a while, then clenched his fist. The eyes in the slits of his hood flashed malevolently.

'Very well,' he said, putting the money away and turning towards the poet. 'Kneel down then, Mr Stubborn. Put your head on the block, Mr Spiteful. I can also be spiteful, if I want to. I'll take two blows to behead you. Three, if I'm lucky.'

'I absolve you!' howled Dandelion. 'I forgive you!'

'Thank you.'

'Since he's forgiven you,' said the funereal clerk gloomily, 'give me back my money.'

The executioner turned around and raised the axe.

'Step aside, noble sir,' he said forebodingly in a dull voice. 'Don't get in the way of the tool. For where heads are being chopped off, if you get too close you might lose an ear.'

The clerk stepped back suddenly and almost fell off the scaffold.

'Like this?' Dandelion kneeled down and stretched his neck on the block. 'Master? Hey, master?'

'What?'

'You were joking, weren't you? You'll behead me with one blow? With one swing? Well?'

The executioner's eyes flashed.

'Let it be a surprise,' he snapped portentously.

The crowd suddenly swayed, yielding before a rider bursting

into the square on a foaming horse.

‘Stop!’ yelled the rider, waving a large roll of parchment hung with red seals. ‘Stop the execution! By ducal order! Out of my way! Stop the execution! I bear a pardon for the condemned man.’

‘Not again?’ the executioner snarled, lowering the already raised axe. ‘Another reprieve? It’s starting to get boring.’

‘Mercy! Mercy!’ bellowed the crowd. The matrons in the front row began to lament even louder. A lot of people, mainly youngsters, whistled and moaned in disapproval.

‘Quieten down, good gentlemen and burghers!’ yelled the funereal man, unrolling the parchment. ‘This is the will of Her Grace Anna Henrietta! In her boundless goodness, in celebration of the peace treaty, which, as rumour has it, was signed in the city of Cintra, Her Grace pardons Viscount Julian Alfred Pankratz de Lettenhove, alias Dandelion, and his misdeeds, and waives his execution—’

‘Darling Little Weasel,’ said Dandelion, smiling broadly.

‘—ordering at the same time that the above-mentioned Viscount Julian Pankratz *et cetera* without delay doth leave the capital and borders of the Duchy of Toussaint and never return, since he offends Her Grace, and Her Grace can no longer countenance him! You are free to go, Viscount.’

‘And my property?’ yelled Dandelion. ‘Eh? You can keep my chattels, copses, forests and castles, but give me back, sod the lot of you, my lute, my horse Pegasus, a hundred and forty talars and eighty halers, my raccoon-lined cloak, my ring—’

‘Shut up!’ shouted Geralt, jostling the fulminating and reluctantly parting crowd with his horse. ‘Shut up, get down and come here, you blockhead! Ciri, clear the way! Dandelion! Do you hear me?’

‘Geralt? Is that you?’

‘Don’t ask, just get down! Over here! Leap onto my horse!’

They forced their way through the throng and galloped down the narrow street. Ciri first and Geralt and Dandelion on Roach behind her.

‘Why the hurry?’ said the bard behind the Witcher’s back. ‘No one’s following us.’

‘For now. Your duchess likes to change her mind and suddenly cancel what she’s already decided. Come clean; did you know about the pardon?’

‘No, no I didn’t,’ murmured Dandelion. ‘But, I confess I was counting on it. Little Weasel is a darling and has a very kind heart.’

‘Enough of that bloody “Little Weasel”, dammit. You’ve only just wriggled out of lèse-majesté, do you want to fall back into recidivism?’

The troubadour fell silent. Ciri reined back Kelpie and waited for them. When they caught up she looked at Dandelion and wiped away a tear.

‘Oh, you . . .’ she said. ‘You . . . Pancratts . . .’

‘Let’s go,’ urged the Witcher. ‘Let’s leave this town and the borders of this enchanting duchy. While we still can.’

*

A ducal messenger caught up with them almost at the very border of Toussaint, from where one could already see Gorgon Mountain. He was pulling behind him a saddled Pegasus and was carrying Dandelion’s lute, cloak and ring. He ignored the question about the one hundred and forty talars and eighty halers. He listened stony-faced to the bard’s request to give the duchess a kiss.

They rode up the Sansretour, which was now a tiny, fast-flowing stream. They bypassed Belhaven and camped in the Newi valley. In a place the Witcher and the bard remembered.

Dandelion held out for a very long time. He didn’t ask any questions.

But he finally had to be told everything.

And be accompanied in his silence. In the dreadful, pregnant silence that fell after the telling, and festered like a sore.

*

At noon the next day they were at the Slopes, outside Riedbrune.

Peace and order reigned all around. The people were sanguine and helpful. It felt safe.

Gibbets, heavy with hanging corpses, stood everywhere.

They steered clear of the town, heading towards Dol Angra.

'Dandelion!' Geralt had only just noticed what he should have noticed much earlier. 'Your priceless tube! Your centuries of poetry! The messenger didn't have them. They were left in Toussaint!'

'They were.' The bard nodded indifferently. 'In Little Weasel's wardrobe, under a pile of dresses, knickers and corsets. And may they lie there forever.'

'Would you like to explain?'

'What's there to explain? I had enough time in Toussaint to read closely what I'd written.'

'And?'

'I'm going to write it again. Anew.'

'I understand.' Geralt nodded. 'In short, you turned out to be as poor a writer as you were a favourite. Or to put it more bluntly: you make a fucking mess of whatever you touch. Well, but even if you have the chance to improve and rewrite your *Half a Century*, you haven't got a fucking prayer with Duchess Anarietta. Ugh, the lover driven away in disgrace. Yes, yes, no point making faces! You weren't meant to be ducal consort in Toussaint, Dandelion.'

'We shall see about that.'

'Don't count on me. I don't mean to be there to see it.'

'And no one's asking you to. I tell you though, Little Weasel has a good and understanding little heart. In truth, she got somewhat carried away when she caught me with young Nique, the baron's daughter . . . But now she's sure to have cooled off. Understood that a man isn't created for monogamy. She's forgiven me and is no doubt waiting—'

'You're hopelessly stupid,' stated Geralt, and Ciri confirmed she thought the same with an energetic nod of her head.

'I'm not going to discuss it with you,' Dandelion sulked. 'Particularly since it's an intimate matter. I tell you one more time: Little Weasel will forgive me. I'll write a suitable ballad or sonnet, send it to her, and she'll . . .'

‘Have mercy, Dandelion.’

‘Oh, there’s really no point talking to you. Let’s ride on! Gallop, Pegasus! Gallop, you white-legged flyer!’

They rode on.

It was May.

*

‘Because of you,’ the Witcher said reproachfully, ‘because of you, O my banished lover, I also had to flee from Toussaint like some outlaw or exile. I didn’t even manage to meet up with . . .’

‘Fringilla Vigo? You wouldn’t have seen her. She left soon after you set off in January. She simply vanished.’

‘I wasn’t thinking about her.’ Geralt cleared his throat, seeing Ciri prick up her ears in interest. ‘I wanted to meet Reynart. And introduce him to Ciri . . .’

Dandelion fixed his eyes on Pegasus’s mane.

‘Reynart de Bois-Fresnes,’ he mumbled, ‘fell in a skirmish with marauders on the Cervantes pass sometime at the end of February, in the vicinity of the Vedette watchtower. Anarietta honoured him with a posthumous medal—’

‘Shut up, Dandelion.’

Dandelion shut up, admirably obedient.

*

May marched on and matured. The vivid yellow of dandelions disappeared from the meadows, replaced by the downy, grubby, fleeting white of their parachutes.

It was green and very warm. The air, if it wasn’t freshened by brief storms, was thick, hot and as sticky as mead.

*

They crossed the Yaruga on the twenty-sixth of May over a very new, very white bridge smelling of resin. The remains of the old bridge – black, scorched, charred timbers – could be seen in the water and on the bank.

Ciri became anxious.

Geralt knew. He knew her intentions, knew about her plans, about the agreement with Yennefer. He was ready. But in spite of that the thought of parting stung him painfully. As though a nasty little scorpion had been sleeping in his chest, within him, behind his ribcage and had now suddenly come awake.

*

A spreading oak tree stood – as it had for at least a hundred years, actually – at the crossroads outside the village of Koprzywnica, beyond the ruins of the burnt-down inn. Now, in the spring, it was laden with tiny buds of blossom. People from the whole region, even the remote Spalla, were accustomed to using the huge and quite low boughs of the oak to hang up slats and boards bearing all sorts of information. For that reason, the oak tree that served for communication between people was called the Tree of Tidings of Good and Evil.

'Ciri, start on that side,' ordered Geralt, dismounting. 'Dandelion, have a look on this side.'

The planks on the boughs swayed in the wind, clattering against each other.

Searches for missing and separated families usually dominated after a war. There were plenty of declarations of the following kind: COME BACK, I FORGIVE YOU, plenty of offers of erotic massage and similar services in the neighbouring towns and villages, and plenty of announcements and advertisements. There were love letters, there were denunciations signed by well-meaning people, and poison pen letters. There were also boards expressing the philosophical views of their authors – the vast majority of them moronically nonsensical or repulsively obscene.

'Ha!' called Dandelion. 'A witcher is urgently sought in Rastburg Castle. They write that good pay, luxurious accommodation and extraordinarily tasty board are guaranteed.

Will you avail yourself of it, Geralt?'

'Absolutely not.'

Ciri found the information they were looking for.

And then announced to the Witcher what he had been expecting for a long time.

*

'I'm going to Vengerberg, Geralt,' she repeated. 'Don't make faces like that. You know I have to, don't you? Yennefer's summoned me. She's waiting for me there.'

'I know.'

'You're going to Rivia, to that rendezvous you're still keeping a secret—'

'A surprise,' he interrupted. 'It's a surprise, not a secret.'

'Very well, a surprise. I, meanwhile, will sort out what I need to in Vengerberg, pick up Yennefer and we'll both be in Rivia in six days. Don't make faces, please. And let's not part like it was forever. It's just six days! Goodbye.'

'Goodbye, Ciri.'

'Rivia, in six days,' she repeated once more, reining Kelpie around.

She galloped away at once. She was out of sight very quickly, and Geralt felt as though a cold, awful clawed hand was squeezing his stomach.

'Six days,' Dandelion repeated pensively. 'From here to Vengerberg and back to Rivia . . . All together it'll be close to two hundred and fifty miles . . . It's impossible, Geralt. Indeed, on that devilish mare, on which the girl can travel at the speed of a courier, three times quicker than us, theoretically, very theoretically, she could cover such a distance in six days. But even the devilish mare has to rest. And that mysterious matter that Ciri has to take care of will also take some time. And thus it's impossible . . .'

'Nothing is impossible—' the Witcher pursed his lips '—for Ciri.'

‘Can it be—?’

‘She’s not the girl you knew,’ Geralt interrupted him harshly. ‘Not any longer.’

Dandelion was silent for a long time.

‘I have a strange feeling . . .’

‘Be quiet. Don’t say anything. I beg you.’

*

May was over. The new moon was coming, the old moon was waning. It was very thin. They rode towards the mountains, barely visible on the horizon.

*

It was a typical landscape after a war. All of a sudden, graves and burial mounds had sprung up among the fields; skulls and skeletons lay white amidst the lush, spring grass. Corpses hung on roadside trees, and wolves sat beside the roads, waiting for the miserable travellers to weaken.

Grass no longer grew on the black patches of land where fires had passed through.

The villages and settlements, of which only charred chimneys remained, resounded with the banging of hammers and the rasping of saws. Near the ruins, peasant women dug holes in the scorched earth with hoes. Some of them, stumbling, were pulling harrows and ploughs and the webbing harnesses bit into their gaunt shoulders. Children hunted for grubs and worms in the newly ploughed furrows.

‘I have a vague feeling that something’s not as it should be here,’ said Dandelion, ‘Something’s missing . . . Do you have that impression, Geralt?’

‘Eh?’

‘Something’s not normal here.’

‘Nothing’s normal here, Dandelion. Nothing.’

*

During the warm, black and windless night, lit up by distant flashes of lightning and restless growls of thunder, Geralt and Dandelion saw from their camp the horizon in the west blooming with the red glow of fire. It wasn't far and the wind that blew up brought the smell of smoke. The wind also brought snatches of sound. They heard – like it or not – the howling of people being murdered, the wailing of women, and the brash and triumphant yelling of bandits.

Dandelion said nothing, glancing fearfully at the Witcher every now and then.

But the Witcher didn't even twitch, didn't even turn his head around. And his face seemed to be cast in bronze.

They continued on their journey the next morning. They didn't even look at the thin trail of smoke rising above some trees.

And later they chanced upon a column of settlers.

*

They were walking in a long line. Slowly. Carrying small bundles. They walked in complete silence. Men, boys, women and children. They walked without grumbling, without tears, without a word of complaint. Without screams, without any desperate wailing.

But there were screams and despair in their eyes. In the empty eyes of people who had been damaged. Robbed, beaten, driven away.

'Who are they?' Dandelion ignored the hostility visible in the eyes of the officer supervising the march. 'Who are you driving like this?'

'They're Nilfgaardians,' snapped a sub-lieutenant from the height of his saddle. He was a ruddy-faced stripling, of no more than eighteen summers. 'Nilfgaardian settlers. They appeared in our lands like cockroaches! And we'll sweep them away like cockroaches. So was it decided in Cintra and so was it written in the peace treaty.'

He leaned over and spat.

‘And if it was up to me,’ he continued, looking defiantly at Dandelion and the Witcher, ‘I wouldn’t let them get out of here alive, the rats.’

‘And if it depended on me,’ said a non-commissioned officer with a grey moustache in a slow, drawling voice, looking at his commander with a gaze strangely devoid of respect, ‘I’d leave them in peace on their farms. I wouldn’t drive good farmers from the land. I’d be glad that agriculture was prospering. That there’s something to eat.’

‘You’re as thick as pig shit, Sergeant,’ snapped the sub-lieutenant. ‘It’s Nilfgaard! It’s not our language, not our culture, not our blood. We’d be glad of the agriculture and nursing a viper in our bosom. Traitors, ready to stab us in the back. Perhaps you think there’ll be harmony with the Black Cloaks forever. No, they can go back where they came from . . . Hey, soldiers! That one has a cart! Get it off him, at the double!’

The order was carried out extremely zealously. With the use not only of heels and fists, but truncheons too.

Dandelion gave a slight cough.

‘What, something not to your liking, perhaps?’ The youthful sub-lieutenant glared at him. ‘Perhaps you’re a Nilfgaard-lover?’

‘Heaven forbid,’ Dandelion swallowed.

Many of the empty-eyed women and girls walking like automatons had torn garments, swollen and bruised faces, and thighs and calves marked by trickles of dried blood. Many of them had to be supported as they walked. Dandelion looked at Geralt’s face and began to be afraid.

‘Time we were going,’ he mumbled. ‘Farewell, gentlemen.’

The sub-lieutenant didn’t even turn his head around, preoccupied with checking that none of the settlers were carrying luggage larger than the Peace of Cintra had determined.

The column of settlers walked on.

They heard the high-pitched, desperate screams of a woman in great pain.

‘Geralt, no,’ groaned Dandelion. ‘Don’t do anything, I beg you . . . Don’t get involved . . .’

The Witcher turned his face towards him, and Dandelion didn't recognise it.

'Get involved?' he repeated. 'Intervene? Rescue somebody? Risk my neck for some noble principles or ideas? Oh, no, Dandelion. Not any longer.'

*

One night, a restless night lit up by distant flashes of lightning, a dream woke the Witcher again. He wasn't certain this time, either, if he hadn't gone straight from one nightmare to another.

Once again, a pulsating brightness that frightened the horses rose above the remains of the campfire. Once again, there was a great castle, black colonnades, and a table with women sitting around it in the brightness.

Two of the women weren't sitting but standing. One in black and white and the other in black and grey.

It was Yennefer and Ciri.

The Witcher groaned in his sleep.

*

Yennefer was right to quite categorically advise Ciri against wearing male clothing. Dressed like a boy, Ciri would have felt foolish, here, now, in the hall among these elegant women sparkling with jewellery. She was pleased she'd agreed to dress in a combination of black and grey. It flattered her when she felt approving looks on her puffed, paned sleeves and high waist, on the velvet ribbon bearing the small rose-shaped diamond brooch.

'Please come closer.'

Ciri shuddered a little. Not just at the sound of that voice. Yennefer, it turned out, had been right in one more thing – she had advised against a plunging neckline. Ciri, however, had insisted and now had the impression the draught was literally raging over her chest, and her whole front, almost to her navel, was covered in gooseflesh.

‘Come closer,’ repeated the dark-haired, dark-eyed woman whom Ciri knew and remembered from the Isle of Thanedd. And although Yennefer had told her whom she would meet in Montecalvo, had described them all and taught her all of their names, Ciri at once began to entitle her ‘Madam Owl’ in her thoughts.

‘Welcome to the Montecalvo Lodge,’ said Madam Owl. ‘Miss Ciri.’

Ciri bowed as Yennefer had instructed, politely, but more in the male fashion, without a ladylike curtsey, without a modest and submissive lowering of her eyes. She responded with a smile to Triss Merigold’s sincere and pleasant smile, and with a somewhat lower nod of the head to Margarita Laux-Antille’s friendly look. She endured the remaining eight pairs of eyes, although they pierced like gimlets. Stabbed like spear blades.

‘Please be seated,’ beckoned Madam Owl with a truly regal gesture. ‘No, not you, Yennefer! Just her. You, Yennefer, are not an invited guest, but a felon, summoned to be judged and punished. You will stand until the Lodge decides on your fate.’

Protocol was over for Ciri in a flash.

‘In that case I shall also stand,’ she said, not at all quietly. ‘I’m no guest either. I was also summoned to be informed about my fate. That’s the first thing. And the second is that Yennefer’s fate is my fate. What applies to her applies to me. We cannot be rent asunder. With all due respect.’

Margarita Laux-Antille smiled, looking her in the eyes. The modest, elegant woman with the slightly aquiline nose, who could only be the Nilfgaardian, Assire var Anahid, nodded, and tapped her fingers lightly on the table.

‘Philippa,’ said a woman with her neck wrapped in a silver fox-fur boa. ‘We don’t have to be so uncompromising, it seems to me. At least not today, not right now. This is the Lodge’s round table. We sit at it as equals. Even if we are to be judged. I think we can all agree about what we should—’

She didn’t finish, but swept her eyes over the remaining sorceresses. They, meanwhile, expressed their agreement by nodding: Margarita, Assire, Triss, Sabrina Glevissig, Keira Metz, and the two beautiful elf women. Only the other Nilfgaardian, the raven-haired Fringilla Vigo, sat motionless, very pale, not wresting

her eyes from Yennefer.

‘Let it be so.’ Philippa Eilhart waved a ringed hand. ‘Sit down, both of you. Despite my opposition. But the Lodge’s unity comes before everything. The Lodge’s interests before everything. And above everything. The Lodge is everything, the rest nothing. I hope you understand, Ciri?’

‘Very well.’ Ciri had no intention of lowering her gaze. ‘Particularly since I am that nothing.’

Francesca Findabair, the stunning elf woman, gave a peal of resonant laughter.

‘Congratulations, Yennefer,’ she said in her hypnotically melodic voice. ‘I recognise an outstanding hallmark, the purity of the gold. I recognise the school.’

‘It isn’t difficult to recognise.’ Yennefer swept a passionate look around her. ‘For it’s the school of Tissaia de Vries.’

‘Tissaia de Vries is dead,’ Madam Owl said calmly. ‘She’s not present at this table. Tissaia de Vries died, and the matter has been grieved and mourned. It was simultaneously a landmark and a turning point. For a new time has dawned, a new era has come, and great changes are coming. And fate has assigned you an important role in these transformations, Ciri; you who once were Cirilla of Cintra. You probably already know what role.’

‘I know,’ she snapped, not reacting to Yennefer’s restraining hiss. ‘Vilgefortz explained it to me! While preparing to stick a glass syringe between my legs. If that’s supposed to be my destiny, then I – respectfully – decline.’

Philippa’s dark eyes flashed with a cold anger. But it was Sheala de Tancarville who spoke.

‘You still have much to learn, child,’ she said, wrapping the silver fox-fur boa around her neck. ‘You will have to unlearn many things, I see and hear, by your own efforts or with someone’s help. You have lately come into possession, it can be gathered, of much evil knowledge. You have also certainly endured evil, experienced evil. Now, in your childish rage, you refuse to notice the good, you deny the good and good intentions. You bristle like a hedgehog, unable to recognise precisely those who are concerned with your good. You snort and bare your claws like a wild kitten, without leaving us a choice: you need to be grabbed by the scruff of the neck. And we shall do that, child, without a second thought. For we

are older than you, we're wiser, we know everything about what has been and what is, and we know much about what will be. We shall take you by the scruff of the neck, kitty, so you may one day soon, sit here among us at this table, as an experienced and wise she-cat. As one of us. No! Not a word! Don't you dare open your mouth when Sheala de Tancarville is speaking!'

The voice of the Koviran sorceress, sharp and piercing like a knife scraping against iron, suddenly hung in mid-air over the table. Not only Ciri cowered; the other witches of the Lodge shuddered slightly and drew their heads into their shoulders. Well, perhaps with the exception of Philippa, Francesca and Assire. And Yennefer.

'You were right,' continued Sheala, wrapping the boa around her neck, 'in thinking that you were summoned to Montecalvo to be informed about your fate. You weren't right to think you are nothing. For you are everything, you are the future of the world. At this moment, naturally, you don't know that, can't know that, at this moment you're a puffed up and spitting kitten, a traumatised child, who sees in everybody Emhyr var Emreis or Vilgefortz holding his inseminator. And there's no point now, at this moment, explaining to you that you are mistaken, that it concerns your good and the good of the world. The time will come for such explanations. One day. Now, hot under the collar, you don't want to listen to the voice of reason. Now, for every argument you will have a riposte in the form of childish stubbornness and noisy indignation. Now you will simply be grabbed by the scruff of the neck. I have finished. Inform the girl of her fate, Philippa.'

Ciri sat stiff, stroking the heads of the sphinxes carved into the armrests of the chair.

'You will go to Kovir with Sheala and I.' Madam Owl broke the heavy and dead silence. 'To Point Vanis, the royal summer capital. Because you are no longer Cirilla of Cintra, you will be presented at the audience as a novice in magic, our pupil. At the audience you will meet a very wise king, Esterad Thyssen, of genuine royal blood. You will meet his wife, Queen Zuleyka, a person of extraordinary nobility and goodness. You will also meet the royal couple's son, Prince Tankred.

Ciri, beginning to understand, opened her eyes widely. Madam Owl noticed it.

'Yes,' she confirmed. 'You must make an impression on Prince Tankred, above all. For you will become his lover and bear his

child.'

'Were you still Cirilla of Cintra—' Philippa took the conversation up after a long pause '—were you still the daughter of Pavetta and the granddaughter of Calanthe, we would make you Tankred's wedded wife. Princess, and later Queen of Kovir and Poviss. Sadly, and I say this with real sorrow, fate has deprived you of everything. Including the future. You will only be a lover. A favourite—'

'By name and formally,' interjected Sheala, 'for in practice we shall try hard for you to gain the status of princess by Tankred's side, and afterwards even of queen. Your help will be necessary, naturally. Tankred must desire you to be at his side. Day and night. We'll teach you how to fuel such a desire. But whether the lesson is learned will depend on you.'

'Those titles are essentially trifles,' said Madam Owl. 'It's important that Tankred impregnates you as quickly as possible.'

'Well, that's obvious,' Ciri muttered.

'The Lodge will provide for the future and position of your child.' Philippa didn't take her eyes off Ciri. 'You deserve to know we're thinking here about matters of great note. You will be participating in it, in any case, since right after the birth of the child you will begin to take part in our gatherings. You will learn. Since you are, although it may be incomprehensible to you today, one of us.'

'You called me a monster on the Isle of Thanedd, Madam Owl.' Ciri overcame the constriction in her throat. 'And today you tell me I'm one of you.'

'There's no contradiction in that,' resounded the voice of Enid an Gleanna, the Daisy of the Valleys, as melodic as the burbling of a stream. 'We, *me luned*, are all monsters. Each in our own way. Isn't that right, Madam Owl?'

Philippa shrugged.

'We shall disguise that hideous scar on your face with an illusion,' Sheala spoke again, tugging at her boa apparently indifferently. 'You will be beautiful and mysterious, and Tankred Thyssen, I assure you, will lose his head for you. We'll have to invent some personal details for you. Cirilla is a nice name and is by no means so rare that you would have to give it up to remain incognito. But we have to give you a surname. I wouldn't protest if

you chose mine.'

'Or mine,' said Madam Owl, smiling with the corners of her mouth. 'Cirilla Eilhart also sounds nice.'

'That name—' the silver bells of the Daisy of the Valleys jingled in the hall again '—sounds nice in every combination. And each of us, sitting here, would like to have a daughter like you, Zireael, O Swallow with the eyes of a falcon, you, who bear the blood and bones of Lara Dorren's blood and bones. Each of us would give up everything, even the Lodge, even the fate of the kingdoms and the whole world, to have a daughter like you. But it's impossible. We know that it's impossible. Which is why we envy Yennefer.'

'Thank you, Madam Philippa,' Ciri said a moment later, clenching her hands on the sphinxes' heads. 'I'm also honoured at the offer of bearing the name Tancarville. However, because a surname is the only thing in this whole matter that depends on me and my choice, the only thing that isn't being imposed on me, I have to gratefully decline and choose for myself. I want to be called Ciri of Vengerberg, daughter of Yennefer.'

'Ha!' A black-haired sorceress, whom Ciri guessed was Sabrina Glevissig of Kaedwen, flashed her teeth. 'Tankred Thyssen will prove to be an ass if he doesn't wed her morganatically. If instead of her he lets some drippy princess be foisted upon him, he'll turn out to be an ass and a blind man, unable to recognise a diamond among pieces of glass. Congratulations, Yenna. I envy you. And you know how sincerely I can envy.'

Yennefer thanked her with a nod of her head. Without even the ghost of a smile.

'And thus,' said Philippa, 'everything is settled.'

'No,' said Ciri.

Francesca Findabair snorted softly. Sheala de Tancarville raised her head and her facial features hardened unpleasantly.

'I have to think the matter over,' Ciri declared. 'Ponder it. Sort everything out in my mind. Calmly. Once I've done that I'll return here, to Montecalvo. I'll appear before you, ladies. I'll tell you what I've decided.'

Sheala moved her lips, as though she'd found something in her mouth she ought to spit out at once. But she didn't speak.

‘I have arranged to meet the Witcher Geralt in the city of Rivia.’ Ciri lifted her head up. ‘I promised him I’d meet him there, that I’d ride there with Yennefer. I’ll keep that promise, with your permission or without it. Madam Rita, who is here, knows that I always find a crack in the wall if I’m going to Geralt.’

Margarita Laux-Antille nodded with a smile.

‘I must talk to Geralt. Say goodbye to him. And admit he’s right. Because you ought to know one thing, ladies. When we were riding away from Stygga Castle, leaving corpses in our wake, I asked Geralt if it was the end, if we were victorious, if evil had been overcome, and if good had triumphed. And he just smiled somehow strangely and sadly. I thought it was from tiredness, because we had buried all of his friends at the foot of Stygga. But now I know what that smile meant. It was a smile of pity at the naivety of a child who thought that the slit throats of Vilgefortz and Bonhart meant the triumph of good over evil. I really must tell him I’ve grown wiser, that I’ve understood. I really must tell him.

‘I must also try to convince him that what you want to do with me fundamentally differs from what Vilgefortz wanted to do to me with a glass syringe. I have to explain to him that there is a difference between Montecalvo Castle and Stygga Castle, even though Vilgefortz was concerned with the good of the world and you are also concerned with the good of the world.

‘I know it won’t be easy to convince an old wolf like Geralt. Geralt will say I’m a chit, that it’s easy to beguile me with appearances of nobility, that all this bloody *destiny* and *good of the world* are stupid platitudes. But I must try. It’s important that he understands and accepts it. It’s very important. For you too, ladies.’

‘You haven’t understood anything,’ said Sheala de Tancarville harshly. ‘You’re still a child passing from the stage of callow howling and foot-stamping to callow arrogance. The only thing that raises hope is your sharpness of mind. You’ll learn quickly. Soon, believe me, you’ll laugh, recalling the nonsense you talked here. As regards your trip to Rivia, I pray you, let the Lodge express its opinion. I’m expressing my firm opposition. For fundamental reasons. To prove to you that I, Sheala de Tancarville, never waste words. And am capable of making you bend your proud neck. You need to be taught discipline, for your own good.’

‘Let’s settle this matter then.’ Philippa Eilhart placed her palms on the table. ‘Ladies, please express your opinions. Are we to permit

the haughty maid Ciri to ride to Rivia? For a meeting with some witcher for whom there soon won't be a place in her life? Are we to let sentimentalism grow in her, sentimentality that she will soon have to utterly get rid of? Sheala is opposed. And the rest of you ladies?'

'I'm against,' declared Sabrina Glevissig. 'Also for fundamental reasons. I like the girl, I like what she says, her insolence and hot-tempered impudence. I prefer it to spineless acquiescence. I wouldn't have anything against her request, particularly since she would certainly return; people such as she don't break their word. But the little madam has threatened us. She must know we disregard such threats!'

'I'm opposed,' said Keira Metz. 'For practical reasons. I like the girl too, and Geralt carried me in his arms on Thanedd. There isn't a scrap of sentimentality in me, but it was awfully pleasant. It would be a way of repaying him. But no! For you are mistaken, Sabrina. The girl is a witcher and is trying to outwit us. In short, make a run for it.'

'Does anyone here,' Yennefer drawled malevolently, 'dare to doubt the words of my daughter?'

'You, Yennefer, be quiet,' hissed Philippa. 'Don't speak, or I'll lose my patience. There are three votes against. Let's hear the rest.'

'I vote to allow her to go,' said Triss Merigold. 'I know her and vouch for her. I'd also like to accompany her on her journey, if she agrees. Help her in her deliberations and reflections, if she agrees. And in her conversation with Geralt, if she agrees.'

'I'm also in favour,' smiled Margarita Laux-Antille. 'What I say will astonish you, ladies, but I'm doing it for Tissaia de Vries. Were Tissaia here, she would be outraged at the suggestion that compulsion and the restriction of personal freedom are necessary to maintain the unity of the Lodge.'

'I vote in favour,' said Francesca Findabair, straightening the lace on her neckline. 'There are many reasons, but I don't have to reveal them nor do I intend to.'

'I vote in favour,' said Ida Emean aep Sivney, just as laconically. 'Because my heart compels me thus.'

'And I'm opposed,' declared Assire var Anahid dryly. 'I'm not driven by any sympathy, antipathy or fundamental issues. I fear for Ciri's life. She is safe in the Lodge's care, but an easy target on the

roads leading to Rivia. And I worry that there are people who, even having taken away her name and identity, will still think that's not enough.'

'It remains for us to learn the position of Madam Fringilla Vigo,' said Sabrina Glevissig quite scathingly. 'Although it should be obvious. For I take the liberty of reminding you all of Rhys-Rhun Castle.'

'Although I am grateful for the reminder—' Fringilla Vigo lifted her head proudly '—I vote for Ciri. To show the respect and affection I have for the girl. And more than anything I'm doing it for Geralt of Rivia, the Witcher, without whom that girl wouldn't be here today. Who, in order to rescue Ciri, went to the end of the world, fighting everything that stood in his way, even himself. It would be a wickedness to deny him a meeting with her.'

'Yet there was too little wickedness,' Sabrina said cynically, 'and too much naive sentimentality; the same sentimentality we mean to eradicate from this maiden. Why, there was even talk about hearts. And the result is that the scales are in the balance. In deadlock. We haven't decided anything. We'll have to vote again. I suggest by secret ballot.'

'What for?'

They all looked at the person who had spoken. Yennefer.

'I am still a member of this Lodge,' said Yennefer. 'No one has taken my membership away from me. No one has taken my place. I have the formal right to vote. I think it's clear who I'm voting for. The votes in favour prevail, so the matter is settled.'

'Your insolence,' said Sabrina, locking her fingers, armed with onyx rings, 'borders on bad taste, Yennefer.'

'In your place, madam, I would sit in humble silence,' added Sheala grimly. 'Bearing in mind the voting of which you will soon be the subject.'

'I backed Ciri,' said Francesca, 'but I must take you to task, Yennefer. You left the Lodge, fleeing from it and refusing to cooperate. You don't have any rights. You do, though, have obligations, debts to pay, a sentence to hear. Were it not for that, you wouldn't have been allowed to cross Montecalvo's threshold.'

Yennefer restrained Ciri, who was itching to stand up and shout. Without resisting and in silence, Ciri sank into the chair with

the armrests carved into sphinxes, watching Madam Owl – Philippa Eilhart – getting up from her chair and suddenly towering over the table.

'Yennefer doesn't have the right to vote, that is clear,' she announced in a ringing voice. 'But I do. I've listened to the votes of all the women present here, so I can finally vote myself, I believe.'

'What do you mean by that, Philippa?' Sabrina frowned.

Philippa Eilhart looked across the table. She met Ciri's eyes and looked into them.

*

The bottom of the pool is made of a many-coloured mosaic, the tiles shimmering and seeming to move. The entire surface trembles, glimmering with light and shade. Carp and orfe flash by under lily leaves as large as plates, amidst green pond weed. The young girl's large dark eyes reflect in the water, her long hair reaches down to the surface, floating on it.

The girl, forgetting about the whole world, runs her little hands among the stems of water lilies, and hangs over the edge of the pool surrounding the fountain. She would love to touch one of the small gold and red fishes. The fish swim up to the girl's hands, they circle around her curiously, but they won't let themselves be seized; they're as elusive as apparitions, like the water itself. The dark-eyed girl's fingers close on nothingness.

'Philippa!'

It's her most favourite voice. In spite of that the little girl doesn't react right away. She continues to look at the water, at the little fish, at the water lilies and at her own reflection.

'Philippa!'

*

'Philippa.' Sheala de Tancarville's harsh voice shook her out of her reverie. 'We're waiting.'

A cold, spring wind blew in through the open window.

Philippa Eilhart shuddered. *Death*, she thought. *Death passed beside me.*

'This Lodge,' she finally said confidently, loudly and emphatically, 'will decide the fates of the world. Because this Lodge is like the world, is its mirror. Good sense, which doesn't always mean cold wickedness and calculation, is balancing out sentimentality, which is not always naive. Responsibility, iron discipline – even if imposed by force – and aversion to violence; gentleness and trust. The matter-of-fact coolness of omnipotence . . . and heart.

'I, casting my vote last, take one more thing into consideration,' she continued in the silence that had descended on the colonnaded hall in Montecalvo. 'One that, though it doesn't balance out anything, counterbalances everything.'

Following her gaze, all the women looked at the wall, at the mosaic constructed from tiny coloured tiles, depicting the snake Ouroboros grasping its tail in its teeth.

'That thing is destiny,' she continued, fixing her dark eyes on Ciri. 'Which I, Philippa Eilhart, have only recently begun to believe in. Which I, Philippa Eilhart, have only recently begun to understand. Destiny isn't the judgements of providence, isn't scrolls written by the hand of a demiurge, isn't fatalism. Destiny is hope. Being full of hope, believing that what is meant to happen will happen, I cast my vote. I vote for Ciri. The Child of Destiny. The Child of Hope.'

The silence in the colonnaded hall of Montecalvo Castle, plunged in subtle chiaroscuro, lasted a long time. The cry of an osprey circling over the lake reached them from outside the window.

'Madam Yennefer,' Ciri whispered. 'Does that mean . . .'

'Let's go, daughter,' answered Yennefer in a soft voice. 'Geralt's waiting for us and there's a long road ahead.'

*

Geralt awoke and leaped to his feet with the cry of a night bird in his ears.

Then the sorceress and the witcher were married and held a grand wedding party. I too was there, I drank mead and wine. And then they lived happily ever after, but for a very short time. He died ordinarily, of a heart attack. She died soon after him, but of what the tale does not say. They say of sorrow and longing, but who would lend credence to fairy tales?

Flourens Delannoy, *Fairy Tales and Stories*

CHAPTER TWELVE

It was the sixth day after the June new moon when they arrived in Rivia.

They rode out of the forests onto the hillsides and then, beneath them, down below, suddenly and without warning, twinkled and glittered the surface of Loch Eskalott, which filled the valley in the shape of the rune from which it took its name. The hillsides of Craag Ros, the protruding end of the Mahakam massif, covered in fir and larch, gazed at their own reflections in the lake surface. As did the red tiles of the towers of the stout Rivia Castle, the winter seat of the kings of Lyria, standing on a headland extending into the lake. And by a bay at the southern end of Loch Eskalott lay the town of Rivia, with the bright thatch of the cottages around the castle and dark houses growing by the lake shore like mushrooms.

'Well, we seem to have arrived,' Dandelion stated, shielding his eyes with his hand. 'Now we've come full circle, we're in Rivia. Strange, how strange are the twists of fate . . . I don't see blue and white pennants on any of the castle towers, and thus Queen Meve is not residing at the castle. I don't suppose, in any case, that she still remembers our desertion—'

'Believe me, Dandelion,' Geralt interrupted, steering his horse down the hillside. 'I don't give a damn who remembers what.'

A colourful tent resembling a cake stood outside the city, not far from the turnpike. A white shield with a red chevron hung on a pole in front of it. A knight in full armour and a white surcoat decorated with the same arms as the shield was standing under the raised flap of the tent. The knight was scrutinising women in headscarves, tar and pitch makers with kegs containing their wares, herdsmen, pedlars and beggars. His eyes lit up in hope at the sight of Geralt and Dandelion riding slowly along.

'The lady of your heart—' Geralt dispelled the knight's hope in an icy voice '—whoever she is, is the most beautiful and most virtuous virgin from the Yaruga to the Buina.'

'By my troth,' the knight snapped back. 'You speak the truth, sir.'

*

A fair-haired girl in a densely studded leather jacket vomited in the middle of the street, bent in two, holding on to the stirrup of a flea-bitten grey mare. The girl's two male companions, identically attired, carrying swords on their backs and wearing bands on their foreheads, cursed the passers-by filthily, in somewhat incoherent voices. Both were more than tipsy, unsteady on their feet, bumping into horses' sides and the bar of the hitching post situated outside the inn.

'Must we really go in there?' asked Dandelion. 'There may be more nice lads like that inside.'

'I'm meeting someone here. Have you forgotten? This is The Rooster and Mother Hen mentioned in a notice on the oak tree.'

The fair-haired girl bent over again, puked spasmodically and extremely profusely. The mare snorted loudly and jerked, knocking the girl over and dragging her through the vomit.

'What are you gawking at, you fool?' mumbled one of the youngsters. 'You grey-haired old bum?'

'Geralt,' muttered Dandelion, dismounting. 'Don't do anything foolish, please.'

'Fear not. I won't.'

They tied their horses to the hitching post on the other side of the steps. The young men stopped paying attention to them and began insulting and spitting at a townswoman crossing the street with a child. Dandelion glanced at the Witcher's face. He didn't like what he saw.

The first thing that stuck out after entering the inn was a sign: WANTED: COOK. The next was a large picture on a signboard made of planks of wood, portraying a bearded monster holding a battle axe dripping blood. The caption announced: THE DWARF – A WRETCHED, TREACHEROUS RUNT.

Dandelion was right to be worried. In practice, the only guests in the inn – apart from a few seriously drunk drunks and two skinny prostitutes with dark circles around their eyes – were more 'lads' dressed up in leather sparkling with studs, with swords on their backs. There were eight of them of both sexes, but they were

making enough of a commotion for eighteen, shouting over each other and swearing.

'I recognise you and know who you are, gentlemen.' The innkeeper surprised them as soon as he saw them. 'And I have news for you. You're to go to a tavern called Wirsing's in Elm.'

'Oooh.' Dandelion cheered up. 'That's good . . .'

'I wouldn't know about that.' The innkeeper went back to drying a mug on his apron. 'If you disdain my establishment, that's your choice. But I'll tell you that Elm's a dwarven district, where non-humans reside.'

'And what of it?' Geralt squinted his eyes.

'Aye, I'm sure it doesn't bother you.' The innkeeper shrugged. 'Why, the one who left the news was a dwarf. Since you associate with such as he . . . that's your affair. It's your affair whose company you find more agreeable.'

'We aren't particularly fussy as regards company,' announced Dandelion, nodding towards the youths in black jackets with bands around their pimply foreheads yelling and wrestling at a table. 'But I swear we aren't fond of that kind.'

The innkeeper put down the dry mug and glared at them unpleasantly.

'You should be more understanding,' he instructed with emphasis. 'Youngsters have to let off steam. There's a certain saying, youngsters have to let off steam. The war damaged them. Their fathers perished . . .'

'And their mothers screwed around,' finished Geralt with a voice as icy as a mountain lake. 'I understand and I'm full of understanding. At least, I'm trying hard to be. Let's go, Dandelion.'

'Be off with you – with respect,' said the innkeeper without respect. 'But don't be a-complaining about what I warned you of. These days it's easy to get a sore head in the dwarven district. If anything were to happen.'

'If what were to happen?'

'How would I know? Is it any business of mine?'

'Let's go, Geralt,' urged Dandelion, seeing out of the corner of one eye that the war-damaged youngsters, those who were still reasonably conscious, were observing them with eyes shining with

fisstech.

‘Goodbye, master innkeeper. Who knows, perhaps we’ll visit your establishment one day, in a while. Once those signs have gone from the entrance.’

‘And which one don’t you gentlemen like?’ The innkeeper frowned and stood with legs aggressively apart. ‘Eh? The one about the dwarf, perhaps?’

‘No. The one about the cook.’

Three youngsters got up from the table, slightly unsteady on their feet, clearly intending to bar their way. A girl and two boys in black jackets. With swords on their backs.

Geralt didn’t slow his stride, he walked on and his face and eyes were cold and totally indifferent.

Almost at the last moment the striplings parted, stepping back. Dandelion smelled the beer on their breath. And sweat. And fear.

‘You have to get used to it,’ said the Witcher, when they were outside. ‘You have to adapt.’

‘It’s hard sometimes.’

‘That’s no argument. That’s no argument, Dandelion.’

The air was hot, dense and sticky. Like soup.

*

Outside, in front of the inn, the two boys in black jackets were helping the fair-haired girl wash in a horse trough. The girl snorted, incoherently indicating that she was feeling better and announced that she needed a drink. And of course she’d go to the bazaar to overturn some stalls for a lark, but first she needed a drink.

The girl’s name was Nadia Esposito. That name became etched in the annals. It passed into history.

But Geralt and Dandelion couldn’t have known that then. Neither could the girl.

*

The narrow streets of the city of Rivia bustled with life, and what seemed to wholly occupy the residents and visitors was trade. It seemed as though everybody was trading in everything there and trying to exchange anything for something more. A cacophony of shouts resounded from all sides – goods were being advertised, people were bargaining heatedly, insulting each other, thunderously accusing each other of cheating, thievery and swindles, as well as other peccadilloes absolutely unconnected to commerce.

Before Geralt and Dandelion had reached Elm they were presented with a great deal of attractive offers. They were offered, among other things, an astrolabe, a brass trumpet, a set of cutlery decorated with the coat of arms of the Frangipani family, stocks in a copper mine, a large jar of leeches, a tattered book entitled *An Alleged Miracle or the Medusa's Head*, a pair of ferrets, an elixir to increase potency and – as part of a package deal – a none too young, none too slim and none too fresh woman.

A black-bearded dwarf tried to convince them extremely aggressively to buy a shoddy little mirror in a pinchbeck frame, attempting to prove it was the magical looking glass of Cambuscan, when soon after somebody threw a stone and knocked the ware out of his hand.

'Lousy kobold!' bellowed a barefoot and dirty street urchin. 'Unhuman! Bearded old goat!'

'And may your guts rot, you human shithead!' roared the dwarf. 'May they rot and leak out of your arse.'

People looked on in gloomy silence.

*

The district of Elm lay right beside the lake, in a bay among alders, weeping willows and – naturally – elms. It was much more quiet and peaceful, no one bought anything or wanted to sell anything here. A light breeze was blowing from the lake, especially pleasant after getting out of the stuffy, flyblown stink of the city.

They didn't have to search long to find Wirsing's tavern. The first passer-by they encountered pointed it out to them without hesitation.

Two bearded dwarves, sipping beer from mugs hugged against

their bellies, were sitting beneath a roof covered in bright green moss and swallows' nests on the steps of a porch enveloped in climbing peas and wild roses.

'Geralt and Dandelion,' said one of the dwarves and belched daintily. 'What took you so long, you rogues?'

Geralt dismounted.

'Greetings, Yarpen Zigrin. Glad to see you, Zoltan Chivay.'

*

They were the only guests of the tavern, which smelled strongly of roast meat, garlic, herbs and something else, something elusive, but very pleasant. They sat at a heavy table with a view of the lake, which looked mysterious, charming and romantic through tinted panes in lead frames.

'Where's Ciri?' Yarpen Zigrin asked bluntly. 'She can't be—'

'No,' Geralt quickly interrupted. 'She's coming here. She'll be here any moment. Well, beardies, tell us how things are going.'

'Didn't I say?' Yarpen said with a sneer. 'Didn't I say, Zoltan? Comes back from the end of the world, where, if rumours can be believed, he waded in blood, killed dragons and overthrew empires. And he asks *us* how things are going. That's the Witcher all over—'

'What smells so appetising here?' Dandelion interjected.

'Dinner,' said Yarpen Zigrin. 'Meat. Dandelion, ask me where we got the meat.'

'I won't, because I know that joke.'

'Don't be a swine.'

'Where did you get the meat?'

'Crawled here itself.'

'And now more seriously—' Yarpen wiped away tears, although the joke, to tell the truth, was pretty hoary '—the situation with vittles is quite critical, as usual after a war. You won't find meat, not even poultry, it's also hard to get fish . . . Things are bad with flour and spuds, peas and beans . . Farms have been burned down, stores plundered, fishponds emptied and fields lie fallow . . .'

‘There’s no turnover,’ added Zoltan. ‘There’s no transport. Only usury and barter are functioning. Did you see the bazaar? Profiteers are making fortunes beside beggars selling and exchanging the remains of their possessions . . .’

‘If the crops fail on top of that, people will begin to die of hunger in the winter.’

‘Is it really that bad?’

‘Riding from the South you must have passed villages and settlements. Think back to how often you heard dogs barking.’

‘Bloody hell.’ Dandelion slapped himself on the forehead. ‘I knew it . . . I told you, Geralt, that it wasn’t normal! That something was missing! Ha! Now I get it! We didn’t hear any dogs! There weren’t any around—’

He suddenly broke off and glanced towards the kitchen and the smell of garlic and herbs with terror in his eyes.

‘Fear not,’ snorted Yarpen. ‘Our meat doesn’t come from anything that barks, meows or calls out “Mercy!”. Our meat is totally different. It’s fit for kings!’

‘Let us in on it, dwarf!’

‘When we received your letter and it was clear we’d meet in Rivia, Zoltan and I pondered over what to serve you. We racked our brains till all that racking made us want to piss, and then we went down to a little lakeside alder. We looked, and there were positively tons of snails. So we took a sack and caught a load of the dear molluscs, as many as we could stuff in it . . .’

‘A lot of them escaped,’ Zoltan Chivay nodded, ‘We were a tad drunk and they’re devilish fast.’

Again, both dwarves wept with laughter at another old chestnut.

‘Wirsing—’ Yarpen pointed at the innkeeper bustling around by the stove ‘—knows how to cook snails, and that, you ought to know, demands considerable arcane knowledge. He nonetheless is a born chef de cuisine. Before he became a widower he and his wife ran the roadhouse in Maribor with such a table that the king himself entertained guests there. We’ll soon be tucking in, I tell you!’

‘And before that,’ nodded Zoltan, ‘we’ll have a starter of freshly smoked whitefish caught on a gaff in the bottomless depths

of this lake. And we'll wash it down with hooch from the depths of the cellar.'

'And the story, gentlemen,' reminded Yarpen, pouring. 'The story!'

*

The whitefish was still hot, oily and smelled of smoke from alder chips. The vodka was so cold it stung the teeth.

Dandelion spoke first; elaborately, fluently, colourfully and volubly, embellishing his tale with ornaments so beautiful and fanciful they almost obscured the fibs and confabulations.

Then the Witcher spoke. He spoke the same truth, and spoke so dryly, boringly and flatly that Dandelion couldn't bear it and kept butting in, for which the dwarves reprimanded him.

And then the story was over and a lengthy silence fell.

'To the archer Milva!' Zoltan Chivay cleared his throat, saluting with his cup. 'To the Nilfgaardian. To Regis the herbalist who entertained the travellers in his cottage with moonshine and mandrake. And to Angoulême, whom I never knew. May the earth lie lightly on them all. May they have in the beyond plenty of whatever they were short of on earth. And may their names live forever in songs and tales. Let's drink to them.'

*

Wirsing, a grey-haired fellow, pale and as thin as a rake, the sheer opposite of the stereotype of an innkeeper and master of culinary secrets, brought to the table a basket of snow-white, aromatic bread, and after that a huge, wooden dish of snails on a bed of horseradish leaves, sizzling and spitting garlic butter. Dandelion, Geralt and the dwarves set about eating with a will. The meal was exquisitely tasty and at the same time extremely comical, considering the need to fiddle with bizarre tongs and little forks.

They ate, smacked their lips and caught the dripping butter on bread. They swore cheerfully as one snail after another slipped from the tongs. Two young kittens had great fun rolling and chasing the

empty shells across the floor.

The smell coming from the kitchen indicated that Wirsing was cooking another batch.

*

Yarpen Zigrin reluctantly waved a hand, but realised that the Witcher wouldn't give up.

'Nothing new with me, by and large,' he said, sucking out a shell. 'A bit of soldiering . . . A bit of politicking, because I was elected vice-starosta. I'm going to make a career in politics. There's great competition in every other trade. And there are no end of fools, bribe-takers and thieves in politics. It's easy to make a name for yourself.'

'While I don't have a flair for politics,' said Zoltan Chivay, gesticulating with a snail held in his tongs, 'I'm setting up a steam and water hammer works, in partnership with Figgs Merluzzo and Munro Bruys. Remember them, Witcher, Figgs and Bruys?'

'Not just them.'

'Yazon Varda fell at the Battle of the Yaruga,' Zoltan informed them dryly. 'Pretty stupidly, in one of the last skirmishes.'

'Shame. And Percival Schuttenbach?'

'The gnome? Oh, he's doing well. The crafty thing, he got out of the draft using some ancient gnomish laws as an excuse, claiming his religion forbad him from soldiering. And he managed it, even though everybody knows he'd give the whole pantheon of gods and goddesses for a marinated herring. He has a jeweller's workshop in Novigrad. Do you know, he bought that parrot Field Marshal Duda and turned the bird into a living advertisement, after teaching it to call: "Diiiamonds, diiiamonds". And just imagine, it works. The gnome has lots of custom, hands full of work and a well-stuffed safe. Yes, yes, that's Novigrad! Money lies in the streets there. That's also why we want to start our hammer works in Novigrad.'

'People will be smearing shit on your door,' said Yarpen. 'And throwing stones at the windows. And calling you a filthy short-arse. It won't help you at all that you're a war veteran, that you fought for them. You'll be a pariah in that Novigrad of yours.'

‘Be all right,’ said Zoltan cheerfully. ‘There’s too much competition in Mahakam. And too many politicians. Let’s drink a toast, lads. To Caleb Stratton. And Yazon Varda.’

‘To Regan Dahlberg,’ added Yarpen, growing gloomy. Geralt shook his head.

‘Regan too . . .’

‘Aye. At Mayena. Old Mrs Dahlberg was left a widow. Ah, by the devil, enough, enough of that, let’s drink. And hurry with those snails, I see Wirsing’s bringing another bowl!’

*

The dwarves, belts loosened, listened to Geralt’s story about how Dandelion’s ducal romance finished up on the scaffold. The poet pretended to be piqued and didn’t comment. Yarpen and Zoltan roared with laughter.

‘Yes, yes,’ said Yarpen Zigrin at the end, grinning. ‘As the old song goes: *Though man can bend rods of steel, women will always bring him to heel*. Several wonderful examples of the aptness of that adage are gathered around one table today. Zoltan Chivay springs to mind. When I told you what’s new with him, I forgot to add he’s taking a wife. And soon, in September. The lucky girl is called Eudora Brekekeks.’

‘Breckenriggs!’ Zoltan corrected emphatically, frowning. ‘I’m beginning to have enough of correcting your pronunciation, Zigrin. Take heed, for I’m liable to start cracking heads when I’ve had enough of something—!’

‘Where’s the wedding? And when exactly?’ Dandelion interrupted in mid-sentence placatingly. ‘I’m asking, because we might look in. If you invite us, naturally.’

‘It hasn’t been decided what, where or how, or even if it’s happening,’ Zoltan mumbled, clearly disconcerted. ‘Yarpen’s getting ahead of himself. Eudora and I are engaged, right enough, but who knows what might happen? In these fuck-awful times?’

‘The second example of woman’s omnipotence,’ continued Yarpen Zigrin, ‘is Geralt of Rivia, the Witcher.’

Geralt pretended to be occupied with a snail. Yarpen snorted.

‘Having miraculously regained Ciri,’ he continued, ‘he lets her ride off, agreeing to another farewell. He leaves her on her own again, although, as somebody here rightly observed, the times are not too peaceful, for fuck’s sake. And said witcher does all that because that’s what a certain woman wants. The Witcher always does everything that that woman – known to society as Yennefer of Vengerberg – wants. And if only said Witcher got any benefit from it. But he doesn’t. Indeed, as King Dezmod used to say when looking into his chamber pot after completing a motion, “The mind is unable to grasp it”.’

‘I suggest—’ Geralt raised his cup with a charming smile ‘—we drink up and change the subject.’

‘Well said,’ said Dandelion and Zoltan in unison.

*

Wirsing brought to the table a third, and then a fourth great bowl of snails. Neither did he forget, naturally, about the bread and vodka. The diners had now eaten their fill, so it was no surprise that toasts were being drunk somewhat more frequently. Neither was it a surprise that philosophy crept into the discourse more and more often.

*

‘The evil I fought against,’ repeated the Witcher, ‘was a sign of the activities of Chaos, activities calculated to disturb Order. Since wherever Evil is at large, Order may not reign, and everything Order builds collapses, cannot endure. The little light of wisdom and the flame of hope, the glow of warmth, instead of flaring up, go out. It’ll be dark. And in the darkness will be fangs, claws and blood.’

Yarpen Zigrin stroked his beard, greasy from the herb and garlic butter that had dripped from the snails.

‘Very prettily said, Witcher,’ he admitted. ‘But, as the young Cerro said to King Vridanek during their first tryst: “It’s not a bad-looking thing, but does it have any practical use?”’

‘The reason for existence—’ the Witcher didn’t smile ‘—and the raison d’être of witchers has been undermined, since the fight between Good and Evil is now being waged on a different battlefield and is being fought completely differently. Evil has stopped being chaotic. It has stopped being a blind and impetuous force, against which a witcher, a mutant as murderous and chaotic as Evil itself, had to act. Today Evil acts according to rights – because it is entitled to. It acts according to peace treaties, because it was taken into consideration when the treaties were being written . . .’

‘He’s seen the settlers being driven south,’ guessed Zoltan Chivay.

‘Not only that,’ Dandelion added grimly. ‘Not only that.’

‘So what?’ Yarpen Zigrin sat more comfortably, locking his hands on his belly. ‘Everyone’s seen things. Everybody’s been pissed off, everybody has lost his appetite for a shorter or a longer time. Or lost sleep. That’s how it is. That’s how it was. And how it’s going to be. Like these shells here, I swear you won’t squeeze any more philosophy out of it. Because there isn’t any more. What’s not to your liking, Witcher, what doesn’t suit you? The changes the world’s undergoing? Development? Progress?’

‘Perhaps.’

Yarpen said nothing for a long time, looking at the Witcher from under his bushy eyebrows.

‘Progress,’ he said finally, ‘is like a herd of pigs. That’s how you should look at progress, that’s how you should judge it. Like a herd of pigs trotting around a farmyard. Numerous benefits derive from the fact of that herd’s existence. There’s pork knuckle. There’s sausage, there’s fatback, there are trotters in aspic. In a word, there are benefits! There’s no point turning your nose up at the shit everywhere.’

They were all silent for some time, weighing up in their minds and consciences the various important issues and matters.

‘Let’s have a drink,’ said Dandelion finally.

No one protested.

*

‘Progress,’ said Yarpen Zigrin amidst the silence, ‘will eventually light up the darkness. The darkness will yield before the light. But not right away. And definitely not without a fight.’

Geralt, staring at the window, smiled at his own thoughts and dreams.

‘The darkness you’re talking about,’ he said, ‘is a state of mind, not matter. Quite different witchers will have to be trained to fight something like that. It’s high time to start.’

‘Start retraining? Is that what you had in mind?’

‘Not entirely. Being a witcher doesn’t interest me any longer. I’m retiring.’

‘Like hell!’

‘I’m totally serious. I’m done with being a witcher.’

A long silence fell, broken only by the furious meowing of the kittens which were scratching and biting one another under the table, faithful to the custom of that species, for whom there’s no sport without pain.

‘He’s done with being a witcher,’ Yarpen Zigrin finally repeated in a drawling voice. ‘Ha! I don’t know what to think about it, as King Dezmod said when he was caught cheating at cards. But one may suspect the worse. Dandelion, you travel with him, spend a lot of time with him. Is he showing any other signs of paranoia?’

‘Yes, yes.’ Geralt was stony-faced. ‘Joking aside, as King Dezmod said when the guests at the banquet suddenly began to go blue and die. I’ve said what I intended to say. And now to action.’

He picked up his sword from the back of the chair.

‘This is your sihill, Zoltan Chivay. I return it to you with thanks and a low bow. It has served. It has helped. Saved lives. And taken lives.’

‘Witcher . . .’ The dwarf raised his hands in a defensive gesture. ‘The sword is yours. I didn’t lend it to you, I gave it. Gifts —’

‘Quiet, Chivay. I’m returning your sword. I won’t need it any longer.’

‘Like hell,’ repeated Yarpen. ‘Pour him some vodka, Dandelion, because he sounds like old Schrader when a pickaxe fell on his head down a mine shaft. Geralt, I know you have a profound

nature and a lofty soul, but don't talk such crap, please, because, as it's easy to see, neither Yennefer nor any other of your magical concubines are in the audience; just us old buggers. You can't tell old buggers like us that your sword's not needed, that witchers aren't needed, that the world's rotten, that this, that and the other. You're a witcher and always will be—'

'No, I won't,' Geralt responded mildly. 'It may surprise you old buggers, but I've come to the conclusion that pissing into the wind is stupid. That risking your neck for anybody is stupid. Even if they're paying. And existential philosophy has nothing to do with it. You won't believe it, but my own skin has suddenly become extremely dear to me. I've come to the conclusion it would be foolish to risk it in someone else's defence.'

'I've noticed.' Dandelion nodded. 'On one hand that's wise. On the other—'

'There is no other.'

'Do Yennefer and Ciri,' Yarpen asked after a short pause, 'have anything to do with your decision?'

'A great deal.'

'Then everything's clear,' sighed the dwarf. 'Admittedly, I don't exactly know how you, a professional swordsman, intend to sustain yourself and intend to organise your worldly existence. Even though, however you slice it, I can't see you in the role of, let's say, a cabbage planter, nonetheless one must respect your choice. Innkeeper, if you'd be so kind! This is a Mahakam sihill sword from the very forge of Rhundurin. It was a gift. The receiver doesn't want it, the giver may not take it back. So you take it, fasten it above the fireplace. Change the name of the tavern to The Witcher's Sword. May tales of treasure and monsters, of bloody wars and fierce battles, of death, be told here on winter evenings. Of great love and unfailing friendship. Of courage and honour. May this sword cheer up the listeners and inspire the storytellers. And now pour me vodka, gentlemen, for I shall continue talking, shall present profound truths and diverse philosophies, including existential ones.'

The cups were filled with vodka silently and solemnly. They looked into each other's eyes and drank. No less solemnly. Yarpen Zigrin cleared his throat, swept his eyes over his audience and made certain they were sufficiently rapt and solemn.

‘Progress,’ he said with reverence. ‘will lighten up the gloom, for that is what progress is for, as – if you’ll pardon me – the arsehole is for shitting. It will be brighter and brighter, and we shall fear less and less the darkness and the Evil hidden in it. And a day will come, perhaps, when we shall stop believing at all that something is lurking in the darkness. We shall laugh at such fears. Call them childish. Be ashamed of them! But darkness will always, always exist. And there will always be Evil in the darkness, always be fangs and claws, death and blood in the darkness. And witchers will always be needed.’

*

They sat in reflection and silence, so deeply plunged in their thoughts that the suddenly increasing murmur and noise of the town – angry, baleful, intensifying like the buzzing of annoyed wasps – escaped their attention.

They barely noticed as a first, a second and a third shape stole along the silent and empty lakeside boulevard.

Just as a roar exploded over the town, the door to Wirsing’s inn slammed wide open and a small dwarf rushed in, red from effort and panting heavily.

‘What is it?’ Yarpen Zigrin lifted his head.

The dwarf, still unable to catch his breath, pointed towards the town centre. His eyes were frantic.

‘Take a deep breath,’ advised Zoltan Chivay, ‘and tell us what’s going on.’

*

It was later said that the tragic events in Rivia were an absolutely chance occurrence, that it was a spontaneous reaction, a sudden and unpredictable explosion of justified anger, springing from the mutual hostility and dislike between humans, dwarves and elves. It was said that it wasn’t the humans, but the dwarves who attacked first, that the aggression came from them. That a dwarven market trader had insulted a young noblewoman, Nadia Esposito, a war

orphan, that he had used violence against her. When, then, her friends came to her defence, the dwarf mustered his fellows. A scuffle broke out and then a fight, which took over the whole bazaar in an instant. The fight turned into a massacre, into a massed attack by humans on the part of the suburbs occupied by non-humans and the district of Elm. In less than an hour, from the time of the incident at the bazaar to the intervention by sorcerers, a hundred and eighty-four individuals had been killed, and almost half of the victims were women and children.

Professor Emmerich Gottschalk of Oxenfurt gives the same version of events in his dissertation.

But there were also those who said something different. How could it have been spontaneous, how could it have been a sudden and unforeseeable explosion, they asked, if in the course of a few minutes from the altercation at the bazaar, wagons had appeared in the streets from which people began to hand out weapons? How could it have been sudden and justified anger if the ringleaders of the mob – who were the most visible and active during the massacre – were people no one knew, and who had arrived in Rivia several days before the riots, from God knows where? And afterwards vanished without trace? Why did the army intervene so late? And so tentatively at first?

Still other scholars tried to identify Nilfgaardian provocation in the Rivian riots, and there were those who claimed it was all concocted by the dwarves and elves together. That they had killed each other to blacken the name of the humans.

Utterly lost among the serious academic voices was the extremely bold theory of a certain young and eccentric graduate, who – until he was silenced – claimed that it was not conspiracies or secret plots that had manifested themselves in Rivia, but the simple and indeed universal traits of the local people: ignorance, xenophobia, callous boorishness and thorough brutishness.

And then everybody lost interest in the matter and stopped talking about it at all.

*

‘Into the cellar!’ repeated the Witcher, anxiously listening to the quickly growing roar and yelling of the mob. ‘Dwarves into the

cellar! Without any stupid heroics!'

'Witcher,' Zoltan grunted, clenching the haft of his battle axe. 'I can't . . . My brothers are dying out there . . .'

'Into the cellar. Think about Eudora Brekekeks. Do you want her to be a widow before her wedding?'

The argument worked. The dwarves went down into the cellar. Geralt and Dandelion covered the entrance with straw mats. Wirsing, who was usually pale, was now white as cottage cheese.

'I saw a pogrom in Maribor,' he stammered out, looking at the entrance to the cellar. 'If they find them there . . .'

'Go to the kitchen.'

Dandelion was also pale. Geralt wasn't especially surprised. Individual accents were sounding in the hitherto indistinct and monotonous roar that reached their ears. Notes that made the hair stand up on their heads.

'Geralt,' groaned the poet. 'I'm somewhat similar to an elf . . .'

'Don't be stupid.'

Clouds of smoke billowed above the rooftops. And fugitives dashed out of a narrow street. Dwarves. Of both sexes.

Two dwarves dived into the lake without thinking and began to swim, churning up the water, straight ahead towards the middle. The others dispersed. Some of them turned towards the tavern.

The mob rushed out of the narrow street. They were quicker than the dwarves. Lust for slaughter was winning out in this race.

The screaming of people being killed pierced the ears and made the coloured glass in the tavern's windows jingle. Geralt felt his hands begin to shake.

One dwarf was literally torn apart, rent into pieces. Another, thrown onto the ground, was turned into a shapeless, bloody mass in a few moments. A woman was stabbed with pitchforks and pikes, and the child she had defended until the end was trampled, crushed under the blows of boot heels.

Three of them – a dwarf and two dwarf women – fled straight towards the tavern. The crowd raced after them, yelling.

Geralt took a deep breath. He stood up. Feeling on him the terrified eyes of Dandelion and Wirsing, he took the sihill, the

sword wrought in Mahakam, in the very forge of Rhundurin, down from the shelf over the fireplace.

'Geralt . . .' the poet groaned pathetically.

'Very well,' said the Witcher, walking towards the exit. 'But this is the last time! Dammit, it really is the last time!'

He went out onto the porch and jumped straight down from it, filleting with a rapid slash a roughneck in bricklayer's overalls who was aiming a blow with a trowel at a woman. He cut off the hand of the next one, who was grasping the hair of another woman. He hacked down two men kicking a dwarf on the ground with two swift, diagonal slashes.

And he entered the crowd quickly, spinning around in half-turns. He cut with wide blows, apparently chaotically – knowing that such strokes are bloodier and more spectacular. He didn't mean to kill them. He just wanted to wound them.

'He's an elf! He's an elf!' yelled someone in the mob savagely. 'Kill the elf!'

That's going too far, he thought. *Dandelion perhaps, but I don't resemble an elf in any way.*

He spotted the one who had shouted, probably a soldier, because he was wearing a brigantine and high boots. The Witcher wormed his way into the crowd like an eel. The soldier shielded himself with a javelin held in both hands. Geralt cut along the shaft, chopping off the soldier's fingers. The Witcher whirled, bringing forth shrieks of pain and fountains of blood with the next broad stroke.

'Mercy!' an unkempt young man with crazy eyes fell on his knees in front of him. 'Spare me!'

Geralt spared him, stopped the movement of his arm and sword, using the momentum intended for the blow to spin away. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the unkempt youth spring to his feet and saw what he was holding. Geralt interrupted the turn to spin back the other way. But he was stuck in the crowd. He was stuck in the crowd for a split second.

All he could do was watch as the three-fanged fork flew towards him.

*

The fire in the grate of the huge hearth went out, and it grew dark in the hall. The strong wind gusting from the mountains whistled in the cracks in the walls, wailed, blowing in through the draughty shutters of Kaer Morhen, the Seat of the Witchers.

'Dammit!' Eskel blurted out, stood up and opened the sideboard. '"Seagull" or vodka?'

'Vodka,' said Coën and Geralt as one.

'Of course,' said Vesemir, hidden in the shadows. 'Of course, naturally! Drown your stupidity in booze. Sodding fools!'

'It was an accident . . .' muttered Lambert. 'She was managing well on the comb.'

'Shut your trap, you ass! I don't want to hear your voice! I tell you, if anything's the matter with the girl—'

'She's good now,' Coën interrupted gently. 'She's sleeping peacefully. Deeply and soundly. She'll wake up a bit sore, and that's all. She won't remember at all about the trance or what happened.'

'As long as *you* remember!' panted Vesemir. 'Blockheads! Pour me one too, Eskel.'

They were silent for a long time, engrossed in the howling of the wind.

'We'll have to summon someone,' said Eskel finally. 'We'll have to get some witch to come. It's not normal what's happening to that girl.'

'That's the third trance already.'

'But it's the first time she's used articulated speech . . .'

'Tell me again what she said,' ordered Vesemir, emptying the goblet in one draught. 'Word for word.'

'I can't tell you word for word,' said Geralt, staring into the embers. 'And the meaning, if there's any point looking for meaning in it was: me and Coën are going to die. Teeth will be our undoing. We'll both be killed by teeth. In his case two. In mine three.'

'It's quite likely we'll be bitten to death,' snorted Lambert, 'Teeth could be the downfall of any of us at any moment. Although if that prediction is a real prophecy you two will be finished off by some extremely gap-toothed monsters.'

‘Or by purulent gangrene from rotten teeth,’ Eskel nodded, apparently serious. ‘Except our teeth aren’t rotting.’

‘I wouldn’t make fun of the matter,’ said Vesemir.

The witchers said nothing.

The wind howled and whistled in the walls of Kaer Morhen.

*

The unkempt young man, as though horrified by what he’d done, dropped the shaft. The Witcher cried out in pain in spite of himself and bent over. The trident sticking into his stomach overbalanced him and when he fell onto his knees, it slid out of his body and fell onto the cobbles. Blood poured out with a swoosh and a splash worthy of a waterfall.

Geralt tried to rise from his knees. Instead, he fell over on his side.

The sounds around him resonated and echoed. He heard them as though his head was under water. His vision was also blurred, with distorted perspective and totally false geometry.

But he saw the crowd take flight. Saw them run from the relief. From Zoltan and Yarpen holding battle axes, Wirsing holding a meat cleaver and Dandelion armed with a broom.

Stop, he wanted to cry, *where are you going? It’s enough that I always piss into the wind.*

But he couldn’t cry out. His voice was choked by a gush of blood.

*

It was getting towards noon when the sorceresses reached Rivia. Down below, viewed from the perspective of the highway, the surface of Loch Eskalott glittered with the sparkling reflections of the castle’s red tiles and the town’s roofs.

‘Well, we’ve arrived,’ stated Yennefer. ‘Rivia! Ha, how strange are the twists of fate.’

Ciri, who had been excited for a long time, made Kelpie dance and take short steps. Triss Merigold sighed imperceptibly. At least she thought it was imperceptible.

'Well, well.' Yennefer glared at her. 'What strange sounds are lifting your virgin breast, Triss. Ciri, ride on ahead and see if you're already there.'

Triss turned her face away, determined not to provoke or give any pretext. She wasn't counting on a result. For a long time she had sensed the anger and aggression in Yennefer getting stronger the closer they got to Rivia.

'You, Triss,' Yennefer repeated scathingly. 'Don't blush, don't sigh, don't slaver and don't wiggle your bum in the saddle. Do you think that's why I yielded to your request, agreed to you coming with us? For a languorously blissful meeting with your erstwhile sweetheart? Ciri, I asked you to ride on ahead a little! Let us have a talk!'

'It's a monologue, not a talk,' said Ciri impertinently, but she yielded at once under the menacing violet glare, whistled at Kelpie and galloped down the highway.

'You aren't riding to a rendezvous with your lover, Triss,' Yennefer continued. 'I'm neither so noble, nor so stupid as to give you the chance and him the temptation. Just this once, today, and then I'll make sure that neither of you has any temptations or opportunities. But today I won't deny myself that sweet and perverted pleasure. He knows about the role you played. And will thank you for it with his eyes. And I shall look at your trembling lips and shaking hands, listen to your lame apologies and excuses. And do you know what, Triss? I'll be swooning with delight.'

'I knew you wouldn't forget what I did, that you would take your revenge,' muttered Triss. 'I accept that, because I was indeed to blame. But I have to tell you one thing, Yennefer. Don't count too much on my swooning. He knows how to forgive.'

'For what was done to him, indeed.' Yennefer squinted her eyes. 'But he'll never forgive you for what was done to Ciri. And to me.'

'Maybe,' Triss swallowed. 'Maybe he won't. Particularly if you do your utmost to stop him. But he definitely won't bully me. He won't stoop to that.'

Yennefer swiped her horse with her whip. The horse whinnied,

jumped and cavorted so suddenly that the sorceress swayed in the saddle.

'That's enough of this discussion!' she snapped. 'A little more humility, you arrogant slut! He's my man, mine and only mine! Do you understand? You're to stop talking about him, you're to stop thinking about him, you're to stop delighting in his noble character . . . Right away, at once! Oh, I feel like grabbing you by that ginger mop of hair—'

'Just you try!' yelled Triss. 'Just try, you bitch, and I'll scratch your eyes out! I—'

They fell silent, seeing Ciri hurtling towards them in a cloud of dust. They knew right away that something was afoot. And saw at once what it was. Before Ciri even reached them.

Tongues of flame suddenly shot up over the thatched roofs of the now nearby suburbs and over the tiles and chimneys of the city, and smoke belched in billows. Screaming, like the distant buzzing of annoying flies, like the droning of angry bumblebees, reached the sorceresses' ears. The screaming grew, it increased, counterpointed by single high-pitched cries.

'What the bloody hell is going on there?' Yennefer stood up in the stirrups. 'A raid? A fire?'

'Geralt . . .' Ciri suddenly groaned, becoming as white as vellum. 'Geralt!'

'Ciri? What's the matter with you?'

Ciri raised her hand, and the sorceresses saw blood dribbling over it. Along the life-line.

'The circle has closed,' said the girl, closing her eyes. 'A thorn from Shaerrawedd pricked me, and the snake Ouroboros has sunk its teeth into its own tail. I'm coming, Geralt! I'm coming to you! I won't leave you alone!'

Before either of the sorceresses had time to protest, the girl had turned Kelpie around and galloped off at once.

They had enough presence of mind to immediately urge their own horses into a gallop. But their steeds were no match for Kelpie.

'What is it?' screamed Yennefer, gulping the wind. 'What's happening?'

'But you know!' sobbed Triss, galloping beside her. 'Fly,

Yennefer!'

Before they had dashed among the shacks of the suburbs, before they were passed by the first fugitives fleeing the town, Yennefer already had a clear enough picture of the situation to know that what was happening in Rivia wasn't a fire, or a raid by enemy troops, but a pogrom. She also knew what Ciri had felt, where – and to whom – she was rushing so quickly. She also knew she couldn't catch up with her. There was no chance. Kelpie had simply jumped over the panicked people crushed together into a crowd knocking off several hats and caps with her hooves. She and Triss had had to rein in their steeds so abruptly they almost tumbled over their horses' heads.

'Ciri! Stop!'

They suddenly found themselves amidst narrow streets full of the running and wailing mob. As she passed, Yennefer noticed bodies lying in the gutters, saw corpses hanging by their legs from posts and beams. She saw a dwarf lying on the ground being kicked and beaten with sticks, saw another being battered with the necks of broken bottles. She heard the shouts of the assailants, the screaming and howling of the beaten. She saw a throng clustering around a woman who had been thrown from a window and the glint of metal bars rising and falling.

The crowd closed in, the roar intensified. It seemed to the sorceresses that the distance between them and Ciri had shortened. The next obstacle in Kelpie's way was a small group of disorientated halberdiers, whom the black mare treated like a fence and jumped over, knocking a flat kettle hat off one of them. The others simply squatted down in fear.

They burst into a square at full gallop. It was black with people. And smoke. Yennefer realised that Ciri, unerringly led by her prophetic vision, was heading for the very heart, the very centre of events. To the very core of the conflagrations, where murder was rampaging.

For a battle was raging in the street she had turned towards. Dwarves and elves were fiercely defending a makeshift barricade, defending a lost position, falling and dying under the pressure of the howling rabble attacking them. Ciri screamed and pressed herself to her horse's neck. Kelpie took off and flew over the barricade, not like a horse, but like a huge black bird.

Yennefer rode into the crowd and reined her horse in sharply,

knocking a few people over. She was dragged from the saddle before she managed to yell. She was hit on the shoulders, on the back, and on the back of her head. She fell onto her knees and saw an unshaven character in a shoemaker's apron preparing to kick her.

Yennefer had had enough of people kicking her.

From her spread fingers shot pale blue, hissing fire, cutting like a horsewhip the faces, torsos and arms of the people surrounding her. There was a stench of burning flesh and for a moment howling and squealing rose above the general commotion and hullabaloo.

'Witch! Elven witch! Enchantress!'

The next character leaped at her with a raised axe. Yennefer shot fire straight in his face. His eyeballs burst, seethed and spilled out onto his cheeks with a hiss.

The crowd thinned out. Someone grabbed her by the arm, and she recoiled, ready to fire, but it was Triss.

'Let's flee from here . . . Yenna . . . Flee . . . from here . . .'

I've heard her talking in a voice like that before, flashed a thought through Yennefer's head. *With lips like wood that not even a droplet of saliva can moisten. Lips that fear paralyses, that panic makes tremble.*

I heard her talking in a voice like that. On Sodden Hill.

When she was dying of fear.

Now she's dying of fear too. She's going to die of fear her whole life. For whoever doesn't overcome the cowardice inside themselves will die of fear to the end of their days.

The fingers that Triss dug into her arm seemed to be made of steel, and Yennefer only freed herself from their grasp with the greatest of effort.

'Flee if you want to!' she cried. 'Hide behind the skirts of your Lodge! I have something to defend! I shan't leave Ciri alone. Or Geralt! Get away, you rabble! Out of the way if you value your lives!'

The crowd separating her from her horse retreated before the lightning bolts shooting from the sorceress's eyes and hands. Yennefer tossed her head, ruffling up her black locks. She looked

like fury incarnate, like an angel of destruction, a punishing angel of destruction with a flaming sword.

‘Begone, get you home, you swine!’ she yelled, lashing the rabble with a flaming whip. ‘Begone! Or I’ll brand you with fire like cattle.’

‘It’s only one witch, people!’ a resonant and metallic voice sounded from the crowd. ‘A single bloody elven spell-caster!’

‘She’s alone! The other bolted! Hey, children, take up stones!’

‘Death to the non-humans! Woe betide the witch!’

‘To her confusion!’

The first stone whistled past her ear. The second thudded into her arm, making her stagger. The third hit her directly in the face. First the pain exploded intensely in her eyes, then wrapped everything in black velvet.

*

She came to, groaning in pain. Pain shot through both her forearms and wrists. She groped involuntarily, felt the thick layers of bandage. She groaned again, dully, despairingly. Sorry that it wasn’t a dream. And sorry that she’d failed.

‘You didn’t succeed,’ said Tissaia de Vries, sitting beside the bed.

Yennefer was thirsty. She wanted somebody to at least moisten her lips, which were covered in a sticky coating. But she didn’t ask. Her pride wouldn’t let her.

‘You didn’t succeed,’ repeated Tissaia de Vries. ‘But not because you didn’t try hard. You cut well and deep. That’s why I am here with you. Had it only been silly games, had it been a foolish, irresponsible demonstration, I would have nothing but contempt for you. But you cut deeply. Purposefully.’

Yennefer looked at the ceiling vacantly.

‘I shall take care of you, girl. Because I believe it’s worth it. And it’ll require a good deal of work, oh, but it will. I’ll not only have to straighten your spine and shoulder blade, but also heal your hands. When you slit your wrists you severed the tendons. And a

sorceress's hands are important instruments, Yennefer.'

Moisture on her mouth. Water.

'You shall live,' Tissaia's voice was matter-of-fact, grave, stern even. 'Your time has not yet come. When it does, you will recall this day.'

Yennefer greedily sucked the moisture from a stick wrapped in a wet bandage.

'I shall take care of you,' Tissaia de Vries repeated, gently touching her hair. 'And now . . . We are alone here. Without witnesses. No one will see and I shan't tell anyone. Weep, girl. Have a good cry. Weep your heart out for the last time. For later you won't be able to. There isn't a more hideous sight than a sorceress weeping.'

*

She came to, hawked and coughed up blood. Someone was dragging her across the ground. It was Triss, she recognised her by the scent of her perfume. Not far from them iron-shod hooves rang on the cobbles and yelling resounded. Yennefer saw a rider in full armour, in a white surcoat with a red chevron, pummelling the crowd with a bullwhip from a high lancer's saddle. The stones being hurled by the mob bounced harmlessly off his armour and visor. The horse neighed, thrashed around and kicked.

Yennefer felt she had a great potato instead of her upper lip. At least one front tooth had been broken or knocked out and was cutting her tongue painfully.

'Triss . . .' she gibbered. 'Teleport us out of here!'

'No, Yennefer,' Triss's voice was very calm. And very cold.

'They'll kill us . . .'

'No, Yennefer. I shan't run away. I shan't hide behind the Lodge's skirts. And don't worry, I shan't faint from fear like I did at Sodden. I shall vanquish it inside me. I've already vanquished it!'

A great pile of compost, dung and waste in a recess of moss-covered walls rose up near the exit of the narrow street. It was a magnificent pile. A hill, one could say.

The crowd had finally succeeded in seizing and immobilising the knight and his horse. He was knocked to the ground with a terrible thud and the mob crawled over him like lice, covering him in a moving layer.

After hauling Yennefer up, Triss stood on the top of the pile of garbage and raised her arms in the air. She screamed out a spell; screamed it out with true fury. So piercingly that the crowd fell silent for a split second.

'They'll kill us,' Yennefer spat blood. 'As sure as anything . . .'

'Help me.' Triss interrupted the incantation for a moment. 'Help me, Yennefer. We'll cast Alzur's Thunder at them.'

And we'll kill about five of them, thought Yennefer. *Then the rest will tear us to pieces. But very well, Triss, as you wish. If you don't run away, you won't see me running away.*

She joined in the incantation. The two of them screamed.

The crowd stared at them for a second, but quickly came to their senses. Stones whistled around the sorceresses again. A javelin flew just beside Triss's temple. Triss didn't even flinch.

It isn't working at all, thought Yennefer, *our spell isn't working at all. We don't have a chance of casting anything as complicated as Alzur's Thunder. Alzur, it is claimed, had a voice like a bell and the diction of an orator. And we're squeaking and mumbling, mixing up the words and the intonation pattern.*

She was ready to interrupt the chant and concentrate the rest of her strength on some other spell, capable either of teleporting them both away, or treating the charging rabble – for a split second at least – to something unpleasant. But it turned out there was no need.

The sky suddenly darkened and clouds teemed above the town. It became devilishly sombre. And there was a cold wind.

'Oh my,' Yennefer groaned. 'I think we've stirred something up.'

*

'Merigold's Destructive Hailstorm,' repeated Nimue. 'Actually that name is used illegally. The spell was never registered, because no

one ever managed to repeat it after Triss Merigold. For mundane reasons. Triss's mouth was cut and she was speaking indistinctly. Malicious people claim, furthermore, that her tongue was faltering from fear.'

'It's hard to believe that.' Condwiramurs pouted her lips. 'There's no shortage of examples of the Venerable Triss's valour and courage; some chronicles even call her "the Fearless". But I want to ask about something else. One of the legend's versions says that Triss wasn't alone on the Rivian Hill. That Yennefer was there with her.'

Nimue looked at the watercolour portraying the steep, black, razor-sharp hill against a background of deep blue clouds lit from below. The slender figure of a woman with arms outstretched and hair streaming around was visible on the hill's summit.

The rhythmic rattle of the Fisher King's oars reached them from the fog covering the surface of the water.

'If anyone was there with Triss, they didn't endure in the artist's vision,' said the Lady of the Lake.

*

'Oh, what a mess,' Yennefer repeated. 'Look out, Triss!'

In a moment, hailstones, angular balls of ice the size of hen's eggs, plummeted onto the town from the black cloud billowing above Rivia. They fell so heavily that the entire square was immediately covered in a thick layer. There was a sudden surge in the throng, people fell, covering their heads, they crawled one under the other, ran away, falling over, crowding into doorways and under arcades, and cowering by walls. Not all of them were successful. Some remained, lying like fish on the ice, which was copiously stained with blood.

The hailstones pelted down so hard that the magical shield Yennefer had managed to conjure up over their heads almost at the last moment trembled and threatened to break. She didn't even try any other spells. She knew that what they had triggered could not be halted, that they had unleashed by accident an element that had to run riot, that they had freed a force that had to reach a climax. And would soon reach that climax.

At least so she hoped.

Lightning flashed. There was a sudden peal of thunder, which rumbled on, and then gave a crack. Making the ground tremble. The hail lashed the roofs and cobblestones; fragments of shattering hailstones flew all around.

The sky brightened up a little. The sun shone. A ray breaking through the clouds lashed the town like a horsewhip. Something escaped Triss's lips; neither a groan nor a sob.

The hail was still falling, hammering down, covering the square in a thick layer of icy balls gleaming like diamonds. But now the hail was lighter and more patchy, Yennefer could tell from the change in the thudding on the magical shield. And then it stopped. All at once. All of a sudden. Armed men rushed into the square, iron-shod hooves crunched on the ice. The mob roared and fled, whipped by knouts, struck by spear shafts and the flats of swords.

'Bravo, Triss,' Yennefer croaked. 'I don't know what that was . . . But you did a nice job.'

'There was something worth defending,' croaked Triss Merigold. The heroine of the hill.

'There always is. Let's run, Triss. Because it probably isn't over yet.'

*

It *was* over. The hail that the sorceresses had unleashed on the town cooled down hot heads. Enough for the army to dare to strike and bring order. The soldiers had been afraid before. They knew what they were risking with an attack on the enraged mob, on a rabble drunk on blood and killing that feared nothing and would retreat before nothing. But the explosion of the elements had brought the cruel, many-headed beast under control and a charge by the army accomplished the rest.

The hailstones had caused awful havoc in the town. And a man who a moment earlier had beaten a dwarf woman to death with a swingletree and shattered her child's head against a wall was now sobbing, was now weeping, was now swallowing back tears and snot, looking at what was left of the roof of his house.

Peace reigned in Rivia. Were it not for the almost two hundred

mutilated corpses and a dozen burned down homesteads, one might think nothing had happened. In the district of Elm, on Loch Eskalott, over which the gorgeous arc of a rainbow was shining, weeping willows were reflected beautifully in the smooth, mirror-like water, birds had resumed their singing and it smelt of wet foliage. Everything looked pastoral. Even the Witcher, lying in a pool of blood with Ciri kneeling over him.

*

Geralt was unconscious and as white as a sheet. He lay motionless, but when they stood over him he began to cough, wheeze and spit blood. He began to shake and tremble so hard Ciri couldn't stop him. Yennefer kneeled down beside her. Triss saw that her hands were shaking. She herself suddenly felt as weak as a kitten, and everything went black. Someone held her up, stopped her from falling. She recognised Dandelion.

'It's not working at all.' She heard Ciri's voice emanating despair. 'Your magic isn't healing him at all, Yennefer.'

'We arrived . . .' Yennefer had difficulty moving her lips. 'We arrived too late.'

'Your magic's not working,' Ciri repeated, as though she hadn't heard her. 'What's it worth then, your confounded magic?'

You're right, Ciri, thought Triss, feeling a lump in her throat. *We know how to cause a hailstorm, but we can't drive death away. Although the latter would seem to be easier.*

'We've sent for a physician,' said the dwarf standing beside Dandelion hoarsely. 'But he's taking his time . . .'

'It's too late for a physician,' said Triss, surprising herself by the calm in her voice. 'He's dying.'

Geralt trembled once more, coughed up blood, tensed and went still. Dandelion, supporting Triss, sighed in despair and the dwarf swore. Yennefer groaned. Her face suddenly changed, contorted and grew ugly.

'There's nothing more pathetic,' Ciri said sharply, 'than a weeping sorceress. You taught me that yourself. But now you're pathetic, really pathetic, Yennefer. You and your magic, which isn't fit for anything.'

Yennefer didn't respond. She was holding Geralt's limp, paralysed head in both hands and repeating spells, her voice quavering. Pale blue sparks and crackling glimmers danced over her hands and the Witcher's cheeks and forehead. Triss knew how much energy spells like that used up. She also knew the spells wouldn't help in any way. She was more than certain that even the spells of expert healers would have been powerless. It was too late. Yennefer's spells were only exhausting her. Triss was amazed that the black-haired sorceress was holding out so long.

She stopped being amazed, when Yennefer fell silent halfway through the next magical formula and slumped down onto the cobbles beside the Witcher.

One of the dwarves swore again. The other stood with head lowered. Dandelion, still holding Triss up, sniffed.

It suddenly became very cold. The surface of the lake filled with fog like a sorceress's cauldron, became enveloped in mist. The fog rose swiftly, billowed over the water and rolled onto the land in waves, enveloping everything in a thick, white milk in which sounds grew quieter and died away, in which shapes vanished and forms blurred.

'And I once renounced my power,' said Ciri slowly, still kneeling on the blood-soaked cobbles. 'Had I not renounced it I would have saved him now. I would have healed him, I know it. But it's too late. I renounced it and now I can't do anything. It's as though I've killed him.'

The silence was first interrupted by Kelpie's loud neighing. Then by Dandelion's muffled cry.

Then they were all struck dumb.

*

A white unicorn emerged from the fog, running very lightly, ethereally and noiselessly, gracefully raising its shapely head. There actually wasn't anything unusual in that – everybody knew the legends, and they were unanimous about unicorns running very lightly, ethereally and noiselessly and raising their heads with characteristic grace. If anything was strange it was that the unicorn was running over the surface of the water and the water wasn't

even rippling.

Dandelion groaned, but this time in awe. Triss felt herself being seized by a thrill. By euphoria.

The unicorn clattered its hooves on the stone boulevard. It shook its mane. And neighed lengthily and melodically.

'Ihuarraquax,' said Ciri. 'I'd hoped you'd come.'

The unicorn came closer, neighed again, tapped with a hoof and then struck the cobbles hard. He bent his head. The horn sticking out of his domed forehead suddenly lit up with a bright glare, a brilliance that dispersed the fog for a moment.

Ciri touched the horn.

Triss cried out softly, seeing the girl's eyes suddenly lighting up with a milky glow, saw her surrounded by a fiery halo. Ciri couldn't hear her, couldn't hear anyone. She was still holding the unicorn's horn in one hand, and pointed the other towards the motionless Witcher. A ribbon of flickering brightness that glowed like lava flowed from her fingers.

*

No one could tell how long it lasted. Because it was unreal.

Like a dream.

*

The unicorn, almost blurring in the thickening fog, neighed, struck its hoof, and shook its head and horn, as though pointing at something. Triss looked. She saw a dark shape on the water under the canopy of willow branches hanging over the lake. It was a boat.

The unicorn pointed again with its horn. And quickly began to vanish into the mist.

'Kelpie,' said Ciri. 'Follow him.'

Kelpie snorted. And tossed her head. She followed the unicorn obediently. Her horseshoes rang on the cobbles for a while. Then the sound suddenly broke off. As though the mare had taken wing,

disappeared, dematerialised.

The boat was beside the very bank, and in the moments when the fog dispersed Triss could see it clearly. It was a primitively constructed barge, as clumsy and angular as a large pig trough.

'Help me,' said Ciri. Her voice was confident and determined.

No one knew at the beginning what the girl meant, what help she was expecting. Dandelion was the first to understand. Perhaps because he knew the legend, had once read one of its poeticized versions. He picked up the still unconscious Yennefer. He was astonished at how dainty and light she was. He could have sworn somebody was helping him carry her. He could have sworn he could feel Cahir's shoulder beside his arm. Out of the corner of one eye he caught sight of a flash of Milva's flaxen plait. When he placed the sorceress in the boat he could have sworn he saw Angoulême's hands steadying the side.

The dwarves carried the Witcher, helped by Triss, who was supporting his head. Yarpen Zigrin positively blinked on seeing both Dahlberg brothers for a second. Zoltan Chivay could have sworn that Caleb Stratton had helped him lay the Witcher in the boat. Triss Merigold was absolutely certain she could smell the perfume of Lytta Neyd, also called Coral. And for a moment she saw amidst the haze the bright, yellow-green eyes of Coën from Kaer Morhen.

That was the kind of tricks played on the senses by the fog, the thick fog over Loch Eskalott.

'It's ready, Ciri,' the sorceress said dully. 'Your boat is waiting.'

Ciri brushed her hair back from her forehead and sniffed.

'Apologise to the ladies of Montecalvo, Triss,' she said. 'But it can't be otherwise. I cannot stay when Geralt and Yennefer are departing. I simply cannot. They ought to understand.'

'They ought to.'

'Farewell then, Triss Merigold. Farewell, Dandelion. Farewell all of you.'

'Ciri,' whispered Triss. 'Little sister . . . Let me sail away with you . . .'

'You don't know what you're asking, Triss.'

'Will you ever—?'

‘For certain,’ she interrupted firmly.

She boarded the boat, which rocked and immediately began to sail away. To fade into the fog. Those that were standing on the bank didn’t hear even the merest splash, didn’t see any ripples or movements of the water. As though it wasn’t a boat but an apparition.

For a very short time they could still see Ciri’s slight and ethereal silhouette, saw her push off from the bottom with a long pole, saw her urge on the already quickly gliding barge.

And then there was only the fog.

She lied to me, thought Triss. *I’ll never see her again. I’ll never see her, because . . . Vaesse deireadh aep eigean. Something ends . . .*

‘Something has ended,’ said Dandelion in an altered voice.

‘Something is beginning,’ Yarpen Zigrin chimed in.

A rooster crowed loudly somewhere in the direction of the town.

The fog quickly began to rise.

*

Geralt opened his eyes, irritated by the play of light and shadow through his eyelids. He saw leaves above him, a kaleidoscope of leaves flickering in the sun. He saw branches heavy with apples.

He felt the soft touch of fingers on his temple and cheek. Fingers he knew. Fingers he loved so much it hurt.

His belly and chest hurt, his ribs hurt and the tight corset of bandages left him in no doubt that the town of Rivia and the three-fanged trident hadn’t been a nightmare.

‘Lie still, my darling,’ Yennefer said gently. ‘Lie still. Don’t move.’

‘Where are we, Yen?’

‘Is it important? We’re together. You and me.’

Birds – either greenfinches or thrushes – were singing. It smelled of grass, herbs and flowers. And apples.

‘Where’s Ciri?’

‘She’s gone away.’

She changed her position, gently freeing her arm from under his head and lay down beside him on the grass so that she could look in his eyes. She looked at him voraciously, as though she wanted to feast her eyes on the sight, as though she wanted to eat him up with her eyes to store it away, for the whole of eternity. He looked at her too, and longing choked him.

‘We were with Ciri in a boat,’ he recalled. ‘On a lake. Then on a river. On a river with a strong current. In the fog.’

Her fingers found his hand and squeezed it strongly.

‘Lie still, my darling. Lie still. I’m beside you. It doesn’t matter what happened, doesn’t matter where we were. Now I’m beside you. And I’ll never leave you. Never.’

‘I love you, Yen.’

‘I know.’

‘All the same,’ he sighed, ‘I’d like to know where we are.’

‘Me too,’ said Yennefer, quietly and not right away.

*

‘And is that the end of the story?’ Galahad asked a moment later.

‘Not at all,’ protested Ciri, rubbing one foot against the other, wiping off the dried sand that had stuck to her toes and the sole of her foot. ‘Would you like the story to end like that? Like hell! I wouldn’t!’

‘So what happened then?’

‘Nothing special,’ she snorted. ‘They got married.’

‘Tell me.’

‘Aaah, what is there to tell? There was a great big wedding. They all came: Dandelion, Mother Nenneke, Iola and Eurneid, Yarpen Zigrin, Vesemir, Eskel . . . Coën, Milva, Angoulême . . . And my Mistle . . . And I was there, I drank mead and wine. And they, I mean Geralt and Yennefer, had their own house afterwards and were happy, very, very happy. Like in a fairy tale. Do you understand?’

‘Why are you weeping like that, O Lady of the Lake?’

‘I’m not weeping at all. My eyes are watering from the wind. And that’s that!’

They were silent for a long time, and looked as the red-hot glowing ball of the sun touched the mountain peaks.

‘Indeed—’ Galahad finally interrupted the silence ‘—it was a very strange story, oh, very strange. Truly, Miss Ciri, the world you came from is incredible.’

Ciri sniffed loudly.

‘Yeees,’ continued Galahad, clearing his throat several times, feeling a little uncomfortable by her silence. ‘But astounding adventures also occur here, in our world. Let’s take, for instance, what happened to Sir Gawain and the Green Knight . . . Or to my uncle, Sir Bors, and Sir Tristan . . . Just consider, Lady Ciri, Sir Bors and Sir Tristan set off one day for the West, towards Tintagel. The road led them through forests untamed and perilous. They rode and rode, and looked, and there stood a white hind, and beside it a lady, dressed in black. Truly a blacker black you couldn’t even see in nightmares. And that comely lady, so comely you couldn’t see a comelier one in the whole world, well, apart from Queen Guinevere . . . That lady standing by the hind saw the knights, beckoned and spake thus to them . . .’

‘Galahad.’

‘Yes?’

‘Be quiet.’

He coughed, cleared his throat and fell silent. They were both silent, looking at the sun. They were silent for a long time.

‘Lady of the Lake?’

‘I’ve asked you not to call me that.’

‘Lady Ciri?’

‘Yes.’

‘Ride with me to Camelot, O Lady Ciri. King Arthur, you’ll see, will show you honour and respect . . . While I . . . I shall always love you and revere you—’

‘Get up from your knee, at once! Or maybe not. If you’re there, rub my feet. They’re really frozen. Thank you. You’re sweet. I said

my feet! My feet finish at the ankles!'

'Lady Ciri?'

'I haven't gone anywhere.'

'The day is drawing to a close . . .'

'Indeed.' Ciri fastened her boot buckles and stood up. 'Let's saddle up, Galahad. Is there somewhere around here we can spend the night? Ha, I see from your expression that you know this place as well as I do. But never mind, let's set off, even if we have to sleep under an open sky, let's go a bit further, into a forest. There's a breeze coming off the lake . . . Why are you looking like that?

'Aha,' she guessed, seeing him blush. 'Are you imagining a night under a filbert bush, on a carpet of moss? In the arms of a fairy? Listen, young man, I don't have the slightest desire—'

She broke off, looking at his blushing cheeks and shining eyes. At his actually not bad-looking face. Something squeezed her belly and it wasn't hunger.

What's happening to me? she thought. *What's happening to me?*

'Don't dilly-dally!' she almost shouted. 'Saddle your stallion!'

When they mounted she looked at him and laughed out loud. He glanced at her, and his gaze was one of amazement and questioning.

'Nothing, nothing,' she said freely. 'I just thought of something. On we go, Galahad.'

A carpet of moss, she thought, suppressing a giggle. *Under a filbert bush. With me playing the fairy. Well, well.*

'Lady Ciri . . .'

'Yes?'

'Will you ride with me to Camelot?'

She held out her hand. And he held out his. They joined hands, riding side by side.

By the devil, she thought, *why not? I'd bet any money that in this world a job could be found for a witcher girl.*

Because there isn't a world where there wouldn't be work for a witcher.

'Lady Ciri . . .'

‘Let’s not talk about it now. Let’s go.’

They rode straight into the setting sun. Leaving behind them the darkening valley. Behind them was the lake, the enchanted lake, the blue lake as smooth as a polished sapphire. They left behind them the boulders on the lakeside. The pines on the hillsides.

That was all behind them.

And before them was everything.

Season of Storms

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Battle not with monsters, lest ye become a monster; for if you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes back into you.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

I consider gazing into the abyss utter foolishness. There are many things in the world much more worth gazing into.

Dandelion, *Half a Century of Poetry*

CHAPTER ONE

It lived only to kill.

It was lying on the sun-warmed sand.

It could sense the vibrations being transmitted through its hair-like feelers and bristles. Though the vibrations were still far off, the idr could feel them distinctly and precisely; it was thus able to determine not only its quarry's direction and speed of movement, but also its weight. As with most similar predators, the weight of the prey was of cardinal importance. Stalking, attacking and giving chase meant a loss of energy that had to be compensated by the calorific value of its food. Most predators similar to the idr would quit their attack if their prey was too small. But not the idr. The idr didn't exist to eat and sustain the species. It hadn't been created for that.

It lived to kill.

Moving its limbs cautiously, it exited the hollow, crawled over a rotten tree trunk, covered the clearing in three bounds, plunged into the fern-covered undergrowth and melted into the thicket. It moved swiftly and noiselessly, now running, now leaping like a huge grasshopper.

It sank into the thicket and pressed the segmented carapace of its abdomen to the ground. The vibrations in the ground became more and more distinct. The impulses from the idr's feelers and bristles formed themselves into an image. Into a plan. The idr now knew where to approach its victim from, where to cross its path, how to force it to flee, how to swoop on it from behind with a great leap, from what height to strike and lacerate with its razor-sharp mandibles. Within it the vibrations and impulses were already arousing the joy it would experience when its victim started struggling under its weight, arousing the euphoria that the taste of hot blood would induce in it. The ecstasy it would feel when the air was rent by a scream of pain. It trembled slightly, opening and closing its pincers and pedipalps.

The vibrations in the ground were very distinct and had also diversified. The idr now knew there was more than one victim – probably three, or perhaps four. Two of them were shaking the

ground in a normal way; the vibrations of the third suggested a small mass and weight. The fourth, meanwhile – provided there really was a fourth – was causing irregular, weak and hesitant vibrations. The idr stopped moving, tensed and extended its antennae above the grass, examining the movements of the air.

The vibrations in the ground finally signalled what the idr had been waiting for. Its quarry had separated. One of them, the smallest, had fallen behind. And the fourth – the vague one – had disappeared. It had been a fake signal, a false echo. The idr ignored it.

The smallest target moved even further away from the others. The trembling in the ground was more intense. And closer. The idr braced its rear limbs, pushed off and leaped.

*

The little girl gave an ear-splitting scream. Rather than running away, she had frozen to the spot. And was screaming unremittingly.

*

The Witcher darted towards her, drawing his sword mid-leap. And realised at once that something was wrong. That he'd been tricked.

The man pulling a handcart loaded with faggots screamed and shot six feet up into the air in front of Geralt's eyes, blood spraying copiously from him. He fell, only to immediately fly up again, this time in two pieces, each spurting blood. He'd stopped screaming. Now the woman was screaming piercingly and, like her daughter, was petrified and paralysed by fear.

Although he didn't believe he would, the Witcher managed to save her. He leaped and pushed hard, throwing the blood-spattered woman from the path into the forest, among the ferns. And realised at once that this time, too, it had been a trick. A ruse. For the flat, grey, many-limbed and incredibly quick shape was now moving away from the handcart and its first victim. It was gliding towards the next one. Towards the still shrieking little girl. Geralt sped after the idr.

Had she remained where she was, he would have been too late. But the girl demonstrated presence of mind and bolted frantically. The grey monster, however, would easily have caught up with her, killed her and turned back to dispatch the woman, too. That's what would have happened had it not been for the Witcher.

He caught up with the monster and jumped, pinning down one of its rear limbs with his heel. If he hadn't jumped aside immediately he would have lost a leg – the grey creature twisted around with extraordinary agility, and its curved pincers snapped shut, missing him by a hair's breadth. Before the Witcher could regain his balance the monster sprang from the ground and attacked. Geralt defended himself instinctively with a broad and rather haphazard swing of his sword that pushed the monster away. He hadn't wounded it, but now he had the upper hand.

He sprang up and fell on the monster, slashing backhand, cleaving the carapace of the flat cephalothorax. Before the dazed creature came to its senses, a second blow hacked off its left mandible. The monster attacked, brandishing its limbs and trying to gore him with its remaining mandible like an aurochs. The Witcher hacked that one off too. He slashed one of the idr's pedipalps with a swift reverse cut. Then hacked at the cephalothorax again.

*

It finally dawned on the idr that it was in danger. That it must flee. Flee far from there, take cover, find a hiding place. It only lived to kill. In order to kill it must regenerate. It must flee . . . Flee . . .

*

The Witcher didn't let it. He caught up with it, stepped on the rear segment of the thorax and cut from above with a fierce blow. This time, the carapace gave way, and viscous, greenish fluid gushed and poured from the wound. The monster flailed around, its limbs thrashing the ground chaotically.

Geralt cut again with his sword, this time completely severing the flat head from the body.

He was breathing heavily.

It thundered in the distance. The growing wind and darkening sky heralded an approaching storm.

*

Right from their very first encounter, Albert Smulka, the newly appointed district reeve, reminded Geralt of a swede – he was stout, unwashed, thick-skinned and generally pretty dull. In other words, he didn't differ much from all the other district clerks Geralt had dealt with.

'Would seem to be true,' said the reeve. 'Nought like a witcher for dealing with troubles. Jonas, my predecessor, couldn't speak highly enough of you,' he continued a moment later, not waiting for any reaction from Geralt. 'To think, I considered him a liar. I mean that I didn't completely lend credence to him. I know how things can grow into fairy tales. Particularly among the common folk, with them there's always either a miracle or a marvel, or some witcher with superhuman powers. And here we are, turns out it's the honest truth. Uncounted people have died in that forest beyond the little river. And because it's a shortcut to the town the fools went that way . . . to their own doom. Heedless of warnings. These days it's better not to loiter in badlands or wander through forests. Monsters and man-eaters everywhere. A dreadful thing has just happened in the Tukaj Hills of Temeria – a sylvan ghoul killed fifteen people in a charcoal-burners' settlement. It's called Rogovizna. You must have heard. Haven't you? But it's the truth, cross my heart and hope to die. It's said even the wizardry have started an investigation in that there Rogovizna. Well, enough of stories. We're safe here in Ansegis now. Thanks to you.'

He took a coffer from a chest of drawers, spread out a sheet of paper on the table and dipped a quill in an inkwell.

'You promised you'd kill the monster,' he said, without raising his head. 'Seems you weren't having me on. You're a man of your word, for a vagabond . . . And you saved those people's lives. That woman and the lass. Did they even thank you? Express their gratitude?'

No, they didn't. The Witcher clenched his jaw. *Because they haven't yet fully regained consciousness. And I'll be gone before they do. Before they realise I used them as bait, convinced in my conceited*

arrogance that I was capable of saving all three of them. I'll be gone before it dawns on the girl, before she understands I'm to blame for her becoming a half-orphan.

He felt bad. No doubt because of the elixirs he'd taken before the fight. No doubt.

'That monster is a right abomination.' The reeve sprinkled some sand over the paper, and then shook it off onto the floor. 'I had a look at the carcass when they brought it here . . . What on earth was it?'

Geralt wasn't certain in that regard, but didn't intend to reveal his ignorance.

'An arachnomorph.'

Albert Smulka moved his lips, vainly trying to repeat the word.

'Ugh, meks no difference, when all's said and done. Did you dispatch it with that sword? With that blade? Can I take a look?'

'No, you can't.'

'Ha, because it's no doubt enchanted. And it must be dear . . . Quite something . . . Well, here we are jawing away and time's passing. The task's been executed, time for payment. But first the formalities. Make your mark on the bill. I mean, put a cross or some such.'

The Witcher took the bill from Smulka and held it up to the light.

'Look at 'im.' The reeve shook his head, grimacing. 'What's this, can he read?'

Geralt put the paper on the table and pushed it towards the official.

'A slight error has crept into the document,' he said, calmly and softly. 'We agreed on fifty crowns. This bill has been made out for eighty.'

Albert Smulka clasped his hands together and rested his chin on them.

'It isn't an error.' He also lowered his voice. 'Rather, a token of gratitude. You killed the monster and I'm sure it was an exacting job . . . So the sum won't astonish anyone . . .'

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Pull the other one. Don’t play the innocent. Trying to tell me that when Jonas was in charge he never made out bills like this? I swear I—’

‘What do you swear?’ Geralt interrupted. ‘That he inflated bills? And went halves with me on the sum the royal purse was deprived of?’

‘Went halves?’ the reeve sneered. ‘Don’t be soft, witcher, don’t be soft. Reckon you’re that important? You’ll get a third of the difference. Ten crowns. It’s a decent bonus for you anyway. For I deserve more, if only owing to my function. State officials ought to be wealthy. The wealthier the official, the greater the prestige to the state. Besides, what would you know about it? This conversation’s beginning to weary me. You signing it or what?’

The rain hammered on the roof. It was pouring down outside. But the thunder had stopped; the storm had moved away.

INTERLUDE

Two days later

'Do come closer, madam.' Belohun, King of Kerack, beckoned imperiously. 'Do come closer. Servants! A chair!'

The chamber's vaulting was decorated with a plafond of a fresco depicting a sailing ship at sea, amidst mermen, hippocampi and lobster-like creatures. The fresco on one of the walls, however, was a map of the world. An absolutely fanciful map, as Coral had long before realised, having little in common with the actual locations of lands and seas, but pleasing and tasteful.

Two pages lugged in and set down a heavy, carved curule seat. The sorceress sat down, resting her hands on the armrests so that her ruby-encrusted bracelets would be very conspicuous and not escape the king's attention. She had a small ruby tiara on her coiffed hair, and a ruby necklace in the plunging neckline of her dress. All especially for the royal audience. She wanted to make an impression. And had. King Belohun stared goggle-eyed: though it wasn't clear whether at the rubies or the cleavage.

Belohun, son of Osmyk, was, it could be said, a first-generation king. His father had made quite a considerable fortune from maritime trade, and probably also a little from buccaneering. Having finished off the competition and monopolised the region's cabotage, Osmyk named himself king. That act of self-anointed coronation had actually only formalised the status quo, and hence did not arouse significant quibbles nor provoke protests. Over the course of various private wars and skirmishes, Osmyk had smoothed over border disputes and jurisdictional squabbles with his neighbours, Verden and Cidaris. It was established where Kerack began, where it finished and who ruled there. And since he ruled, he was king – and deserved the title. By the natural order of things titles and power pass from father to son, so no one was surprised when Belohun ascended his father's throne, following Osmyk's death. Osmyk admittedly had more sons – at least four of them – but they had all renounced their rights to the crown, one of them allegedly even of his own free will. Thus, Belohun had reigned in Kerack for over twenty years, deriving profits from shipbuilding,

freight, fishery and piracy in keeping with family traditions.

And now King Belohun, seated on a raised throne, wearing a sable calpac and with a sceptre in one hand, was granting an audience. As majestic as a dung beetle on a cowpat.

'Our dear Madam Lytta Neyd,' he greeted her. 'Our favourite sorceress, Lytta Neyd. She has deigned to visit Kerack again. And surely for a long stay again?'

'The sea air's good for me.' Coral crossed her legs provocatively, displaying a bootee with fashionable cork heels. 'With the gracious permission of Your Royal Highness.'

The king glanced at his sons sitting beside him. Both were tall and slender, quite unlike their father, who was bony and sinewy, but of not very imposing height. Neither did they look like brothers. The older, Egmund, had raven-black hair, while Xander, who was a little younger, was almost albino blond. Both looked at Lytta with dislike. They were evidently annoyed by the privilege that permitted sorceresses to sit in the presence of kings, and that such seated audiences were granted to them. The privilege was well established, however, and could not be flouted by anyone wanting to be regarded as civilised. And Belohun's sons very much wanted to be regarded as civilised.

'We graciously grant our permission,' Belohun said slowly. 'With one proviso.'

Coral raised a hand and ostentatiously examined her fingernails. It was meant to signal that she couldn't give a shit about Belohun's proviso. The king didn't decode the signal. Or if he did he concealed it skilfully.

'It has reached our ears,' he puffed angrily, 'that the Honourable Madam Neyd makes magical concoctions available to womenfolk who don't want children. And helps those who are already pregnant to abort the foetus. We, here in Kerack, consider such a practice immoral.'

'What a woman has a natural right to,' replied Coral, dryly, 'cannot – *ipso facto* – be immoral.'

'A woman—' the king straightened up his skinny frame on the throne '—has the right to expect only two gifts from a man: a child in the summer and thin bast slippers in the winter. Both the former and the latter gifts are intended to keep the woman at home, since the home is the proper place for a woman – ascribed to her by

nature. A woman with a swollen belly and offspring clinging to her frock will not stray from the home and no foolish ideas will occur to her, which guarantees her man peace of mind. A man with peace of mind can labour hard for the purpose of increasing the wealth and prosperity of his king. Neither do any foolish ideas occur to a man confident of his marriage while toiling by the sweat of his brow and with his nose to the grindstone. But if someone tells a woman she can have a child when she wants and when she doesn't she mustn't, and when to cap it all someone offers a method and passes her a physick, then, Honourable Lady, then the social order begins to totter.'

'That's right,' interjected Prince Xander, who had been waiting for some time for a chance to interject. 'Precisely!'

'A woman who is averse to motherhood,' continued Belohun, 'a woman whose belly, the cradle and a host of brats don't imprison her in the homestead, soon yields to carnal urges. The matter is, indeed, obvious and inevitable. Then a man loses his inner calm and balanced state of mind, something suddenly goes out of kilter and stinks in his former harmony, nay, it turns out that there *is* no harmony or order. In particular, there is none of the order that justifies the daily grind. And the truth is I appropriate the results of that hard work. And from such thoughts it's but a single step to upheaval. To sedition, rebellion, revolt. Do you see, Neyd? Whoever gives womenfolk contraceptive agents or enables pregnancies to be terminated undermines the social order and incites riots and rebellion.'

'That is so,' interjected Xander. 'Absolutely!'

Lytta didn't care about Belohun's outer trappings of authority and imperiousness. She knew perfectly well that as a sorceress she was immune and that all the king could do was talk. However, she refrained from bluntly bringing to his attention that things had been out of kilter and stinking in his kingdom for ages, that there was next to no order in it, and that the only 'Harmony' known to his subjects was a harlot of the same name at the portside brothel. And mixing up in it women and motherhood – or aversion to motherhood – was evidence not only of misogyny, but also imbecility.

Instead of that she said the following: 'In your lengthy disquisition you keep stubbornly returning to the themes of increasing wealth and prosperity. I understand you perfectly, since

my own prosperity is also extremely dear to me. And not for all the world would I give up anything that prosperity provides me with. I judge that a woman has the right to have children when she wants and not to have them when she doesn't, but I shall not enter into a debate in that regard; after all, everyone has the right to some opinion or other. I merely point out that I charge a fee for the medical help I give women. It's quite a significant source of my income. We have a free market economy, Your Majesty. Please don't interfere with the sources of my income. Because *my* income, as you well know, is also the income of the Chapter and the entire consorority. And the consorority reacts extremely badly to any attempts to diminish its income.'

'Are you trying to threaten me, Neyd?'

'The very thought! Not only am I not, but I declare my far-reaching help and collaboration. Know this, Belohun, that if – as a result of the exploitation and plunder you're engaged in – unrest occurs in Kerack, if – speaking grandiloquently – the fire of rebellion flares up, or if a rebellious rabble comes to drag you out by the balls, dethrone you and hang you forthwith from a dry branch . . . Then you'll be able to count on my consorority. And the sorcerers. We'll come to your aid. We shan't allow revolt or anarchy, because they don't suit us either. So keep on exploiting and increasing your wealth. Feel free. And don't interfere with others doing the same. That's my request and advice.'

'Advice?' fumed Xander, rising from his seat. 'You, advising? My father? My father is the king! Kings don't listen to advice – kings command!'

'Sit down and be quiet, son.' Belohun grimaced, 'And you, witch, listen carefully. I have something to say to you.'

'Yes?'

'I'm taking a new lady wife . . . Seventeen years old . . . A little cherry, I tell you. A cherry on a tart.'

'My congratulations.'

'I'm doing it for dynastic reasons. Out of concern for the succession and order in the land.'

Egmund, previously silent as the grave, jerked his head up.

'Succession?' he snarled, and the evil glint in his eyes didn't escape Lytta's notice. 'What succession? You have six sons and eight

daughters, including bastards! What more do you want?'

'You can see for yourself.' Belohun waved a bony hand. 'You can see for yourself, Neyd. I have to look after the succession. Am I to leave the kingdom and the crown to someone who addresses his parent thus? Fortunately, I'm still alive and reigning. And I mean to reign for a long time. As I said, I'm wedding—'

'What of it?'

'Were she . . .' The king scratched behind an ear and glanced at Lytta from under half-closed eyelids. 'Were she . . . I mean my new, young wife . . . to ask you for those physics . . . I forbid you from giving them. Because I'm against physicks like that. Because they're immoral!'

'We can agree on that.' Coral smiled charmingly. 'If your little cherry asks I won't give her anything. I promise.'

'I understand.' Belohun brightened up. 'Why, how splendidly we've come to agreement. The crux is mutual understanding and respect. One must even differ with grace.'

'That's right,' interjected Xander. Egmund bristled and swore under his breath.

'In the spirit of respect and understanding—' Coral twisted a ginger ringlet around a finger and looked up at the plafond '—and also out of concern for harmony and order in your country . . . I have some information. Confidential information. I consider informants repellent; but fraudsters and thieves even more so. And this concerns impudent embezzlement, Your Majesty. People are trying to rob you.'

Belohun leaned forward from his throne, grimacing like a wolf.

'Who? I want names!'

***Kerack**, a city in the northern kingdom of Cidaris, at the mouth of the River Adalatte. Once the capital of the independent kingdom of K., which, as the result of inept governments and the extinction of the royal line, fell into decline, lost its significance and became parcelled up by its neighbours and incorporated into them. It has a port, several factories, a lighthouse and roughly two thousand residents.*

Effenberg and Talbot,

Encyclopaedia Maxima Mundi, vol. VIII

CHAPTER TWO

The bay bristled with masts and filled with sails, some white, some many-coloured. The larger ships stood at anchor, protected by a headland and a breakwater. In the port itself, smaller and absolutely tiny vessels were moored alongside wooden jetties. Almost all of the free space on the beach was occupied by boats. Or the remains of boats.

A white-and-red-brick lighthouse, originally built by the elves and later renovated, stood tall at the end of the headland where it was being buffeted by white breakers.

The Witcher spurred his mare in her sides. Roach raised her head and flared her nostrils as though also enjoying the smell of the sea breeze. Urged on, she set off across the dunes. Towards the city, now nearby.

The city of Kerack, the chief metropolis of the kingdom bearing the same name, was divided into three separate, distinct zones straddling both banks at the mouth of the River Adalatte.

The port complex with docks and an industrial and commercial centre, including a shipyard and workshops as well as food-processing plants, warehouses and stores was located on the left bank of the Adalatte.

The river's right bank, an area called Palmyra, was occupied by the shacks and cottages of labourers and paupers, the houses and stalls of small traders, abattoirs and shambles, and numerous bars and dens that only livened up after nightfall, since Palmyra was also the district of entertainment and forbidden pleasures. It was also quite easy, as Geralt knew well, to lose one's purse or get a knife in the ribs there.

Kerack proper, an area consisting of narrow streets running between the houses of wealthy merchants and financiers, manufactories, banks, pawnbrokers, shoemakers' and tailors' shops, and large and small stores, was situated further away from the sea, on the left bank, behind a high palisade of robust stakes. Located there were also taverns, coffee houses and inns of superior category, including establishments offering, indeed, much the same as the port quarter of Palmyra, but at considerably higher prices. The

centre of the district was a quadrangular town square featuring the town hall, the theatre, the courthouse, the customs office and the houses of the city's elite. A statue of the city's founder, King Osmyk, dreadfully spattered in bird droppings, stood on a plinth in the middle of the town square. It was a downright lie, as a seaside town had existed there long before Osmyk arrived from the devil knows where.

Higher up, on a hill, stood the castle and the royal palace, which were quite unusual in terms of form and shape. It had previously been a temple, which was abandoned by its priests embittered by the townspeople's total lack of interest and then modified and extended. The temple's campanile – or bell tower – and its bell had even survived, which the incumbent King Belohun ordered to be tolled every day at noon and – clearly just to spite his subjects – at midnight. The bell sounded as the Witcher began to ride between Palmyra's cottages.

Palmyra stank of fish, laundry and cheap restaurants, and the crush in the streets was dreadful, which cost the Witcher a great deal of time and patience to negotiate the streets. He breathed a sigh when he finally arrived at the bridge and crossed onto the Adalatte's left bank. The water smelled foul and bore scuds of dense foam – waste from the tannery located upstream. From that point it wasn't far to the road leading to the palisaded city.

Geralt left his horse in the stables outside the city centre, paying for two days in advance and giving the stableman some baksheesh in order to ensure that Roach was adequately cared for. He headed towards the watchtower. One could only enter Kerack through the watchtower, after undergoing a search and the rather unpleasant procedures accompanying it. This necessity somewhat angered the Witcher, but he understood its purpose – the fancier townspeople weren't especially overjoyed at the thought of visits by guests from dockside Palmyra, particularly in the form of mariners from foreign parts putting ashore there.

He entered the watchtower, a log building that he knew accommodated the guardhouse. He thought he knew what to expect. He was wrong.

He had visited numerous guardhouses in his life: small, medium and large, both nearby and in quite distant parts of the world, some in more and less civilised – and some quite uncivilised – regions. All the world's guardhouses stank of mould, sweat,

leather and urine, as well as iron and the grease used to preserve it. It was no different in the Kerack guardhouse. Or it wouldn't have been, had the classic guardhouse smell not been drowned out by the heavy, choking, floor-to-ceiling odour of farts. There could be no doubt that leguminous plants – most likely peas and beans – prevailed in the diet of the guardhouse's crew.

And the garrison was wholly female. It consisted of six women currently sitting at a table and busy with their midday meal. They were all greedily slurping some morsels floating in a thin, paprika sauce from earthenware bowls.

The tallest guard, clearly the commandant, pushed her bowl away and stood up. Geralt, who always maintained there was no such thing as an ugly woman, suddenly felt compelled to revise this opinion.

'Weapons on the bench!'

The commandant's head – like those of her comrades – was shaven. Her hair had managed to grow back a little, giving rise to patchy stubble on her bald head. The muscles of her midriff showed from beneath her unbuttoned waistcoat and gaping shirt, bringing to mind a netted pork roast. The guard's biceps – to remain on the subject of cooked meat – were the size of hams.

'Put your weapons on the bench!' she repeated. 'You deaf?'

One of her subordinates, still hunched over her bowl, raised herself a little and farted, loud and long. Her companions guffawed. Geralt fanned himself with a glove. The guard looked at his swords.

'Hey, girls! Get over here!'

The 'girls' stood up rather reluctantly, stretching. Their style of clothing, Geralt noticed, was quite informal, mainly intended to show off their musculature. One of them was wearing leather shorts with the legs split at the seams to accommodate her thighs. Two belts crossing her chest were pretty much all she had on above the waist.

'A witcher,' she stated. 'Two swords. Steel and silver.'

Another – like all of them, tall and broad-shouldered – approached, tugged open Geralt's shirt unceremoniously and pulled out his medallion by the silver chain.

'He has a sign,' she stated. 'There's a wolf on it, fangs bared. Would seem to be a witcher. Do we let him through?'

‘Rules don’t prohibit it. He’s handed over his swords . . .’

‘That’s correct,’ Geralt joined the conversation in a calm voice. ‘I have. They’ll both remain, I presume, in safe deposit? To be reclaimed on production of a docket. Which you’re about to give me?’

The guards surrounded him, grinning. One of them prodded him, apparently by accident. Another farted thunderously.

‘That’s your receipt,’ she snorted.

‘A witcher! A hired monster killer! And he gave up his swords! At once! Meek as a schoolboy!’

‘Bet he’d turn his cock over as well, if we ordered him to.’

‘Let’s do it then! Eh, girls? Have him whip it out!’

‘We’ll see what witchers’ cocks are like!’

‘Here we go,’ snapped the commandant. ‘They’re off now, the sluts. Gonschorek, get here! Gonschorek!’

A balding, elderly gentleman in a dun mantle and woollen beret emerged from the next room. Immediately he entered he had a coughing fit, took off his beret and began to fan himself with it. He took the swords wrapped in their belts and gestured for Geralt to follow him. The Witcher didn’t linger. Intestinal gases had definitely begun to predominate in the noxious mixture of the guardhouse.

The room they entered was split down the middle by a sturdy iron grating. The large key the elderly gentleman opened it with grated in the lock. He hung the swords on a hook beside other sabres, claymores, broadswords and cutlasses. He opened a scruffy register, scrawled slowly and lengthily in it, coughing incessantly and struggling to catch his breath. He finally handed Geralt the completed receipt.

‘Am I to understand that my swords are safe here? Locked away and under guard?’

The dun-clad elderly gentleman, puffing and panting heavily, locked the grating and showed him the key. It didn’t convince Geralt. Any grating could be forced, and the noisy flatulence of the ‘ladies’ from the guardhouse was capable of drowning out any attempts at burglary. But there was no choice. He had to accomplish in Kerack what he had come to do. And leave the city as soon as he could.

*

The tavern – or, as the sign declared, the Natura Rerum osteria – was a small but tasteful building of cedar wood, with a steep roof and a chimney sticking up high out of it. The building's façade was decorated by a porch with steps leading to it, surrounded by spreading aloe plants in wooden tubs. The smell of cooking – mainly meat roasting on a gridiron – drifted from the tavern. The scents were so enticing that right away it seemed to the Witcher that Natura Rerum was an Eden, a garden of delights, an island of happiness, a retreat for the blessed flowing with milk and honey.

It soon turned out that this Eden – like every Eden – was guarded. It had its own Cerberus, a guard with a flaming sword. Geralt had the chance to see him in action. Before his very eyes, the guard, a short but powerfully built fellow, was driving a skinny young man from the garden of delights. The young man was protesting – shouting and gesticulating – which clearly annoyed the guard.

'You're barred, Muus. As well you know. So be off. I won't say it again.'

The young man moved away from the steps quickly enough to avoid being pushed. He was, Geralt noticed, prematurely balding, his long, thin hair only beginning somewhere in the region of his crown, which gave a generally rather unprepossessing impression.

'Fuck you and your ban!' yelled the young man from a safe distance. 'I don't need any favours! You aren't the only ones! I'll go to the competition! Big-heads! Upstarts! The sign may be gilded, but there's still dung on your boots. You mean as much to me as that dung. And shit will always be shit!'

Geralt was slightly worried. The balding young man, apart from his unsightly looks, was dressed in quite a grand fashion, perhaps not too richly, but in any case, more elegantly than the Witcher. So, if elegance was the determining criterion . . .

'And where might you be going, may I ask?' The guard's icy voice interrupted his train of thought. And confirmed his fears.

'This is an exclusive tavern,' continued the Cerberus, blocking the stairs. 'Do you understand the meaning of the word? It's off

limits, as it were. To some people.'

'Why to me?'

'Don't judge a book by its cover.' The guard looked down on the Witcher from two steps higher up. 'You are a foreigner, a walking illustration of that old folk saying. Your cover is nothing to write home about. Perhaps there are other objects hidden in its pages, but I shan't pry. I repeat, this is an exclusive tavern. We don't tolerate people dressed like ruffians here. Or armed.'

'I'm not armed.'

'But you look like you are. So kindly take yourself off somewhere else.'

'Control yourself, Tarp.'

A swarthy man in a short velvet jacket appeared in the doorway of the tavern. His eyebrows were bushy, his gaze piercing and his nose aquiline. And large.

'You clearly don't know who you're dealing with,' the aquiline nose informed the guard. 'You don't know who has come to visit.'

The guard's lengthening silence showed he indeed did not.

'Geralt of Rivia. The Witcher. Known for protecting people and saving their lives. As he did a week ago, here, in our region, in Ansegis, when he saved a mother and her child. And several months earlier, he famously killed a man-eating leucrote in Cizmar, suffering wounds in so doing. How could you bar entry to my tavern to somebody who plies such an honest trade? On the contrary, I'm very happy to see a guest like him. And I consider it an honour that he desires to visit me. Master Geralt, the Natura Rerum osteria warmly welcomes you. I'm Febus Ravenga, the owner of this humble house.'

The table that the head waiter sat him at had a tablecloth. All the tables in the Natura Rerum – most of which were occupied – had tablecloths. Geralt couldn't recall the last time he'd seen any in a tavern.

Although curious, he didn't look around, not wanting to appear provincial and uncouth. However, a cautious glance revealed modest – though elegant and tasteful – decor. The clientele, whom he judged to be mainly merchants and craftsmen, were also elegantly – although not always tastefully – attired. There were ships' captains, weather-beaten and bearded. And there was

no shortage of garishly dressed noblemen. It smelled nice and elegant: of roast meat, garlic, caraway and big money.

He felt eyes on him. His witcher senses immediately signalled whenever he was being observed. He had a quick, discreet look around.

A young woman with fox-red hair was observing him, also very discreetly, and to an ordinary mortal imperceptibly. She was pretending to be completely absorbed in her meal – something tasty looking and temptingly fragrant even from a distance. Her style and body language left no doubt. Not to a witcher. He would have bet anything she was a sorceress.

The head waiter shook him out of his contemplation and sudden nostalgia.

'Today,' he announced ceremonially and not without pride, 'we propose veal shank stewed in vegetables with mushrooms and beans. Saddle of lamb roast with aubergines. Bacon in beer served with glazed plums. Roast shoulder of boar, served with stewed apples. Fried duck breasts, served with red cabbage and cranberries. Squid stuffed with chicory in a white sauce served with grapes. Grilled monkfish in a cream sauce, served with stewed pears. Or as usual, our speciality: goose legs in white wine, with a choice of baked fruit, and turbot in caramelised cuttlefish ink, served with crayfish necks.'

'If you have a liking for fish,' Febus Ravenga suddenly appeared at the table out of the blue, 'I heartily recommend the turbot. From the morning catch, it goes without saying. The pride and boast of our head chef.'

'The turbot in ink then.' The Witcher fought against an irrational desire to order several dishes in one go, aware it would have been in bad taste. 'Thank you for the suggestion. I'd begun to suffer the agony of choice.'

'Which wine,' the head waiter asked, 'would sir like to order?'

'Please choose something suitable. I'm not very au fait with wines.'

'Few are,' smiled Febus Ravenga. 'And very few admit it. Never fear, *we* shall choose the type and vintage, master witcher. I'll leave you in peace, bon appétit.'

That wish was not to come true. Neither did Geralt have the

opportunity to find out what wine they would choose. The taste of turbot in cuttlefish ink was also to remain a mystery to him that day.

The red-haired woman suddenly abandoned discretion, as her eyes found his. She smiled. Spitefully, he couldn't help feeling. He felt a quiver run through him.

'The Witcher called Geralt of Rivia?' The question was asked by one of three characters dressed in black who had noiselessly approached the table.

'It is I.'

'You are arrested in the name of the law.'

What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong?

William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

CHAPTER THREE

Geralt's court-appointed barrister avoided eye contact. She flicked through the portfolio of documents with a persistence worthy of a better cause. There were very few papers in it. Two, to be precise. His lawyer had probably learned them by heart. To dazzle them with her speech for the defence, he hoped. But that was, he suspected, a forlorn hope.

'You assaulted two of your cellmates while under arrest.' His lawyer finally raised her eyes. 'Ought I perhaps to know the reason?'

'*Primo*, I rejected their sexual advances. They didn't want to understand that "no" means "no". *Secundo*, I like beating people up. *Tertio*, it's a falsehood. They self-inflicted their wounds. By banging themselves against the wall. To slander me.'

He spoke slowly and carelessly. After a week spent in prison he had become utterly indifferent.

His barrister closed the portfolio. Only to open it again straight away. Then she tidied her elaborate coiffure.

'The victims aren't pressing charges, it transpires.' She sighed. 'Let us focus on the prosecutor's charge. The tribunal assessor is accusing you of a grave crime, punishable by a severe penalty.'

How could it be otherwise? he thought, contemplating the lawyer's features. He wondered how old she had been when she entered the school for sorcerers. And how old she was when she left.

The two schools for sorcerers – Ban Ard School for boys and Aretuza School for girls, both on the Isle of Thanedd – apart from male and female graduates, also produced rejects. In spite of the strict selection procedure of their entry examinations, which was supposed to facilitate the winnowing out and discarding of hopeless cases, it was only the first semesters that really found and revealed the ones who had managed to remain hidden. The ones for whom thinking turned out to be a disagreeable and hazardous experience. Latent idiots, sluggards and intellectual slackers of both sexes, who had no place in schools of magic. The difficulty was that they were usually the offspring of wealthy people or considered important for

other reasons. After being expelled from school it was necessary to do something with these difficult youngsters. There was no problem for the boys rejected by Ban Ard – they joined the diplomatic service, the army, navy or police while politics was left for the stupidest. Magical rejects in the shape of the fairer sex seemed to be more difficult to place. Although expelled, the young ladies had nonetheless crossed the threshold of a school of magic and had tasted magic to some degree or other. And the influence of sorceresses on monarchs, and on all areas of political and economic life, was too powerful for the young ladies to be left in the lurch. They were provided with a safe haven. They joined the judiciary. They became lawyers.

The defence counsel closed the portfolio. Then opened it.

'I recommend an admission of guilt,' she said. 'Then we can expect a more lenient punishment—'

'Admit to what?' interrupted the Witcher.

'When the judge asks if you plead guilty you are to reply in the affirmative. An admission of guilt will be regarded as a mitigating circumstance.'

'How do you mean to defend me, then?'

The lawyer closed the portfolio. As though it were a coffin lid.

'Let's go. The judge is waiting.'

The judge was waiting. For right then the previous miscreant was being escorted from the courtroom. *He looks none too cheerful*, thought Geralt.

A shield flecked with flies bearing the emblem of Kerack, a blue dolphin *naiant*, hung on the wall. Under the coat of arms was the bench, with three people sitting behind it. A scrawny scribe. A faded subjudge. And the judge, a woman of equable appearance and countenance.

The bench on the judges' right was occupied by the tribunal assessor, acting as prosecutor. He looked serious. Serious enough to avoid an encounter with him in a dark alley.

On the other side, on the judges' left, was the dock. The place assigned to Geralt.

Things moved quickly after that.

'Geralt, called Geralt of Rivia, a witcher by profession, is

accused of embezzlement, of the seizure and misappropriation of Crown property. Acting in league with other persons whom he corrupted, the accused inflated the fees on the bills issued for his services with the intention of arrogating those surpluses. Which resulted in losses to the state treasury. The proof is a report, *notitia criminis*, that the prosecution has enclosed in the file. That report . . .'

The judge's weary expression and absent gaze clearly showed that this respectable lady was miles away. And that quite other matters and problems were distressing her: the laundry, the children, the colour of the curtains, preparing the dough for a poppy-seed cake and the stretch marks on her large behind auguring a marital crisis. The Witcher humbly accepted the fact that he was less important. That he could not compete with anything of that kind.

'The crime committed by the accused,' the prosecutor continued without emotion, 'not only damages the country, but also undermines the social order and spreads dissent. The law demands —'

'The report included in the file,' interrupted the judge, 'has to be treated by the court as *probatio de relato*, evidence supplied by a third party. Can the prosecution supply any other proof?'

'There is no other evidence . . . For the moment . . . The accused is, as has been pointed out, a witcher. He is a mutant, beyond the margins of human society, flouting human laws and placing himself above them. In his criminogenic and antisocial profession, he communes with criminals, as well as non-humans, including races traditionally hostile to humanity. Law-breaking is part of a witcher's nihilistic nature. In the case of *this* witcher, Your Honour, the lack of evidence is the best proof . . . It proves perfidy and—'

'Does the accused . . .' The judge was clearly uninterested in whatever the lack of evidence proved. 'Does the accused plead guilty?'

'He does not.' Geralt ignored his lawyer's desperate signals. 'I am innocent; I haven't committed any crime.'

He had some skill, he had dealt with the law. He had also familiarised himself with the literature on the subject.

'I am accused on the basis of prejudice—'

‘Objection!’ yelled the assessor. ‘The accused is making a speech!’

‘Objection dismissed.’

‘—as a result of prejudice against my person and my profession, i.e. as a result of *praeiudicium. Praeiudicium* implies, in advance, a falsehood. Furthermore, I stand accused on the grounds of an anonymous denunciation, and only one. *Testimonium unius non valet. Testis unus, testis nullus. Ergo*, it is not an accusation, but conjecture, i.e. *praesumptio*. And conjecture leaves doubt.’

‘*In dubio pro reo*!’ the defence counsel roused herself. ‘*In dubio pro reo*, Your Honour!’

‘The court has decided to set bail of five hundred Novigradian crowns.’ The judge struck her gavel on the bench, waking up the faded subjudge.

Geralt sighed. He wondered if both his cellmates had come around and drawn any kind of lesson from the matter. Or whether he would have to give them another hiding.

What is the city but the people?

William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*

CHAPTER FOUR

A stall carelessly nailed together from planks, manned by an old dear in a straw hat and as plump and ruddy-faced as a good witch from a fairy tale, stood at the very edge of the crowded market place. The sign above the old dear read: *Come to me for joy and happiness. Gherkin complimentary.* Geralt stopped and dug some copper pennies from his pocket.

'Pour me a gill of happiness, Granny,' he demanded gloomily.

He took a deep breath, downed it in one, and breathed out. He wiped away the tears that the hooch brought to his eyes.

He was at liberty. And angry.

He had learned that he was free, interestingly, from a person he knew. By sight. It was the same prematurely bald young man who he had observed being driven from the steps of the Natura Rerum osteria. And who, it turned out, was the court scribe.

'You're free,' the bald young man had told him, locking and unlocking his thin, ink-stained fingers. 'Someone came up with the bail.'

'Who?'

The information turned out to be confidential – the bald scribbler refused to give it. He also refused – rather bluntly – the return of Geralt's confiscated purse. Which contained cash and bank cheques among other things. The Witcher's personal property – he declared not without spitefulness – had been treated by the authorities as a *cautio pro expensis*, a down payment against court costs and expected penalties.

There was no point or purpose in arguing. On release, Geralt had to content himself with what he had in his pockets when he was arrested. Personal trifles and petty cash. So petty no one had bothered to steal it.

He counted the remaining copper pennies and smiled at the old dear.

'And a gill of joy, please. I'll decline the gherkin.'

After the old dear's hooch, the world took on a more beautiful

hue. Geralt knew it would quickly pass so he quickened his step. He had things to do.

Roach, his mare, had fortunately escaped the attentions of the court and wasn't included in the cost of the *cautio pro expensis.* She was where he'd left her, in the stable stall, well-groomed and fed. The Witcher couldn't accept something like that without a reward, irrespective of his own assets. The stableman received at once a few of the handful of silver coins that had survived in a hiding place sewn into the saddle. Geralt's generosity took the man's breath away.

The horizon over the sea was darkening. It seemed to Geralt that he could see flashes of lightning there.

Before entering the guardhouse, he prudently filled his lungs with fresh air. It didn't help. The guardswomen must have eaten more beans than usual that day. Many, many more beans. Who knew, perhaps it was Sunday.

Some of them were eating, as usual. Others were busy playing dice. They stood up from the table upon seeing him. And surrounded him.

'The Witcher, just look,' said the commandant, standing very close. ''e's up and come here.'

'I'm leaving the city. I've come to collect my property.'

'If we lets you.' Another guard prodded him with an elbow, apparently by accident. 'What will 'e give us for it? You'll have to buy yourself out, sonny, buy yourself out! Eh, lasses? What'll we make him do?'

'Kiss all our bare arses!'

'With a lick! And a dick!'

'Nothing of the kind! He might infect us with something.'

'But he'll 'ave to give some pleasure, won't 'e?' Another one pushed her rock-hard bust onto him.

'He can sing us an air.' Another one farted thunderously. 'And fit the tune to my pitch!'

'Or mine!' Yet another one farted even louder. 'Mine's more full-blooded!'

The other women laughed so much they clasped their sides.

Geralt made his way through, trying hard not to use excessive force. At that moment, the door to the deposit opened and an elderly gentleman in a grey mantle and beret appeared. The attendant, Gonschorek. On seeing the Witcher he opened his mouth wide.

‘You, sir?’ he mumbled. ‘How so? Your swords . . .’

‘Indeed. My swords. May I have them?’

‘But . . . But . . .’ Gonschorek choked and clutched his chest, struggling to catch his breath. ‘But I don’t have the swords!’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘I don’t have them . . .’ Gonschorek’s face flushed. And contorted as though in a paroxysm of pain. ‘Them bin took—’

‘What?’ Geralt felt cold fury gripping him.

‘Bin . . . took . . .’

‘What do you mean, taken?’ He grabbed the attendant by the lapels. ‘Taken by whom, dammit? What the bloody hell is this about?’

‘The docket . . .’

‘Exactly!’ He felt an iron grip on his arm. The commandant of the guard shoved him away from the choking Gonschorek.

‘Exactly! Show us the docket!’

The Witcher did not have the docket. The docket from the weapon store had been in his purse. The purse the court had confiscated. Against the costs and the expected punishments.

‘The docket!’

‘I don’t have it. But—’

‘No docket, no deposit.’ The commandant didn’t let him finish. ‘Swords bin took, didn’t you ’ear? You probably took ’em. And now you’re putting on this pantomime? Want to con something out of us? Nothing doing. Get out of here.’

‘I’m not leaving until . . .’

The commandant, without loosening her grasp, dragged Geralt away and turned him around. To face the door.

‘Fuck off.’

Geralt shied away from hitting women. He didn’t, however,

have any reluctance when it came to somebody who had the shoulders of a wrestler, a belly like a netted pork roast and calves like a discus thrower, and on top of that who farted like a mule. He pushed the commandant away and smashed her hard in the jaw. With his favourite right hook.

The others froze, but only for a second. Even before the commandant had tumbled onto the table, splashing beans and paprika sauce around, they were on him. He smashed one of them in the nose without thinking, and hit another so hard her teeth made a cracking noise. He treated two to the Aard Sign. They flew like rag dolls into a stand of halberds, knocking them all over with an indescribable crash and clatter.

He got hit in the ear by the commandant, who was dripping sauce. The other guard, the one with the rock-hard bust, seized him from behind in a bear hug. He elbowed her so hard she howled. He pushed the commandant onto the table again, and whacked her with a haymaker. He thumped the one with the smashed nose in the solar plexus and knocked her to the ground, where she vomited audibly. Another, struck in the temple, slammed her head against a post and went limp, her eyes immediately misting over.

But four of them were still on their feet. That marked the end of his advantage. He was hit in the back of the head and then in the ear. And after that in the lower back. One of them tripped him up and when he fell down two dropped on him, pinning him down and pounding him with their fists. The other two weighed in with kicks.

A head-butt in the face took out one of the women lying on him, but the other immediately pressed him down. The commandant – he recognised her by the sauce dripping from her. She smacked him from above in the teeth. He spat blood right in her eyes.

‘A knife!’ she yelled, thrashing her shaven head around. ‘Give me a knife! I’ll cut his balls off!’

‘Why a knife?’ yelled another. ‘I’ll bite them off!’

‘Stop! Attention! What is the meaning of this? Attention, I said!’

A stentorian voice, commanding respect, tore through the hubbub of the fracas, pacifying the guards. They released Geralt from their grasp. He got up with difficulty, somewhat sore. The sight of the battlefield improved his humour a little. He observed

his accomplishments with some satisfaction. The guard lying by the wall had opened her eyes, but was still unable even to sit upright. Another, bent over, was spitting blood and feeling her teeth with a finger. Yet another, the one with the smashed nose, was trying hard to stand, but kept falling over, slipping in a puddle of her own beany vomit. Only three of the six could keep their balance. So he could be satisfied with the result. Despite the fact that had it not been for the intervention he would have suffered more serious injuries and might not have been able to get up unaided.

The person who had intervened, however, was an elegantly attired man with noble features, emanating authority. Geralt didn't know who he was. But he knew perfectly well who the noble-looking man's companion was. A dandy in a fanciful hat with an egret feather stuck into it, with shoulder-length blond hair curled with irons. Wearing a doublet the colour of red wine and a shirt with a lace ruffle. Along with his ever-present lute and with that ever-present insolent smile on his lips.

'Greetings, Witcher! What *do* you look like? With that smashed-up fizzog! I'll split my sides laughing!'

'Greetings, Dandelion. I'm pleased to see you too.'

'What's going on here?' The man with the noble looks stood with arms akimbo. 'Well? What are you up to? Standard report! This moment!'

'It was him!' The commandant shook the last of the sauce from her ears and pointed accusingly at Geralt. 'He's guilty, Honourable Instigator. He lost his temper and stirred up a row, and then began brawling. And all because of some swords in the deposit, what he hasn't got a docket for. Gonschorek will confirm . . . Hey, Gonschorek, what are you doing curled up in the corner? Shat yourself? Move your arse, get up, tell the Honourable Instigator . . . Hey! Gonschorek? What ails you?'

A close look was enough to guess what ailed him. There was no need to check his pulse, it sufficed to look at his chalky white face. Gonschorek was dead. He was, quite simply, deceased.

*

'We will institute an investigation, Lord Rivia,' said Ferrant de

Lettenhove, instigator of the Royal Tribunal. ‘Since you are lodging a formal complaint and appeal we must institute one – the law so decrees. We shall interrogate everyone who during your arrest and trial had access to your effects. We shall arrest any suspects.’

‘The usual ones?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Nothing, nothing.’

‘Indeed. The matter will certainly be explained, and those guilty of the theft of the swords will be brought to justice. If a theft was really committed. I promise that we shall solve the mystery and the truth will out. Sooner or later.’

‘I’d rather it were sooner.’ The Witcher didn’t care too much for the instigator’s tone of voice. ‘My swords are my existence; I can’t do my job without them. I know my profession is adversely perceived by many and that I suffer as a result of this negative portrayal caused by prejudice, superstition and xenophobia. I hope that fact won’t influence the investigation.’

‘It won’t,’ replied Ferrant de Lettenhove dryly, ‘since law and order prevail here.’

After the servants had carried Gonschorek’s body out, the instigator ordered a search of the weapon store and the entire cubbyhole. Predictably, there wasn’t a trace of the Witcher’s swords. And the commandant of the guard – still annoyed with Geralt – pointed out to them a filing spike where the deceased had kept the completed deposit slips. The Witcher’s was soon found among them. The commandant searched through the stack, thrusting it under his nose a moment later.

‘There you go.’ She pointed triumphantly. ‘It’s here in black and white. Signed *Gerland of Ryblia*. Told yer the witcher had bin here and took his swords away. And now ’e’s lying, no doubt to claim damages. Gonschorek turned ’is toes up thanks to ’im! His gall bladder ruptured from the worry and ’is heart gev out.’

But neither she, nor any of the other guards, elected to testify that any of them had actually seen Geralt collect his weapons. The explanation was that ‘there’s always someone ’anging around ’ere’ and they had been busy eating.

Seagulls circled over the roof of the court, uttering ear-splitting screeches. The wind had blown the storm cloud

southwards over the sea. The sun was out.

'May I warn you in advance,' said Geralt, 'that my swords are protected by powerful spells. Only witchers can touch them; others will have their vitality drained away. It mainly manifests in the loss of male potency. I'm talking about sexual enfeeblement. Absolute and permanent.'

'We shall bear that in mind.' The instigator nodded. 'For the moment, though, I would ask you not to leave the city. I'm inclined to turn a blind eye to the brawl in the guardhouse – in any case, they occur there regularly. The guards are pretty volatile. And because Julian – I mean Lord Dandelion – vouches for you, I'm certain that your case will be satisfactorily solved in court.'

'My case—' the Witcher squinted his eyes '—is nothing but harassment. Intimidation resulting from prejudice and hatred—'

'The evidence will be examined—' the instigator cut him off '—and measures taken based on it. That is what law and order decrees. The same law and order that granted you your liberty. On bail, and thus conditionally. You ought, Lord Rivia, to respect those caveats.'

'Who paid the bail?'

Ferrant de Lettenhove coldly declined to reveal the identity of the Witcher's benefactor, bade farewell and headed towards the entrance to the court, accompanied by his servants. It was just what Dandelion had been waiting for. Scarcely had they exited the town square and entered a narrow street then he revealed everything he knew.

'It's a genuine catalogue of unfortunate coincidences, Geralt, my dear. And unlucky incidents. And as far as the bail is concerned, it was paid for you by a certain Lytta Neyd, known to her friends as Coral, from the colour of the lipstick she uses. She's a sorceress who works for Belohun, the local kinglet. Everybody's racking their brains wondering why she did it. Because it was none other than she who sent you down.'

'What?'

'Listen, will you? It was Coral who informed on you. That actually didn't surprise anyone, it's widely known that sorcerers have it in for you. And then a bolt from the blue: the sorceress suddenly pays your bail and gets you out of the dungeon where you'd been thrown because of her. The whole city—'

‘Widely known? The whole city? What are you saying, Dandelion?’

‘I’m using metaphors and circumlocution. Don’t pretend you don’t know, you know me well enough. Naturally not the “whole city”, and only certain well-informed people among those close to the crown.’

‘And you’re one of them, I presume?’

‘Correct. Ferrant is my cousin – the son of my father’s brother. I dropped in to visit him, as you would a relative. And I found out about your imbroglio. I immediately interceded for you, you can’t possibly doubt that. I vouched for your honesty. I talked about Yennefer . . .’

‘Thank you very much.’

‘Drop the sarcasm. I had to talk about her to help my cousin realise that the local witch is maligning and slandering you out of jealousy and envy. That the entire accusation is false, that you never stoop to swindle people. As a result of my intercession, Ferrant de Lettenhove, the royal instigator, a high-ranking legal executive, is now convinced of your innocence—’

‘I didn’t get that impression,’ said Geralt. ‘Quite the opposite. I felt he didn’t believe me. Neither in the case of the alleged embezzlement, nor in the case of the vanished swords. Did you hear what he said about evidence? Evidence is a fetish to him. The denunciation will thus be evidence of the fraud and Gerland of Ryblia’s signature on the docket is proof of the hoax involving the theft of the swords. Not to mention his expression when he was warning me against leaving the city . . .’

‘You’re being too hard on him,’ pronounced Dandelion. ‘I know him better than you. That fact that I’m vouching for you is worth more than a dozen inflated pieces of evidence. And he was right to warn you. Why do you think both he and I headed to the guardhouse? To stop you from doing anything foolish. Someone, you say, is framing you, fabricating phoney evidence? Then don’t hand that someone irrefutable proof. Which is what fleeing would be.’

‘Perhaps you’re right,’ agreed Geralt. ‘But my instinct tells me otherwise. I ought to do a runner before they utterly corner me. First arrest, then bail, and then right after that the swords . . . What next? Dammit, without a sword I feel like . . . like a snail without a

shell.'

'I think you worry too much. And anyway, the place is full of shops. Forget about those swords and buy some more.'

'And if someone were to steal your lute? Which was acquired, as I recall, in quite dramatic circumstances? Wouldn't *you* worry? Would you let it slide? And buy another in the shop around the corner?'

Dandelion involuntarily tightened his grip on his lute and his eyes swept around anxiously. However, none of the passers-by looked like a potential robber, nor displayed an unhealthy interest in his unique instrument.

'Well, yes,' he sighed. 'I understand. Like my lute, your swords are also unique and irreplaceable. And what's more . . . What were you saying? Enchanted? Triggering magical impotence . . . Dammit, Geralt! Now you tell me. I mean, I've often spent time in your company, I've had those swords at arm's length! And sometimes closer! Now everything's clear, now I get it . . . I've been having certain difficulties lately, dammit . . .'

'Relax. That impotence thing was nonsense. I made it up on the spot, hoping the rumour would spread. That the thief would take fright . . .'

'If he takes fright he's liable to bury the swords in a muck heap,' the bard noted, still slightly pale. 'And you'll never get them back. Better to count on my cousin Ferrant. He's been instigator for years, and has a whole army of sheriffs, agents and narks. They'll find the thief in no time, you'll see.'

'If the thief's still here.' The Witcher ground his teeth. 'He might have run for it while I was in the slammer. What did you say was the name of that sorceress who landed me in this?'

'Lytta Neyd, nicknamed Coral. I can guess what you're planning, my friend. But I don't think it's a good idea. She's a sorceress. An enchantress and a woman in one; in a word, an alien species that doesn't submit to rational understanding, and functions according to mechanisms and principles incomprehensible to ordinary men. Why am I telling you this, anyway? You know it very well. You have, indeed, very rich experience in this matter . . . What's that racket?'

Aimlessly wandering through the streets, they had ended up in the vicinity of a small square resounding with the ceaseless banging

of hammers. There was a large cooper's workshop there, it turned out. Cords of seasoned planks were piled up evenly beneath an awning by the street. From there, the planks were carried by barefoot youngsters to tables where they were attached to special trestles and shaped using drawknives. The carved staves went to other craftsmen, who finished them on long planing benches, standing astride them up to their ankles in shavings. The completed staves ended up in the hands of the coopers, who assembled them. Geralt watched for a while as the shape of the barrel emerged under the pressure of ingenious vices and clamps tightened by screws. Metal hoops hammered onto the staves then created the form of the barrel. Vapour from the large coppers where the barrels were being steamed belched right out into the street. The smell of wood being toasted in a fire – the barrels were being hardened before the next stage in the process – drifted from the courtyard into the workshop.

'Whenever I see a barrel,' Dandelion declared, 'I feel like a beer. Let's go around the corner. I know a pleasant inn.'

'Go by yourself. I'm visiting the sorceress. I think I know which one she is; I've already seen her. Where will I find her? Don't make faces, Dandelion. She, it would seem, is the original source and cause of my troubles. I'm not going to wait for things to develop, I'll go and ask her directly. I can't hang around in this town. If only for the reason that I'm rather skint.'

'We shall find a remedy for that,' the troubadour said proudly. 'I shall support you financially . . . Geralt? What's going on?'

'Go back to the coopers and bring me a stave.'

'What?'

'Fetch me a stave. Quickly.'

The street had been barred by three powerful-looking bruisers with ugly, unshaven and unwashed mugs. One of them, so broad-shouldered he was almost square, held a metal-tipped club, as thick as a capstan bar. The second, in a sheepskin coat with the fur on the outside, was holding a cleaver and had a boarding axe in his belt. The third, as swarthy as a mariner, was armed with a long, hideous-looking knife.

'Hey, you there, Rivian bastard!' began the square-shaped man.

'How do you feel without any swords on your back? Bare-arsed in the wind, eh?'

Geralt didn't join in the discourse. He waited. He heard Dandelion arguing with a cooper about a stave.

'You're toothless now, you freak, you venomous witcher toad,' continued the square-shaped man, clearly the most expert of the three in the oratory arts. 'No one's afraid of a reptile without fangs! For it's nothing but a worm or a slimy lamprey. We put filth like that under our boots and crush it to a pulp so it won't dare to come into our towns among decent people no more. You won't foul our streets with your slime, you reptile. Have at him, boys!'

'Geralt! Catch!'

He caught the stave Dandelion threw to him, dodged a blow from the club, smashed the square-shaped man in the side of the head, spun around and slammed it into the elbow of the thug in the sheepskin, who yelled and dropped the cleaver. The Witcher hit him behind the knees, knocking him down, and then, in passing, struck him on the temple with the stave. Without waiting until the thug fell down, or interrupting his own movement, he ducked under the square-shaped man's club and slammed him over the fingers clenched around it. The square-shaped man howled in pain and dropped the club, and Geralt struck him in turn on the right ear, the ribs and the left ear. And then kicked him hard in the crotch. The square-shaped man fell over and rolled into a ball, cringing and curling up, his forehead touching the ground.

The swarthy one, the most agile and quickest of the three, danced around the Witcher. Deftly tossing his knife from hand to hand, he attacked on bent legs, slashing diagonally. Geralt easily avoided the blows, stepped back and waited for him to lengthen his strides. And when that happened he knocked the knife away with a sweeping blow of the stave, circled the assailant with a pirouette and slammed him in the back of the head. The knifeman fell to his knees and the Witcher whacked him in the right kidney. The man howled and tensed up and the Witcher bashed him with the stave below the ear, striking a nerve. One known to physicians as the parotid plexus.

'Oh, dear,' said Geralt, standing over the man, who was curled up, retching and choking on his screams. 'That must have hurt.'

The thug in the sheepskin coat drew the axe from his belt, but didn't get up from his knees, uncertain what to do. Geralt dispelled his doubts, smashing him over the back of the neck with the stave.

The fellows from the town guard came running along the

street, jostling the gathering crowd of onlookers. Dandelion pacified them, citing his connections, frantically explaining who had been the assailant and who had acted in self-defence. The Witcher gestured the bard over.

'See that the bastards are tied up. Persuade your cousin the instigator to give them a hard time. They either had a hand in stealing the swords themselves or somebody hired them. They knew I was unarmed, which is why they dared to attack. Give the coopers back their stave.'

'I had to buy it,' admitted Dandelion. 'And I think I did the right thing. You wield a mean plank, I can see. You should pack one all the time.'

'I'm going to the sorceress. To pay her a visit. Should I take the stave?'

'Something heavier would come in useful with a sorceress.' The bard grimaced. 'A fence post, for example. A philosopher acquaintance of mine used to say: when visiting a woman, never forget to take a—'

'Dandelion.'

'Very well, very well, I'll give you directions to the witch. But first, if I might advise . . .'

'Yes?'

'Visit a bathhouse. And a barber.'

Guard against disappointments, because appearances can deceive. Things that are really as they seem are rare. And a woman is never as she seems.

Dandelion, *Half a Century of Poetry*

CHAPTER FIVE

The water in the fountain swirled and boiled, spraying small golden drops around. Lytta Neyd, known as Coral, a sorceress, held out her hand and chanted a stabilising charm. The water became as smooth as though oil had been poured over it and pulsated with glimmers of light. The image, at first vague and nebulous, became sharper and stopped shimmering, and, although slightly distorted by the movement of the water, was distinct and clear. Coral leaned over. She saw the Spice Market, the city's main street, in the water. And a white-haired man crossing it. The sorceress stared. Observed. Searched for clues. Some kind of details. Details that would enable her to make the appropriate evaluation. And allow her to predict what would happen.

Lytta had a tried and tested opinion, formed by years of experience, of what constituted a real man. She knew how to recognise a real man in a flock of more-or-less successful imitations. In order to do that she did not have to resort to physical contact, a method of testing manhood she considered like the majority of sorceresses, not just trivial, but also misleading and liable to lead one astray. Savouring them directly, as her attempts had proven, was perhaps some kind of indication of taste, but all too often left a bitter aftertaste. Indigestion. And heartburn. And even vomiting.

Lytta was able to recognise a real man even at a distance, on the basis of trifling and apparently insignificant criteria. A real man, the sorceress knew from experience, is an enthusiastic angler, but only using a fly. He collects military figures, erotic prints and models of sailing ships he builds himself, including the kind in bottles, and there is never a shortage of empty bottles of expensive alcoholic drinks in his home. He is an excellent cook, able to conjure up veritable culinary masterpieces. And well – when all's said and done – the very sight of him is enough to make one desirous.

The Witcher Geralt, about whom the sorceress had heard a great deal, about whom she had acquired much information, and whom she was right then observing in the fountain, met but one of the above conditions, it appeared.

'Mozaïk!'

‘Yes, madam.’

‘We’re going to have a guest. Everything is to be suitably prepared and elegant. But first bring me a gown.’

‘The tea rose? Or the aquamarine?’

‘The white one. He dresses in black, we’ll treat him to yin and yang. And sandals, select something matching, make sure they have at least four-inch heels. I can’t let him look down on me too much.’

‘Madam . . . That white gown . . .’

‘Yes?’

‘It’s, well . . .’

‘Modest? Without any ornamentation or furbelows? Oh, Mozaïk, Mozaïk. Will you ever learn?’

*

He was met in the doorway by a burly and pot-bellied bruiser with a broken nose and little piggy eyes, who searched Geralt from head to toe and then once again the other way. Then he stood back, giving a sign for the Witcher to pass.

A girl with smoothly combed – almost slicked-down – hair was waiting in the anteroom. She invited him in with a gesture, without uttering a single word.

He entered straight onto a patio dotted with flowers and a splashing fountain in the centre. In the middle of the fountain stood a small marble statue portraying a naked, dancing girl. Apart from the fact that it was sculpted by a master, the statue was conspicuous for another detail – it was attached to the plinth at a single point: the big toe of one foot. In no way, judged the Witcher, could the construction be stable without the help of magic.

‘Geralt of Rivia. Welcome. Do come in.’

The sorceress Lytta Neyd was too sharp-featured to be considered classically beautiful. The warm peach shade of rouge on her cheekbones softened the sharpness but couldn’t hide it. Her lips – highlighted by coral-red lipstick – were so perfectly shaped as to be too perfect. But that wasn’t what mattered.

Lytta Neyd was a redhead. A classic, natural redhead. Her

hair's mellow, light russet evoked associations with a fox's summer coat. If one were to catch a red fox and place it alongside her – Geralt was quite convinced about this – the two of them would prove to be identically coloured and indistinguishable from each other. And when the sorceress moved her head, lighter, yellowish accents lit up among the red, identical to a fox's fur. That type of red hair was usually accompanied by freckles – usually in excess. That wasn't the case with Lytta.

Geralt felt an anxiety, forgotten and dormant, suddenly awaking somewhere deep inside him. He had a strange and inexplicable inclination towards redheads in his nature, and several times that particular colouring had made him do stupid things. Thus he ought to be on his guard, and the Witcher made a firm resolution in that regard. His task was actually made easier. It was almost a year since he'd stopped being tempted by that kind of stupid mistake.

Erotically alluring red hair wasn't the sorceress's only attractive attribute. Her snow-white dress was modest and utterly without effects, which was the aim, the intended aim, and without the slightest doubt deliberate. Its simplicity didn't distract the attention of the observer, but focused it on her attractive figure. And the plunging cleavage. To put it concisely, Lytta Neyd could easily have posed for an engraving accompanying the chapter 'Impure Desire' in the illustrated edition of the prophet Lebioda's *Good Book*.

To put it even more concisely, Lytta Neyd was a woman whom only a complete idiot would have wanted to have relations with for longer than two days. It was curious that women like that were usually pursued by hordes of men inclined to stay for much longer.

She smelled of freesias and apricots.

Geralt bowed and then pretended the statue in the fountain was more interesting than her figure and cleavage.

'Come in,' repeated Lytta, pointing at a malachite-topped table and two wicker armchairs. She waited for him to sit down, then as she was taking her place showed off a shapely calf and a lizard skin sandal. The Witcher pretended his entire attention was absorbed by the carafes and fruit bowl.

'Wine? It's Nuragus from Toussaint, in my opinion more compelling than the overrated Est Est. There is also Côte-de-Blessure, if you prefer red. Pour please, Mozaïk.'

‘Thank you.’ He took a goblet from the girl with the slicked-down hair and smiled at her. ‘Mozaïk. Pretty name.’

He saw terror in her eyes.

Lytta Neyd placed her goblet on the table. With a bang, meant to focus his attention.

‘What brings the celebrated Geralt of Rivia to my humble abode?’ She tossed her shock of red curls. ‘I’m dying to find out.’

‘You bought me out,’ he said, deliberately coolly. ‘Paid my bail, I mean. I was released from gaol thanks to your munificence. Where I also ended up because of you. Right? Is it because of you I spent a week in a cell?’

‘Four days.’

‘Four days. I’d like to learn, if possible, the motives behind those actions. Both of them.’

‘Both?’ She raised her eyebrows and her goblet. ‘There’s one. And only one.’

‘Oh.’ He pretended to be devoting all his attention to Mozaïk, who was busying herself on the other side of the patio. ‘So you informed on me and got me thrown into the clink, and then got me out for the same reason?’

‘Bravo.’

‘So, I ask: why?’

‘To show you I can.’

He took a sip of wine. Which was indeed very good.

‘You proved that you can,’ he nodded. ‘In principle, you could have simply told me that, by meeting me in the street, for instance. I would’ve believed it. You preferred to do it differently. And forcibly. So, I ask: what now?’

‘I’m wondering myself.’ She looked at him rapaciously from under her eyelashes. ‘But let’s leave things to take their own course. In the meantime, let’s say I’m acting on behalf of several of my confraters. Sorcerers who have certain plans regarding you. These sorcerers, who are familiar with my diplomatic talents, chose me as the right person to inform you about their plans. For the moment that is all I can disclose to you.’

‘That’s very little.’

‘You’re right. But for the moment, I’m ashamed to admit, I don’t know any more myself. I didn’t expect you to show up so quickly, didn’t expect you to discover so quickly who paid your bail. Which was, they assured me, to have remained a secret. When I know more I shall reveal more. Be patient.’

‘And the matter of my swords? Is that part of the game? Of the plans of those mysterious sorcerers? Or is that further proof of your capabilities?’

‘I don’t know anything about the matter of your swords, whatever it might mean or concern.’

He wasn’t entirely convinced. But he didn’t delve further into the subject.

‘Your confrater sorcerers have recently been trying to outdo each other in showing me antipathy and hostility,’ he said. ‘They’re falling over one another to antagonise me and make my life difficult. I expect to find their interfering fingerprints in every misadventure that befalls me. It’s a catalogue of unfortunate coincidences. They throw me into gaol, then release me, then communicate that they have plans for me. What will your confraters dream up this time? I’m afraid even to speculate. And you order me to be patient, most diplomatically, I admit. But I don’t have a choice. After all, I have to wait until the case triggered by that tip-off comes before the court.’

‘But meanwhile,’ the sorceress smiled, ‘you can take full advantage of your liberty and enjoy its benefits. You have been released pending trial. If the case comes before the court at all, which isn’t by any means certain. And even if it does, you don’t have any reason to be anxious, believe me. Trust me.’

‘Trust may come a bit harder,’ he retorted, with a smile. ‘The actions of your confraters in recent times have severely taxed my trust. But I shall try hard. And now I shall be on my way. To trust and wait patiently. Good day.’

‘Don’t go yet. Stay a while longer. Mozaïk, wine.’

She changed her position on the chair. The Witcher continued to stubbornly pretend he couldn’t see her knee and thigh in the split of her skirt.

‘Oh well,’ she said a moment later. ‘There’s no point beating about the bush. Witchers have never been highly thought of in our circles, so it sufficed to ignore you. At least up to a certain moment.’

‘Until—’ he’d had enough of fudging ‘—I embarked on a romance with Yennefer.’

‘No, no, you’re mistaken.’ She fixed eyes the colour of jade on him. ‘Twice over, actually. *Primo*, you didn’t embark on a romance with Yennefer, but she with you. *Secundo*, the liaison didn’t shock many of us, we’re no strangers to excesses of that kind. The turning point was your parting. When did it happen? A year ago? Oh, how time flies . . .’

She made a dramatic pause, counting on a reaction from him.

‘Exactly a year ago,’ she continued, when it became clear there would be no reaction. ‘Some members of our community – not many, but influential – deigned to notice you. No one was clear what precisely occurred between you. Some of us thought that Yennefer, after coming to her senses, broke off with you and kicked you out. Others dared to suppose that you, after seeing through her, ditched her and took to your heels. Consequently, as I mentioned, you became the object of interest. And, as you correctly guessed, antipathy. Why, there were those who wanted you punished in some way. Fortunately for you the majority thought it not worth the trouble.’

‘What about you? What part of the community do you belong to?’

‘Those whom your love affair merely entertained, if you can imagine.’ Lytta twisted her coral lips. ‘And occasionally amused. And occasionally supplied with true sporting thrills. I personally have to thank you for a significant influx of cash, Witcher. Bets were laid about how long you’d last with Yennefer – the stakes were high. My wager, as it turned out, was the most accurate. And I scooped up the pot.’

‘In that case, it’d be better if I went. I oughtn’t to visit you, we oughtn’t to be seen together. People are liable to think we fixed the bet.’

‘Does it bother you what they’re liable to think?’

‘Not a lot. And I’m delighted with your win. I’d planned to refund you the five hundred crowns you put up as bail. But since you scooped up the pot betting on me, I no longer feel obliged. Let’s call it quits.’

‘I hope the mention of refunding the bail doesn’t betray a plan to escape and flee? Without waiting for the court case?’ An evil

gleam appeared in Lytta Neyd's green eyes. 'No, no, you don't have any such intention; you can't have. You know, I'm sure, that it would send you back into the slammer. You *do* know that, don't you?'

'You don't have to prove to me you can do it.'

'I'd prefer not to have to. I mean that most sincerely.'

She placed her hand on her cleavage, with the clear intention of drawing his gaze there. He pretended not to notice and shifted his eyes towards Mozaïk again. Lytta cleared her throat.

'With regard to settling up or sharing out the winnings from the wager,' she said, 'you're actually right. You deserve it. I wouldn't dare to offer you money . . . But what would you say to unlimited credit at the Natura Rerum? For the time of your stay here? Because of me, your last visit ended before it began, so now —'

'No thank you. I appreciate your willingness and good intentions. But no, thank you.'

'Are you sure? Why, you must be. I needlessly mentioned . . . sending you to the slammer. You provoked me. And beguiled me. Your eyes, those strange, mutated eyes, so apparently sincere, endlessly wander . . . and beguile. You aren't sincere, not at all. I know, I know, that's a compliment, coming from a sorceress. You were about to say so, weren't you?'

'Touché.'

'And would you be capable of sincerity? If I demanded it of you?'

'If you were to ask for it.'

'Oh. Let it be. So, I ask you. Why Yennefer? Why her and no one else? Could you explain it? Name it?'

'If this is another wager—'

'It's not. Why exactly Yennefer of Vengerberg?'

Mozaïk appeared like a wraith. With a fresh carafe. And biscuits. Geralt looked her in the eyes. She turned her head away at once.

'Why Yennefer?' he repeated, staring at Mozaïk. 'Why her, precisely? I'll answer frankly: I don't know myself. There are certain women . . . One look is enough . . .'

Mozaïk opened her mouth and shook her head gently. In terror. She knew. And was begging him to stop. But he'd already gone too far into the game.

'Some women attract you like a magnet,' he said, his eyes continuing to wander over the girl's figure. 'You can't take your eyes off them . . .'

'Leave us, Mozaïk.' The sound of pack ice grating against iron could be heard in Lytta's voice. 'And to you, Geralt of Rivia, my thanks. For the visit. For your patience. And for your sincerity.'

A witcher sword (fig. 40) distinguishes itself by being, as it were, an amalgam of other swords, the fifth essence of what is best in other weapons. The first-rate steel and manner of forging typical of dwarven foundries and smithies lend the blade lightness, but also extraordinary resilience. A witcher sword is also sharpened in the dwarven fashion, a secret fashion, may we add, and one that shall remain secret forever, for the mountain dwarves guard their arts jealously. For a sword whetted by dwarves can cut in two a silken scarf thrown into the air. We know from the accounts of eyewitnesses that witchers were able to accomplish the same trick with their swords.

Pandolfo Forteguerra, *A Treatise on Edged Weapons*

CHAPTER SIX

A fleeting morning rainstorm freshened the air for a short time, after which the stench of refuse, burnt fat and rotting fish borne on the breeze from Palmyra once again became noisome.

Dandelion put Geralt up at the inn. The room the bard was occupying was cosy. In the literal sense – they had to cosy up to pass each other. Fortunately, the bed was big enough for two and was serviceable, although it creaked dreadfully and the paillasse had been compacted by travelling merchants, well-known enthusiasts of ardent extramarital sex.

Geralt – God knew why – dreamed of Lytta Neyd during the night.

They went to break their fast at the nearby market hall, where the bard had previously discovered that excellent sardines were to be had. Dandelion was treating him. Which didn't inconvenience Geralt. After all, it had quite often been the other way around, with Dandelion taking advantage of Geralt's generosity when he was skint.

So they sat at a roughly planed table and got down to crisply fried sardines, brought to them on a wooden platter as large as a barrow wheel. Dandelion looked around fearfully from time to time, the Witcher observed. And froze when it seemed to him that some passer-by was scrutinising them too persistently.

'You ought, think I, to get yourself some sort of weapon,' Dandelion finally muttered. 'And carry it in plain sight. It's worth learning from yesterday's incident, don't you think? Oh, look, do you see those shields and mail shirts on display? That's an armourer's. They're bound to have swords there, too.'

'Weapons are prohibited in this town.' Geralt picked a sardine's spine clean and spat out a fin. 'Visitors' weapons are confiscated. It looks as though only bandits can stroll around here armed.'

'Perhaps they can.' The bard nodded towards a passing ruffian with a long battleaxe on his shoulder. 'But in Kerack the prohibitions are issued, enforced and punished for contravention by Ferrant de Lettenhove, who is, as you know, my cousin. And since

the oldboy network is a sacred law of nature, we can make light of the local prohibitions. We are, I hereby state, entitled to possess and carry arms. Let's finish breakfasting and go and buy you a blade. Good mistress! These fish are excellent! Please fry another dozen!'

'As I eat these sardines, I realise that the loss of the swords was nothing but a punishment for my greed and snobbism.' Geralt threw away a well-chewed sardine skeleton. 'For wanting a little luxury. Work came up in the vicinity, so I decided to drop into Kerack and feast at the Natura Rerum tavern, the talk of the town. While there were places I could have eaten tripe, cabbage and peas, or fish soup . . .'

'Incidentally—' Dandelion licked his fingers '—the Natura Rerum, although justly famous for its board, is only one of many. There are restaurants where the food is no worse, and possibly even better. For instance, the Saffron and Pepper in Gors Velen or the Hen Cerbin in Novigrad, which has its own brewery. Or alternatively the nearby Sonatina in Cidaris, with the best seafood on the entire coast. The Rivoli in Maribor and their *capercaillie à la Brokilon*, heavily larded with pork fat – heavenly. The Fer de Moline in Aldersberg and their celebrated saddle of hare with morels à la King Videmont. The Hofmeier in Hirundum. Oh, to pay a call there in the autumn, after Samhain, for roast goose in pear sauce . . . Or the Two Weatherfish, a few miles outside Ard Carraigh, an ordinary tavern on the crossroads, serving the best pork knuckle I've ever eaten . . . Why! Look who's come to see us. Talk of the devil! Greetings, Ferrant . . . I mean, hmm . . . my lord instigator . . .'

Ferrant de Lettenhove approached alone, gesturing to his servants to remain in the street.

'Julian. Lord Rivia. I come with tidings.'

'I don't deny that I'm getting impatient,' responded Geralt. 'How did the criminals testify? The ones who attacked me yesterday, exploiting the fact that I was unarmed? They spoke of it quite loudly and openly. It's proof they had a hand in the theft of my swords.'

'There is no evidence of that, unfortunately.' The instigator shrugged. 'The three prisoners are typical rapscallions and on top of that, slow-witted. They carried out the assault, it's true, emboldened by your not having a weapon. Rumours about the theft spread incredibly swiftly, thanks, it would seem, to the ladies from the guardhouse. And at once there were willing people . . . Which is

actually not too surprising. You aren't especially liked . . . Nor do you seek to be liked or popular. When in custody, you committed an assault on your fellow prisoners . . .'

'That's right.' The Witcher nodded. 'It's all my fault. Yesterday's assailants also sustained injuries. Didn't they complain? Didn't ask for compensation?'

Dandelion laughed, but fell silent at once.

'The witnesses to yesterday's incident,' said Ferrant de Lettenhove tartly, 'testified that the three men were thrashed with a cooper's stave. And beaten extremely severely. So severely that one of them . . . soiled himself.'

'Probably from excitement.'

'They were beaten even after being incapacitated and no longer posing a threat.' The instigator's expression didn't change. 'Meaning that the limits of necessary defence were exceeded.'

'I'm not worried. I have a good lawyer.'

'A sardine, perhaps?' Dandelion interrupted the heavy silence.

'I inform you that the investigation is under way,' the instigator finally said. 'The men arrested yesterday are not mixed up in the theft of the swords. Several people who may have participated in the crime have been questioned, but no evidence has been found. Informers were unable to indicate any leads. It is known though – and this is the main reason I am here – that the rumour about the swords has stirred up a commotion in the local underworld. Even strangers have appeared, keen to square up to a witcher, particularly an unarmed one. I thus recommend vigilance. I cannot exclude further incidents. I'm also certain, Julian, that in this situation to accompany the Lord Rivia—'

'I have accompanied Geralt in much more hazardous places; in predicaments that the local hoodlums could not imagine,' the troubadour interrupted combatively. 'Provide us with an armed escort, cousin, if you regard it as appropriate. Let it act as a deterrent. Otherwise, when Geralt and I give the next bunch of dregs a good hiding, they'll be bellyaching about the limits of the necessary defence being overstepped.'

'If they are indeed dregs and not paid hitmen, hired by someone,' said Geralt. 'Is the investigation also paying attention to that?'

‘All eventualities are being taken into consideration.’ Ferrant de Lettenhove cut him off. ‘The investigation will continue. I shall assign an escort.’

‘We’re grateful.’

‘Farewell. I wish you good luck.’

Seagulls screeched above the city’s rooftops.

*

They might just as well not have bothered with the visit to the armourer. All Geralt needed was a glance over the swords on offer. When, though, he found out the prices he shrugged and exited the shop without a word.

‘I thought we understood each other.’ Dandelion joined him in the street. ‘You were supposed to buy any old thing, so as not to look unarmed!’

‘I won’t throw away money on any old thing. Even if it’s your money. That was junk, Dandelion. Primitive, mass-produced swords. And little decorative rapiers for courtiers, fit for a masked ball, if you mean to dress up as a swordsman. And priced to make you burst out in insane laughter.’

‘We’ll find another shop! Or workshop!’

‘It’ll be the same everywhere. There’s a market for cheap, poor-quality weapons that are meant to serve in one decent brawl. And not to serve the victors, either, for when they’re collected from the battlefield they’re already useless. And there’s a market for shiny ornaments that dandies can parade with. And which you can’t even slice a sausage with. Unless it’s liver sausage.’

‘You’re exaggerating, as usual.’

‘Coming from you that’s a compliment.’

‘It wasn’t intended! So where, pray tell me, do we get a good sword? No worse than the ones that were stolen? Or better?’

‘There exist, to be sure, masters of the swordsmith’s art. Perhaps one of them might even have a decent blade in stock. But I have to have a sword that’s fitted to my hand. Forged and finished to order. And that takes a few months or even a year. I don’t have

that much time.'

'But you have to get yourself some sort of sword,' the bard observed soberly. 'And pretty urgently, I'd say. What's left? Perhaps . . .'

He lowered his voice and looked around.

'Perhaps . . . Perhaps Kaer Morhen? There are sure to be—'

'Certainly,' Geralt interrupted, clenching his jaw. 'To be sure. There are still enough blades, a wide choice, including silver ones. But it's too far away, and barely a day goes by without a storm and a downpour. The rivers are swollen and the roads softened. The ride would take me a month. Apart from that—'

He angrily kicked a tattered punnet someone had thrown away.

'I was robbed, Dandelion, outwitted and robbed like a complete sucker. Vesemir would mock me mercilessly. My comrades – if I happened upon them in the Keep – would also have fun, they'd rib me for years. No. It's out of the bloody question. I have to sort this out some other way. And by myself.'

They heard a pipe and a drum. They entered a small square, where the vegetable market was taking place and a group of goliards were performing. It was the morning repertoire, meaning primitively stupid and not at all amusing. Dandelion walked among the stalls, where with admirable – and astonishing – expertise he immediately took up the assessment and tasting of the cucumbers, beetroots and apples displayed on the counters, all the while bantering and flirting with the market traders.

'Sauerkraut!' he declared, scooping some from a barrel using wooden tongs. 'Try it, Geralt. Excellent, isn't it? It's a tasty and salutary thing, cabbage like this. In winter, when vitamins are lacking, it protects one from scurvy. It is, furthermore, a splendid antidepressant.'

'How so?'

'You eat a big pot of sauerkraut, drink a jug of sour milk . . . and soon afterwards depression becomes the least of your worries. You forget about depression. Sometimes for a long time. Who are you staring at? Who's that girl?'

'An acquaintance. Wait here. I'll have a brief word with her and I'll be back.'

The girl he'd spotted was Mozaïk, whom he'd met at Lytta Neyd's. The sorceress's shy pupil with the slicked-down hair in a modest, though elegant dress the colour of rosewood. And cork wedge-heeled shoes in which she moved quite gracefully, bearing in mind the slippery vegetable scraps covering the uneven cobbled street.

He approached, surprising her by a stall of tomatoes as she filled a basket hanging from the crook of her arm.

'Greetings.'

She blanched slightly on seeing him, despite her already pale complexion. And had it not been for the stall she would have taken a step or two back. She made a movement as though trying to hide the basket behind her back. No, not the basket. Her hand. She was hiding her forearm and hand, which were tightly wrapped up in a silk scarf. He noticed her behaviour and an inexplicable impulse made him take action. He grabbed the girl's hand.

'Let go,' she whispered, trying to break free.

'Show me. I insist.'

'Not here . . .'

She let him lead her away from the market to somewhere they could be alone. He unwound the scarf. And couldn't contain himself. He swore. Crudely, and at great length.

The girl's left hand was turned over. Twisted at the wrist. The thumb stuck out to the left, the back of her hand was facing downwards. And the palm upwards. A long, regular life-line, he noticed involuntarily. The heart-line was distinct, but dotted and broken.

'Who did that to you? Did she?'

'You did.'

'What?'

'You did!' She jerked her hand away. 'You used me to make a fool of her. She doesn't let something like that slide.'

'I couldn't—'

'—have predicted it?' She looked him in the eyes. He had misjudged her – she was neither timid, nor anxious. 'You could and should have. But you preferred to play with fire. Was it worth it, though? Did it give you satisfaction, make you feel better? Give you

something to boast about to your friends in the tavern?'

He didn't answer. He couldn't find the words. But Mozaïk, to his astonishment, suddenly smiled.

'I don't bear a grudge,' she said easily. 'Your game amused me and I'd have laughed if I hadn't been afraid. Give me back the basket, I'm in a hurry. I still have shopping to do. And I've got an appointment at the alchemist's—'

'Wait. You can't leave it like that.'

'Please.' Mozaïk's voice changed slightly. 'Don't get involved. You'll only make it worse . . . I got away with it, anyway,' she added a moment later. 'She treated me leniently.'

'Leniently?'

'She might have turned both my hands over. She might have twisted my foot around, heel facing forward. She might have swapped my feet over, left to right and vice versa. I've seen her do that to somebody.'

'Did it—?'

'—hurt? Briefly. Because I passed out almost at once. Why are you staring like that? That's how it was. I hope it'll be the same when she twists my hand back again. In a few days, after she's enjoyed her revenge.'

'I'm going to see her. Right away.'

'Bad idea. You can't—'

He interrupted her with a rapid gesture. He heard the crowd buzzing and saw it disperse. The goliards had stopped playing. He saw Dandelion at a distance, giving him sudden and desperate signals.

'You! Witcher filth! I challenge you to a duel! We shall fight!'

'Dammit. Move aside, Mozaïk.'

A short and stocky character in a leather mask and a cuirass of boiled oxhide stepped out of the crowd. The character shook the trident he was holding and with a sudden movement of his left hand unfurled a fishing net in the air, flourished and shook it.

'I am Tonton Zroga, known as the Retiarius! I challenge you to a fight, wi—'

Geralt raised his hand and struck him with the Aard Sign,

putting as much power into it as he could. The crowd yelled. Tonton Zroga, known as the Retiarius, flew into the air and – entangled in his own net and kicking his legs – wiped out a bagel stall, crashed heavily onto the ground and, with a loud clank, slammed his head against a small cast-iron statue of a squatting gnome, which for no apparent reason stood in front of a shop offering haberdashery. The goliards rewarded the flight with thunderous applause. The Retiarius lay on the ground, alive, but displaying fairly feeble signs of consciousness. Geralt, not hurrying, walked over and kicked him hard in the region of the liver. Someone seized him by the sleeve. It was Mozaïk.

‘No. Please. Please, don’t. You can’t do that.’

Geralt would have continued kicking the net-fighter, because he knew quite well what you can’t do, what you can, and what you must do. And he wasn’t in the habit of heeding anyone in such matters. Especially people who had never been beaten up.

‘Please,’ Mozaïk repeated. ‘Don’t take it out on him. For me. Because of her. And because you’ve mixed everything up.’

He did as she asked. Then took her by the arms. And looked her in the eyes.

‘I’m going to see your mistress,’ he declared firmly.

‘That’s not good.’ She shook her head. ‘There’ll be consequences.’

‘For you?’

‘No. Not for me.’

CHAPTER SEVEN

The sorceress's hip was graced by an intricate tattoo with fabulously colourful details, depicting a fish with coloured stripes.

Nil admirari, thought the Witcher. *Nil admirari*.

*

'I don't believe my eyes,' said Lytta Neyd.

He – and he alone – was to blame for what happened and for it happening as it happened. On the way to the sorceress's villa he passed a garden and couldn't resist the temptation of picking a freesia from a flower bed. He remembered it being the predominant scent of her perfume.

'I don't believe my eyes,' said Lytta Neyd. She greeted him in person; the burly porter wasn't there. Perhaps it was his day off.

'You've come, I guess, to give me a dressing down for Mozaïk's hand. And you've brought me a flower. A white freesia. Come in before there's a sensation and the city explodes with rumours. A man on my threshold with a flower! This never happens.'

She was wearing a loose-fitting black dress, a combination of silk and chiffon, very sheer, and rippling with every movement of the air. The Witcher stood, staring, the freesia still in his outstretched hand, wanting to smile and not for all the world able to. *Nil admirari*. He repeated in his head the maxim he remembered from a cartouche over the entrance to the Philosophy Faculty of the University of Oxenfurt. He had been repeating it all the way to Lytta's villa.

'Don't shout at me.' She snatched the freesia from his fingers. 'I'll fix the girl's hand as soon as she appears. Painlessly. I'll possibly even apologise to her. I apologise to you. Just don't shout at me.'

He shook his head, trying not to smile again. Unsuccessfully.

'I wonder—' she brought the freesia up to her face and fixed her jade-coloured eyes on it '—if you know the symbolism of flowers? And their secret language? Do you know what this freesia

is saying, and therefore you're communicating it to me quite consciously? Or perhaps the flower is purely accidental, and the message . . . subconscious?'

Nil admirari.

'But it's meaningless anyway.' She came up to him, very close. 'For either you're openly, consciously and calculatingly signalling to me what you desire . . . Or you're concealing the desire your subconscious is betraying. In both cases I owe you thanks. For the flower. And for what it says. Thank you. And I'll return the favour. I'll also present you with something. There, that drawstring. Pull it. Don't be shy.'

That's what I do best, he thought as he pulled. The woven drawstring slid smoothly from embroidered holes. All the way. And then the silk and chiffon dress flowed from Lytta like water, gathering itself around her ankles ever so softly. He closed his eyes for a moment, her nakedness dazzling him like a sudden flash of light. *What am I doing?* he thought, putting his arm around her neck. *What am I doing?* he thought, tasting the coral-red lipstick on his mouth. *What I'm doing is completely senseless*, he thought, gently leading her towards a bureau by the patio and placing her on the malachite top.

She smelled of freesias and apricots. And something else. Tangerines, perhaps. Lemon grass, perhaps.

It lasted some time and towards the end, the bureau was rocking quite violently. Coral, although she was gripping him tight, didn't once release the freesia from her fingers. The flower's fragrance didn't suppress hers.

'Your enthusiasm is flattering.' She pulled her mouth away from his and opened her eyes. 'And very complimentary. But I do have a bed, you know.'

*

Indeed, she did have a bed. An enormous one. As large as the deck of a frigate. She led him there, and he followed her, unable to take his eyes off her. She didn't look back. She had no doubt that he was following her. That he would go without hesitation where she led

him. Without ever taking his eyes off her.

The bed was huge and had a canopy. The bed linen was of silk and the sheets of satin.

It's no exaggeration to say they made use of the entire bed, of every single inch. Every inch of the bed linen. And every fold of the sheets.

*

'Lytta . . .'

'You may call me Coral. But for the time being don't say anything.'

Nil admirari. The scent of freesias and apricots. Her red hair strewn across the pillow.

*

'Lytta . . .'

'You may call me Coral. And you may do that to me again.'

*

The sorceress's hip was graced by an intricate tattoo with fabulously colourful details, depicting a fish with coloured stripes, its large fins giving it a triangular shape. Fish like that – called angelfish – were usually kept in aquariums and basins by wealthy people and the snobbish *nouveaux riches*. So Geralt – and he wasn't the only one – had always associated them with snobbism and pretentious ostentation. Thus, it astonished him that Coral had chosen that particular tattoo. The astonishment lasted a moment and the explanation came quickly. Lytta Neyd both looked and seemed quite young. But the tattoo dated back to the years of her real youth. From the times when angelfish brought from abroad were indeed a rare attraction, when there were few wealthy people, when the *nouveaux riches* were still making their fortunes and few

could afford an aquarium. *So her tattoo is like a birth certificate*, thought Geralt, caressing the angelfish with his fingertips. *It's a wonder Lytta still has it, rather than magically removing it. Why*, he thought, shifting his caresses to regions some distance from the fish, *a memory from one's youth is a lovely thing. It's not easy to get rid of such a memento. Even if now it's passé and pompously banal.*

He raised himself on an elbow and took a closer look, searching her body for other – equally nostalgic – mementos. He didn't find any. He didn't expect to; he simply wanted to look. Coral sighed. Clearly bored by the abstract – and not very purposeful – peregrinations of his hand, she seized it and decisively directed it to a specific place; in her opinion the only suitable one. *Good for you*, thought Geralt, pulling the sorceress towards him and burying his face in her hair. Fiddlesticks to stripy fish. As though there weren't more vital things worth devoting one's attention to. Or worth thinking about.

*

Perhaps model sailing ships too, thought Coral chaotically, trying hard to control her rapid breathing. *Perhaps military figures too, perhaps fly-fishing. But what counts . . . What really counts . . . Is the way he holds me.*

Geralt embraced her. As though she were all the world to him.

*

They didn't get much sleep the first night. And even when Lytta dropped off, the Witcher found it difficult. Her arm was girdling his waist so tightly he found it hard to breathe and her leg was thrown across his thighs.

The second night she was less possessive. She didn't hold him or hug him as tightly as before. By then she'd stopped fearing he'd run away before dawn.

*

‘You’re pensive. You have a gloomy, male expression. The reason?’

‘I’m wondering about the . . . hmm . . . naturalism of our relationship.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘As I said. Naturalism.’

‘It seems you used the word “relationship”? The semantic capacity of that concept is indeed astonishing. Furthermore, I hear post-coital tristesse intruding on you. A natural state, indeed, it affects all the higher creatures. A strange little tear has come to my eye too, Witcher . . . Cheer up, cheer up. I’m joking.’

‘You lured me . . . As a buck is lured.’

‘What?’

‘You lured me. Like an insect. With magical freesia-and-apricot pheromones.’

‘Are you serious?’

‘Don’t get cross. Please, Coral.’

‘I’m not. Quite the opposite. On second thoughts, I have to admit you’re right. Yes, it’s naturalism in its purest form. Except it’s utterly the reverse. It was you who beguiled and seduced me. At first sight. You naturalistically and animalistically treated me to a male courtship display. You hopped, stamped and fluffed up your tail—’

‘That’s not true.’

‘—fluffed up your tail and flapped your wings like a blackcock. You crowed and clucked—’

‘No, I didn’t.’

‘Yes, you did.’

‘Didn’t.’

‘Did. Embrace me.’

*

‘Coral?’

‘What?’

‘Lytta Neyd . . . That isn’t your real name, is it?’

‘My real one was troublesome.’

‘Why so?’

‘Try saying quickly: Astrid Lyttneyd Ásgeirrfinnbjornsdottir.’

‘I get it.’

‘I doubt you do.’

*

‘Coral?’

‘Uh-huh?’

‘And Mozaïk? Where did she get her nickname?’

‘Know what I don’t like, Witcher? Questions about other women. And particularly when the enquirer is lying in bed with me. And asks a lot of questions, instead of concentrating on the matter in hand. You wouldn’t dare doing anything like that if you were in bed with Yennefer.’

‘And *I* don’t like certain names being mentioned either. Especially when—’

‘Shall I stop?’

‘I didn’t say that.’

Coral kissed his arm.

‘When she arrived at school her given name was Aïk. I don’t remember her family name. Not only did she have a strange name, but she suffered from loss of skin pigment. Her cheeks were dotted with pale spots, she indeed looked like a mosaic. She was cured, naturally, after the first semester, for a sorceress cannot have any blemishes. But the spiteful nickname stuck. And quickly stopped being spiteful. She grew to like it herself. But enough of her. Talk to me and about me. Go on, right now.’

‘What, right now?’

‘Talk about me. What I’m like. Beautiful, aren’t I? Go on, say it!’

‘Beautiful. Red-haired. And freckled.’

‘I’m not freckled. I magically removed them.’

‘Not all. You forgot about some of them. But I found them.’

‘Where are . . . Oh. Well, all right. True. So, I’m freckled. And what else am I?’

‘Sweet.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Sweet. As a honey wafer.’

‘You aren’t making fun of me, are you?’

‘Look at me. Into my eyes. Do you see even the slightest insincerity in them?’

‘No. And that’s what worries me most.’

*

‘Sit down on the edge of the bed.’

‘Or else?’

‘I want to get my own back.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘For the freckles you found where you found them. For your efforts and the thorough . . . exploration. I want to get my own back and repay you. May I?’

‘By all means.’

*

The sorceress’s villa, like almost all the villas in that part of the city, had a terrace with a view of the sea stretching out below. Lytta liked to sit there and spend hours observing the ships riding at anchor, using a telescope of hefty proportions on a tripod. Geralt didn’t really share her fascination with the sea and what sailed on it, but liked to accompany her on the terrace. He sat close, right behind her, with his face beside her red curls, enjoying the scent of freesias and apricots.

‘That galleon, casting its anchor, look—’ Coral pointed ‘—with the blue cross on its flag. That’s the *Pride of Cintra*. It’s probably sailing to Kovir. And that cog is *Alke* from Cidaris, probably taking on a cargo of hides. And over there, that’s *Tetyda*, a hulk from here, four hundred tons’ capacity, a freighter, plying between Kerack and Nastróg. And there, see, the Novigradian schooner *Pandora Parvi* sailing to anchor right now. It’s a beautiful, beautiful ship. Look into the eyepiece. You’ll see it . . .’

‘I can see without a telescope. I’m a mutant.’

‘Oh, true. I’d forgotten. And over there is the galley *Fuchsia*, thirty-two oars, it can take a cargo of eight hundred tons. And that elegant three-mast galleon is *Vertigo*; it sailed from Lan Exeter. And there, in the distance, with the amaranth flag, is the Redanian galleon *Albatross*. Three masts, a hundred and twenty feet in the beam . . . There, look, look, the post clipper *Echo* is setting sail and putting out to sea. I know the captain, he eats at Ravenga’s when he anchors here. There again, look, a galleon from Poviss under full sail . . .’

The Witcher brushed Lytta’s hair from her back. Slowly, one by one, he unfastened the hooks and eyes and slid the dress from the sorceress’s shoulders. After that he utterly devoted his hands and attention to a pair of galleons under full sail. Galleons one would search for in vain on all the maritime routes, harbours, ports and registers of the admiralty.

Lytta didn’t protest. And didn’t take her eyes away from the telescope’s eyepiece.

‘You’re behaving like a fifteen-year-old,’ she said at one point. ‘As if you’ve never seen breasts before.’

‘It’s always the first time for me,’ he reluctantly confessed. ‘And I never really was fifteen.’

*

‘I come from Skellige,’ she told him later, in bed. ‘The sea’s in my blood. And I love it.’

‘I dream of sailing away one day,’ she continued, when he remained silent. ‘All alone. Set sail and put out to sea . . . Far, far away. All the way to the horizon. Only water and sky all around.

The salt foam splashes me, the wind tugs my hair in an utterly male caress. And I'm alone, completely alone, endlessly alone among the strange and hostile elements. Solitude amid a sea of strangeness. Don't you dream of that?'

No, I don't, he thought. *I have it every day.*

*

The summer solstice arrived, and after it a magical night, the shortest of the year, when the flower of the fern bloomed in the forest and naked girls, rubbed with adder's-tongue fern, danced in dew-sprinkled clearings.

A night as short as the blink of an eye.

A wild night, bright from lightning.

*

He awoke alone in the morning after the solstice. Breakfast was waiting for him in the kitchen. And not just breakfast.

'Good morning, Mozaïk. Beautiful weather, isn't it? Where's Lytta?'

'You have a day off,' she replied without looking at him. 'My unparalleled mistress will be busy. Until late. During the time she devoted to . . . pleasure, the list of patients grew.'

'Patients?'

'She treats infertility. And other women's disorders. Didn't you know? Well, now you do. Good day.'

'Don't go out yet. I'd like to—'

'I don't know what you'd like to do,' she interrupted. 'But it's probably a bad idea. It'd be better if you didn't talk to me. Pretend I wasn't here at all.'

'Coral won't harm you any more, I give my word. In any case, she's not here, she can't see us.'

'She sees everything she wants to see; all she needs is a few spells and an artefact. And don't kid yourself that you have any

influence on her. That requires more than . . .' She nodded towards the bedroom. 'Please, don't mention my name in her presence. Not even casually. Because she won't let me forget it. Even if it takes a year, she'll remind me.'

'Since she treats you like that . . . can't you simply go?'

'Go where?' she said crossly. 'To a weaving manufactory? To serve time with a seamstress. Or head at once to a brothel? I don't have anyone. I'm a nobody. And I'll always be a nobody. Only she can change that. I can endure it all . . . But please don't make it any worse.

'I met your pal in town.' She glanced at him a moment later. 'That poet, Dandelion. He asked about you. He was anxious.'

'Did you calm him down? Explain I was safe? In no danger?'

'Why should I lie?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'You aren't safe here. You're here with her out of sorrow for the other one. Even when you're close to her you only think about the other one. She knows it. But she plays along, because it pleases her, and you dissemble splendidly; you're awfully convincing. Have you thought about what will happen when you give yourself away?'

*

'Are you staying with her tonight, too?'

'Yes,' Geralt confirmed.

'That'll be a week, did you know?'

'Four days.'

Dandelion strummed the strings of his lute with a dramatic glissando. He looked around the tavern. He swigged from his mug and wiped the froth from his nose.

'I know it's not my business,' he said, for him unusually emphatically and forcefully. 'I know I shouldn't meddle. I know you don't like it when anyone meddles. But certain things, Geralt, my friend, ought not to be left unsaid. Coral, if you want to know my opinion, is one of those women who ought to always wear a conspicuous warning sign. One proclaiming "Look but don't touch".

In menageries, they put things like that in terrariums containing rattlesnakes.'

'I know.'

'She's playing with you and toying with you.'

'I know.'

'You, meanwhile, are simply filling the void after Yennefer, whom you can't forget about.'

'I know.'

'So why—?'

'I don't know.'

*

They would go out in the evening. Sometimes to the park, sometimes to the hill overlooking the port. Sometimes they simply walked around the Spice Market.

They visited the Natura Rerum osteria together. Several times. Febus Ravenga was beside himself with joy. On his orders, the waiters danced attendance on them. Geralt finally experienced the taste of turbot in cuttlefish ink. And then goose legs in white wine and veal shank with vegetables. Only at first – and briefly – did the intrusive and ostentatious interest of the other guests bother him. Then he followed Lytta's example and ignored them. The wine from the local cellar helped greatly.

Then they returned to the villa. Coral shed her dress in the anterooms and led him – quite naked – to the bedroom.

He followed her. His eyes never left her. He adored looking at her.

*

'Coral?'

'What?'

'Rumour has it you can always see what you want to see. All

you need is a few spells and an artefact.'

'I think I'll have to twist another of that rumour's joints again.' She lifted herself up on an elbow and looked him in the eyes. 'That ought to teach it not to gossip.'

'Please—'

'I was joking.' She cut him off. There wasn't a trace of merriment in her voice.

'And what would you like to see?' she continued, after he had fallen silent, 'Or have prophesied? How long you're going to live? When and how you'll die? What horse will win the Grand Tretorian? Who the electoral college will elect as the Hierarch of Novigrad? Who Yennefer is with now?'

'Lytta.'

'What's bothering you, if I may ask?'

He told her about the theft of the swords.

*

There was a flash of lightning. And a moment later, a peal of thunder.

The fountain splashed very softly. The basin smelt of wet stone. The marble girl was petrified, wet and shining, in her dancing position.

'The statue and the fountain,' Coral hurried to explain, 'aren't there to satisfy my love for pretentious kitsch, nor are they an expression of subservience to snobbish fashions. They serve more concrete ends. The statue portrays me. In miniature. When I was fifteen.'

'Who would have supposed then that you would develop so prettily?'

'It's a magical artefact powerfully linked to me. While the fountain, or more precisely the water, serves for divination. You know, I think, what divination is?'

'Vaguely.'

'The theft of your weapons took place around ten days ago.

Oneiromancy is the best and most certain way of interpreting and analysing past events, even very distant ones, but the rare talent of dream-reading, which I don't possess, is necessary for that. Sortilege, or cleromancy, won't really help us; likewise, pyromancy and aeromancy, which are more effective in the case of foretelling people's fates, on condition that one has something belonging to those people . . . hair, fingernails, a fragment of clothing or something similar. They can't be used with objects – in our case, swords.

'And so all that remains to us is divination.' Lytta brushed a red lock from her forehead. 'That, as you probably know, lets one see and predict future events. The elements will assist us, for a truly stormy season has set in. We shall combine divination with ceraunoscopy. Come closer. Grasp my hand and don't release it. Lean over and look into the water, but don't touch it under any circumstances. Concentrate. Think about your swords! Think hard about them!'

He heard her chanting a spell. The water in the basin reacted, foaming and rippling more powerfully with every sentence of the formula being uttered. Large bubbles began to rise from the bottom.

The water became smooth and cloudy. And then completely clear.

Dark, violet eyes look out from the depths. Raven-black locks fall onto shoulders in cascades, gleam, reflect light like a peacock's feathers, writhing and rippling with every movement . . .

'The swords,' Coral reminded him, quietly and scathingly. 'You were supposed to be thinking about the swords.'

The water swirled, the black-haired, violet-eyed woman disappeared in the vortex. Geralt sighed softly.

'Think about the swords,' hissed Lytta. 'Not her!'

She chanted a spell in another flash of lightning. The statue in the fountain lit up milkily, and the water again calmed and became transparent. And then he saw.

His sword. Hands touching it. Rings on fingers.

. . . made from a meteorite. The superb balance, the weight of the blade precisely equal to the weight of the hilt . . .

The other sword. Silver. The same hands.

. . . a steel tang edged with silver . . . Runic characters along

the entire length . . .

‘I can see them,’ he whispered aloud, squeezing Lytta’s hand. ‘I can see my swords . . . Really—’

‘Quiet.’ She responded with an even stronger grip. ‘Be quiet and concentrate.’

The swords vanish. Instead of them he sees a black forest. An expanse of stones. Rocks. One of the rocks is immense, towering, tall and slender . . . Carved into a bizarre shape by strong winds. . .

The water foamed briefly.

A grizzled man with noble features, in a black velvet jacket and a gold-brocaded waistcoat, both hands resting on a mahogany lectern. Lot number ten*, he declares loudly.* An absolute curio, an exceptional find, two witcher swords . . .

A large, black cat turns around on the spot, trying hard with its paw to reach the medallion on a chain swinging above it. Enamel on the medallion’s golden oval, a blue dolphin naiant.

A river flows among trees, beneath a canopy of branches and boughs hanging over the water. A woman in a long, close-fitting dress stands motionless on one of the boughs.

The water foams briefly and almost immediately becomes calm again.

He saw a sea of grass: a boundless plain reaching to the horizon. He saw it from above, as though from a bird’s-eye view . . . Or from the top of a hill. A hill, down whose slopes descend a row of vague shapes. When they turned their heads, he saw unmoving faces, unseeing, dead eyes. *They’re dead*, he suddenly realised. *It’s a cortège of the dead . . .*

Lytta’s fingers squeezed his hand again. With the strength of pliers.

A flash of lightning. A sudden gust of wind tugged at their hair. The water in the basin churned up, seethed, surged with foam, rose in a wave as high as the wall. And tumbled straight down on them. They both leaped back from the fountain. Coral stumbled and he held her up. Thunder boomed.

The sorceress screamed a spell and waved an arm. Lights came on throughout the house.

The water in the basin, a moment earlier a seething

maelstrom, was smooth, calm, only being moved by the languidly trickling stream of the fountain. Even though a moment earlier a veritable tidal wave had poured over them, there wasn't a single drop of water to be seen.

Geralt breathed out heavily. And stood up.

'Right at the end . . .' he muttered, helping the sorceress to stand up. 'That last image . . . The hill and that procession . . . of people . . . I didn't recognise it . . . I've no idea what it could be . . .'

'Neither do I,' she answered in an uneasy voice. 'But it wasn't your vision. That image was meant for me. I have no idea what it could mean either. But I have a strange feeling there's nothing good in it.'

The thunder fell silent. The storm moved away. Inland.

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'Charlatanism, all that divination of hers,' repeated Dandelion, adjusting the pegs on his lute. 'Fraudulent visions for the naive. The power of suggestion, nothing more. You were thinking about swords, so you saw swords. What else do you think you saw? A march of corpses? A terrible wave? A rock with a bizarre shape? Meaning what?'

'Something like a huge key.' The Witcher pondered. 'Or a two-and-a-half heraldic cross . . .'

The troubadour fell into pensive mood. And then dipped his finger into his beer. And drew something on the table top.

'Similar to that?'

'Oh. Very similar.'

'Damn!' Dandelion plucked the strings, attracting the attention of the entire tavern. 'And blast! Ha-ha, Geralt, my friend! How many times have you got me out of trouble? How many times have you helped me? Rendered me a favour? Without even counting them! Well, now it's my turn. Perhaps I'll help you recover your famed weapons.'

'Eh?'

Dandelion stood up.

‘Madam Lytta Neyd, your newest conquest, unto whom I hereby return her honour as an outstanding diviner and unrivalled clairvoyant, has indicated – in her divination – a place I know. In an obvious, clear way, leaving no room for doubt. We’re going to see Ferrant. At once. He’ll have to arrange an audience for us, using his shadowy connections. And issue you with a pass to leave the city, by the official gate, in order to avoid a confrontation with those harpies from the guardhouse. We’re going on a little outing. And actually not too far from here.’

‘Where to?’

‘I recognised the rock in your vision. Something experts call a mogote. And local residents the “Gryphon”. A distinctive point, simply a signpost leading to the home of the person who may in fact know something about your swords. The place we’re heading for bears the name Ravelin. Does that ring a bell?’

It is not only the execution and the excellence of the craft that determine the quality of a witcher's sword. As with mysterious elven or gnomish blades, whose secret has been lost, the mysterious power of a witcher's sword is bound to the hand and skill of the witcher wielding it. And, forsooth, owing to that magic's mysteries it is greatly potent against the Dark Powers.

Pandolfo Forteguerra, *A Treatise on Edged Weapons*

I shall reveal one secret to you. About witcher swords. It's poppycock that they have some kind of secret power. And that they are supposedly wonderful weapons. That there are no better ones. It's all fiction, invented for the sake of appearances. I know this from a quite certain source.

Dandelion, *Half a Century of Poetry*

CHAPTER EIGHT

They recognised the rock called the Gryphon at once. It was visible a long way off.

*

The place they were aiming for was located more or less halfway along the route from Kerack to Cidaris, some way from the road linking the two cities which wound among forests and rocky wildernesses. The journey took them some time; time they killed with idle chatter. Mainly contributed by Dandelion.

‘Common knowledge claims that swords used by witchers have magical properties,’ said the poet. ‘Passing over the fabrications about sexual impotence, there must be some truth in it. Your swords aren’t ordinary. Would you like to comment?’

Geralt reined in his mare. Bored by the protracted stay in the stables, Roach’s urge to gallop was growing.

‘Yes, I would. Our swords aren’t ordinary swords.’

‘It’s claimed that the magical power of your witcher weaponry, fatal to the monsters you fight, resides in the steel from which they are forged,’ said Dandelion, pretending not to hear the mockery. ‘From the very metal, that is the ores found in meteorites fallen from the sky. How so? Meteorites aren’t magical, after all, they’re a natural phenomenon, accounted for by science. Where’s that magic to come from?’

Geralt looked at the sky darkening from the north. It looked like another storm was gathering. And that they could expect a soaking.

‘As far as I recall,’ he said, answering a question with a question, ‘you have studied all seven liberal arts?’

‘And I graduated *summa cum laude.*’

‘You attended the lectures of Professor Lindenbrog as part of the astronomy course within the Quadrivium?’

‘Old Lindenbrog, known as Fiddle-Faddle?’ laughed Dandelion. ‘Why of course! I can still see him scratching his backside and tapping his pointer on maps and globes, wittering on monotonously. *De sphaera mundi*, errr, *subdividitur* into four Elementary Parts. The Earthly Part, the Aqueous, the Aerial and the Igneous. Earth and Water form the globe, which is surrounded on all sides, errr, by Air, or *Aer*. Over the Air, errr, stretches the *Aether*, Fiery Air or Fire. Above the Fire, meanwhile, are the Subtle Sidereal Heavens, known as the *Firmamentum*, which is spherical in character. On that is located the *Errant Siderea*, or wandering stars, and *Fixa Siderea*, or fixed stars . . .’

‘I don’t know what to admire more; your talent for mimicry or your memory,’ Geralt snorted. ‘Returning, meanwhile, to the issue of interest to us: meteorites, which our good Fiddle-Faddle termed falling stars, *Siderea Cadens*, or something like that, break off from the firmament and fall downwards, to burrow into our good old earth. Along the way, meanwhile, they penetrate all the other planes, that is the elemental planes, as well as the para-elemental planes, for such are also said to exist. The elements and para-elements are imbued, as is known, with powerful energy, the source of all magic and supernatural force, and the meteorite penetrating them absorbs and retains that energy. Steel smelted from a meteorite – and also blades forged from such steel – contains a great deal of such elements. It’s magical. The entire sword is magical. *Quod erat demonstrandum*. Do you understand?’

‘Certainly.’

‘So forget it. Because it’s poppycock.’

‘What?’

‘Poppycock. Fabrication. You don’t find meteorites under every bush. More than half the swords used by witchers were made from steel from magnetic ores. I used them myself. They are as good as the ones that fell from the sky when it comes to the siderites penetrating the elements. There is absolutely no difference. But keep it to yourself, Dandelion, please. Don’t tell anyone.’

‘What? I’m to stay silent? You can’t demand that! What’s the point of knowing something if you can’t show off the knowledge?’

‘Please. I’d prefer to be thought of as a supernatural creature armed with a supernatural weapon. They hire me to be that and pay me to be that. Normality, meanwhile, is the same as banality, and banality is cheap. So I ask you to keep your trap shut. Promise?’

‘Have it your way. I promise.’

*

They recognised the rock called the Gryphon at once; it was visible a long way off.

Indeed, with a little imagination, it could be interpreted as a gryphon’s head set on a long neck. However – as Dandelion observed – it more resembled the fingerboard of a lute or another stringed instrument.

The Gryphon, as it turned out, was an inselberg dominating a gigantic crater. The crater – Geralt recalled the story – was called the Elven Fortress, because of its fairly regular shape, which suggested the ruins of an ancient building, with walls, towers, bastions and all the rest. There had never been any fortress there, elven or other. The shapes of the crater were a work of nature – a fascinating work, admittedly.

‘Down there.’ Dandelion pointed, standing up in his stirrups. ‘Do you see? That’s our destination. Ravelin.’

And the name was particularly apt, as the inselberg described the astonishingly regular shape of a large triangle, extending out from the Elven Fortress like a bastion. A building resembling a fort rose up inside the triangle. Surrounded by something like a walled, fortified camp.

Geralt recalled the rumours circulating about Ravelin. And about the person who dwelt there.

They turned off the road.

There were several entrances beyond the first wall, all guarded by sentries armed to the teeth, easily identifiable as mercenaries by their multicoloured and diverse apparel. They were stopped at the first guard post. Although Dandelion loudly referred to a previously arranged audience and emphatically stressed his good relations with the commanders, they were ordered to dismount and wait. For quite a long time. Geralt was becoming somewhat impatient, when finally a bruiser resembling a galley slave appeared and told them to follow him. It soon turned out that he was leading them by a circuitous route to the back of the complex, from the centre of which they could hear a hubbub and the sound of music.

They crossed a drawbridge. Just beyond it lay a man, semi-conscious and groping around himself. His face was bloodied and so puffy that his eyes were almost completely hidden beneath the swelling. He was breathing heavily and each breath blew bloody bubbles from his smashed nose. The bruiser leading them didn't pay any attention to the man on the ground, so Geralt and Dandelion pretended not to see anything either. They were in a place where it didn't behove them to display excess curiosity. It was recommended not to stick one's nose into Ravelin's affairs. In Ravelin, so the story went, a nose thus stuck usually parted company with its owner and remained where it had been stuck.

The bruiser led them through a kitchen, where cooks were bustling around hectically. Cauldrons bubbled and Geralt noticed crabs, lobsters and crayfishes cooking in them. Conger eels squirmed in vats, and clams and mussels simmered in large pots. Meat sizzled in huge frying pans. Servants seized trays and bowls full of cooked food to carry them away down corridors.

The next rooms were filled – for a change – with the scent of women's perfume and cosmetics. Over a dozen women in various stages of *déshabillé*, including total undress, were touching up their make-up before a row of mirrors, jabbering away ceaselessly. Here, also, Geralt and Dandelion maintained inscrutable expressions and didn't let their eyes wander inordinately.

In the next room, they were subjected to a thorough body search. The characters carrying this out were severe of appearance, professional of manner and resolute of action. A dagger was confiscated from Geralt. Dandelion, who never carried any weapons, was relieved of a comb and a corkscrew. But – after a moment's thought – he was allowed to keep his lute.

'There are chairs in front of His Excellency,' they were finally instructed. 'Sit down on them. Sit down and do not stand up until His Excellency commands. His Excellency is not to be interrupted when he speaks. You are not to speak until His Excellency gives a sign that you may. And now enter. Through this door.'

'His Excellency?' muttered Geralt.

'He was once a priest,' the poet muttered back. 'But don't worry, he never assumed much of a priestly manner. His subordinates have to address him somehow, and he can't bear to be called "boss". We don't have to use his title.'

When they entered, their way was immediately barred by

something. That something was as big as a mountain and smelled strongly of musk.

'Wotcha, Mikita,' Dandelion greeted the mountain.

The giant addressed as Mikita, clearly the bodyguard of His Excellency the boss, was a half-breed, the result of a cross between an ogre and a dwarf. The result was a bald dwarf with a height of well over seven feet, quite without a neck, sporting a curly beard, with teeth protruding like a wild boar's and arms reaching down to his knees. It was rare to see such a cross: the two species, as could be observed, were quite at variance genetically; something like Mikita couldn't have arisen naturally. It couldn't have happened without the help of extremely powerful magic. Forbidden magic, incidentally. Rumour had it that plenty of sorcerers ignored the ban. Proof of those rumours' veracity was standing before Geralt.

They sat down on two wicker chairs, in accordance with the prevailing protocol. Geralt looked around. Two scantily dressed young women were pleasuring each other on a large chaise longue in the furthest corner of the chamber. Watching them, while feeding a dog at the same time, was a small, inconspicuous, hunched and unremarkable man in a loose, flowery embroidered robe and a fez with a tassel. Having fed the dog the last piece of lobster, the man wiped his hands and turned around.

'Greetings, Dandelion,' he said, sitting down in front of them on something deceptively similar to a throne, though it was made of wicker. 'Good day, Master Geralt of Rivia.'

His Excellency, Pyral Pratt, considered – not without reason – the head of organised crime in the entire region, looked like a retired silk merchant. He wouldn't have looked out of place at a retired silk merchants' picnic and wouldn't have been singled out as an imposter. At least not from a distance. A closer look would have revealed in Pyral Pratt what other silk merchants didn't have. An old, faded scar on his cheekbone: a mark left by a knife. The ugly and ominous grimace of his thin mouth. A pair of bright, yellowish eyes, as unmoving as a python's.

No one broke the silence for a long time. Music drifted in from somewhere outside, and a hubbub could be heard.

'I'm very pleased to see you and greet you both,' Pyral Pratt said finally. An old and unquenched love for cheap, crudely distilled alcohol could clearly be heard in his voice.

‘I’m particularly glad to welcome you, singer.’ His Excellency smiled at Dandelion. ‘We haven’t seen you since my granddaughter’s wedding, which you graced with a performance. And I was just thinking about you, because my next granddaughter is in a hurry to get married. I trust that this time you won’t refuse again, for old time’s sake. Well? Will you sing at the wedding? I won’t have to keep asking you like last time? I won’t be forced to . . . convince you?’

‘I’ll sing, I’ll sing,’ Dandelion, blanching slightly, hurried to assure him.

‘And today you dropped in to ask about my health, I imagine?’ continued Pratt. ‘Well, it’s shitty, this health of mine.’

Dandelion and Geralt made no comment. The ogre-dwarf reeked of musk. Pyral Pratt sighed heavily.

‘I’ve gone down with stomach ulcers and food phobia,’ he announced, ‘so the delights of the table aren’t for me now. I’ve been diagnosed with a sick liver and ordered not to drink. I’ve got a herniated disc, which affects in equal measure both my cervical and lumbar vertebrae and has ruled out hunting and other extreme sports from my pastimes. Medicaments and treatments eat up a great deal of my money, which I formerly used to spend on gambling. My john thomas, admittedly, let’s say, still rises but how much effort it takes to keep it up! The whole thing bores me before it gives me pleasure . . . So what’s left? Eh?’

‘Politics?’

Pyral Pratt laughed so much the tassel on his fez shook.

‘Well done, Dandelion. Apt, as ever. Politics, oh yes, that’s something for me now. At first I wasn’t favourably disposed to the matter. I thought rather to earn a living from harlotry and invest in bawdy houses. I moved among politicians and came to know countless of them. And became convinced it’d be better to give up on whores, for whores at least have their honour and some sort of principles. On the other hand, though, it’s better to govern from the town hall than from a brothel. And one would like to run, if not the country, as they say, then at least the county. The old adage goes, if you can’t beat ’em, join ’em . . .’

He broke off and glanced at the chaise longue, craning his neck.

‘Don’t sham, girls!’ he yelled. ‘Don’t put it on! More gusto!

Hmm . . . Where was I?'

'Politics.'

'Ah yes. But leaving politics aside, you, Witcher, have had your famous swords stolen. Isn't it owing to that matter that I have the honour of welcoming you?'

'For that matter, indeed.'

'Someone stole your swords.' Pratt nodded. 'A painful loss, methinks? Painful, no doubt. And irretrievable. Ha, I've always said that Kerack's crawling with thieves. Give the people there one chance and they'll swipe anything that isn't nailed down, it's well known. And they always carry a crowbar with them in case they chance on anything nailed down.

'The investigation, I trust, continues?' he went on a moment later. 'Ferrant de Lettenhove taking action? Stare truth in the eyes, though, gentlemen. You can't expect miracles from Ferrant. No offence, Dandelion, but your relative would be a better accountant than an investigator. With him it's nothing but books, legal codes, articles, rules. Well, that and evidence, evidence and once again that evidence of his. Like that story about the goat and the cabbage. Know it? They once locked a goat in a barn with a head of cabbage. In the morning, there wasn't a trace of it and the goat was shitting green. But there was no evidence or witnesses, so they dismissed the case, *causa finita*. I wouldn't like to be a prophet of doom, Witcher Geralt, but the case of your swords' theft may end up likewise.'

Geralt didn't comment this time, either.

'The first sword is steel.' Pyral Pratt rubbed his chin with a beringed hand. 'Siderite steel, iron ore from a meteorite. Forged in Mahakam, in the dwarven hammer works. Total length forty and a half inches, the blade alone twenty-seven and one quarter. Splendid balance, the weight of the blade is precisely equal to the weight of the hilt, the entire weapon certainly weighs less than forty ounces. The execution of the hilt and cross guard is simple, but elegant.

'And the second sword, of a similar length and weight, is silver. Partially, of course. A steel tang fitted with silver, also the edges are steel, since pure silver is too soft to be sharpened effectively. On the cross guard and along the entire length of the blade there are runic signs and glyphs considered by my experts indecipherable, but undoubtedly magical.'

‘A precise description.’ Geralt was stony-faced. ‘As though you’d seen the swords.’

‘I have indeed. They were brought to me and I was invited to buy them. The broker representing the interests of the current owner, a person of impeccable reputation and known to me personally, pledged that the swords were acquired legally, that they came from a find in Fen Carn, an ancient necropolis in Sodden. Endless treasures and artefacts have been unearthed in Fen Carn, hence in principle there were no grounds to question the source’s veracity. I had my doubts, though. And didn’t buy the swords. Are you listening to me, Witcher?’

‘I’m hanging on your every word. Waiting for the conclusion. And the details.’

‘The conclusion is as follows: you scratch my back . . . Details cost money. Information has a price tag.’

‘Come on,’ Dandelion said irritably. ‘Our old friendship brought me here, along with a friend in need—’

‘Business is business,’ Pyral Pratt interrupted him. ‘I said, the information I possess has its price. If you want to find something out about the fate of your swords, Witcher from Rivia, you have to pay.’

‘What’s the price on the tag?’

Pratt took out a large gold coin from under his robe and handed it to the ogre-dwarf, who without visible effort snapped it in his fingers, as though it were a biscuit. Geralt shook his head.

‘A pantomime cliché,’ he drawled. ‘You hand me half a coin and someone, someday, perhaps even in a few years, shows up with the other half. And demands that I fulfil his wish. Which I will have to fulfil unconditionally. Nothing doing. If that’s supposed to be the price, no deal. *Causa finita*. Let’s go, Dandelion.’

‘Don’t you care about regaining your swords?’

‘Not *that* much.’

‘I suspected so. But it doesn’t harm to try. I’ll make another offer. This time one you won’t refuse.’

‘Let’s go, Dandelion.’

‘You can leave, but through another door.’ Pratt indicated with his head. ‘That one. After first getting undressed. You leave in

naught but your long johns.'

Geralt thought he was controlling his facial expression. He must have been mistaken, because the ogre-dwarf suddenly yelled in warning and moved towards him, raising a hand and stinking twice as much as before.

'This is some kind of joke,' Dandelion pronounced loudly, as usual bold and mouthy at the Witcher's side. 'You're mocking us, Pyral. Which is why we will now say farewell and leave. And by the same door we came in through. Don't forget who I am! I'm leaving!'

'I don't think so.' Pyral Pratt shook his head. 'You once proved you aren't that clever. But you're too clever to try to leave now.'

In order to emphasise the weight of his boss's words, the ogre-dwarf brandished a clenched fist the size of a watermelon. Geralt said nothing. He'd been observing the giant for a long time, searching for a place sensitive to a kick. Because it looked like a kicking was inevitable.

'Very well.' Pratt appeased his bodyguard with a gesture. 'I'll yield a little, I'll demonstrate goodwill and a desire for compromise. The entire local industrial and commercial elite, financiers, politicians, nobility, clergy, and even an incognito prince, are gathered here. I promised them a show the like of which they've never seen before, and they've certainly never seen a witcher in his smalls. But let it be, I'll yield a tad: you'll go out naked to the waist. In exchange, you'll receive the promised information, right away. Furthermore, as a bonus . . .'

Pyral Pratt picked up a small sheet of paper from the table.

'. . . as a bonus, two hundred Novigradian crowns. For the witcher's pension fund. Here you are, a bearer cheque, on the Giancardis' bank, to be cashed at any branch. What do you say to that?'

'Why do you ask?' Geralt squinted his eyes. 'You made it clear, I understood, that I can't refuse.'

'You understood right. I said it was an offer you can't refuse. But mutually beneficial, methinks.'

'Take the cheque, Dandelion.' Geralt unbuttoned his jacket and took it off. 'Speak, Pratt.'

'Don't do it.' Dandelion blanched even more. 'Unless you know what's on the other side of the door?'

‘Speak, Pratt.’

‘As I mentioned.’ His Excellency lounged on his throne. ‘I declined to purchase the swords from the broker. But because it was, as I’ve already said, a person who is well known to me and trusted, I suggested another, more profitable way of selling them. I advised that their present owner put them up for auction. At the Borsody brothers’ auction house in Novigrad. It’s the biggest and most renowned collectors’ fair. Lovers of rarities, antiques, recherché works of art, unique objects and all kinds of curiosities descend on it from all over the world. In order to come into possession of some kind of marvel for their collections, those cranks bid like madmen. Various exotic peculiarities often go for titanic sums at the Borsody brothers’. Nowhere else are things sold so dearly.’

‘Speak, Pratt.’ The Witcher took off his shirt. ‘I’m listening.’

‘The auction at the Borsodys’ occurs once a quarter. The next one will be held in July, on the fifteenth. The thief will undoubtedly appear there with your swords. With a bit of luck, you’ll manage to get them off him before he puts them up for auction.’

‘And is that all?’

‘That’s plenty.’

‘The identity of the thief? Or the broker—?’

‘I don’t know the thief’s identity,’ Pratt interjected. ‘And I won’t reveal the broker’s. This is business; laws, rules and – no less important than that – customs apply. I’d lose face. I revealed something to you, big enough for what I demand from you. Lead him out into the arena, Mikita. And you come with me, Dandelion, we can watch. What are you waiting for, Witcher?’

‘I’m to go out without a weapon, I understand? Not just bare to the waist, but barehanded too?’

‘I promised my guests something they’d never seen before,’ explained Pratt, slowly, as though to a child. ‘They’ve seen a witcher with a weapon.’

‘Of course.’

He found himself in an arena, on sand, in a circle marked out by posts sunk into the ground, flooded by the flickering light of numerous lanterns hung on iron bars. He could hear shouts, cheers, applause and whistles. He saw faces, open mouths and excited eyes

above the arena.

Something moved opposite him, at the very edge of the arena. And jumped.

Geralt barely managed to arrange his forearms into the Heliotrope Sign. The spell thrust back the attacking beast. The crowd yelled as one.

The two-legged lizard resembled a wyvern, but was smaller, the size of a large Great Dane. Its head, though, was considerably larger than a wyvern's. And it had a much toothier maw. And a much longer tail, tapering to a thin point. The lizard brandished it vigorously, sweeping the sand and lashing the posts. Lowering its head, it leaped at the Witcher again.

Geralt was ready, struck with the Aard Sign and repelled it. But the lizard managed to lash him with the end of its tail. The crowd yelled again. Women squealed. The Witcher felt a ridge as thick as a sausage growing and swelling on his naked shoulder. He knew now why he had been ordered to strip. He also recognised his opponent. It was a vigilosaur, a specially bred, magically mutated lizard, used for guarding and protection. Things looked pretty bad. The vigilosaur treated the arena as though it were its lair. Geralt was thus an intruder to be overpowered. And, if necessary, eliminated.

The vigilosaur circled the arena, rubbing itself against the posts, hissing furiously. And attacked again, swiftly, leaving no time for a Sign. The Witcher dodged nimbly out of range of the toothy jaws, but couldn't avoid being lashed by the tail. He felt another ridge swelling beside the first.

The Heliotrope Sign again blocked the charging vigilosaur. The lizard's tail whistled as it whirled around. Geralt's ear caught a change in the note, hearing it a second before the end of the tail struck him across the back. The pain was blinding and blood ran down his skin. The crowd went crazy.

The Signs weakened. The vigilosaur circled him so fast that the Witcher could barely keep up. He managed to elude two lashes of the tail, but not the third, and was struck again with the sharp edge on the shoulder blade. The blood was now pouring down his back.

The crowd roared; the spectators were bellowing and leaping up and down. One of them leaned far over the balustrade to get a

better view, resting on an iron bar holding a lantern. The bar broke and tumbled down with the lantern onto the arena. It stuck into the sand and the lantern struck the vigilosaur's head, bursting into flames. The lizard threw it off, spraying a cascade of sparks around and hissed, rubbing its head against the piles of the arena. Geralt saw his chance at once. He tore the bar out of the sand, took a short run-up and jumped, thrusting the spike hard into the lizard's skull. It passed straight through. The vigilosaur struggled and, clumsily flapping its forepaws, fought to rid itself of the iron rod penetrating its brain. Hopping unco-ordinatedly, it finally lurched into the posts and sank its teeth into the wood. It thrashed around convulsively for some time, churning the sand with its claws and lashing with its tail. Eventually it stopped moving.

The walls shook with cheers and applause.

Geralt climbed out of the arena up a rope ladder somebody had lowered. The excited spectators crowded around him. A man slapped him on his swollen shoulder, and Geralt barely refrained himself from punching him in the face. A young woman kissed him on the cheek. Another, even younger, wiped the blood from his back with a cambric handkerchief which she immediately unfolded and displayed triumphantly to her friends. Another, much older woman, took a necklace from her wrinkled neck and tried to give it to him. His expression sent her scuttling back into the crowd.

There was a reek of musk and the ogre-dwarf Mikita forced his way through the crowd, like a ship through seaweed. He shielded the Witcher and led him out.

A physician was summoned, who dressed Geralt and stitched up his wounds. Dandelion was very pale. Pyral Pratt was calm. As though nothing had happened. But the Witcher's face must have spoken volumes, as he hurried to explain.

'Incidentally, that bar, previously filed through and sharpened, ended up in the arena on my orders.'

'Thanks for hurrying it up.'

'My guests were in seventh heaven. Even Mayor Coppenrath was so pleased he was beaming, and it's hard to satisfy that whoreson. He sniffs at everything, gloomy as a brothel on a Monday morning. I have the position of councillor in my pocket, ha. And maybe I'll rise higher, if . . . Would you perform in a week, Geralt? With a similar show?'

‘Only if you’re in the arena instead of a vigilosaur, Pratt.’ The Witcher wriggled his sore shoulder furiously.

‘That’s good, ha, ha. Hear what a jester he is, Dandelion?’

‘I heard,’ confirmed the poet, looking at Geralt’s back and clenching his teeth. ‘But it wasn’t a joke, it was quite serious. I also, equally solemnly, declare that I shan’t be gracing your granddaughter’s nuptial ceremony with a performance. You can forget it after the way you’ve treated Geralt. And that applies to any other occasions, including christenings and funerals. Yours included.’

Pyral Pratt shot him a glance, and something lit up in his reptilian eyes.

‘You aren’t showing me respect, singer,’ he drawled. ‘You aren’t showing me respect again. You’re asking to be taught a lesson in this regard. One you won’t forget . . .’

Geralt went closer and stood in front of him. Mikita panted, raised a fist and there was a reek of musk. Pyral Pratt gestured him to calm down.

‘You’re losing face, Pratt,’ said the Witcher slowly. ‘You’ve done a deal, classically, according to rules and, no less important than them, customs. Your guests are satisfied with the spectacle; you’ve gained prestige and the prospect of a position on the town council. I’ve gained the necessary information. You scratch my back. Both parties are content, so now we should part without remorse or anger. Instead of that you’re resorting to threats. You’re losing face. Let’s go, Dandelion.’

Pyral Pratt blanched slightly. Then turned his back on them.

‘I was planning to treat you to supper,’ he tossed over his shoulder. ‘But it looks like you’re in a hurry. Farewell then. But think yourself lucky I’m letting you both leave Ravelin scot-free. I usually punish a lack of respect. But I’m not stopping you.’

‘Quite right.’

Pratt turned around.

‘What did you say?’

Geralt looked him in the eyes. ‘You aren’t especially clever, though you like to think otherwise. But you’re too clever to try to stop me.’

*

Scarcely had they passed the hillock and arrived at the first roadside poplars than Geralt reined in his horse and listened.

‘They’re following us.’

‘Dammit!’ Dandelion’s teeth chattered. ‘Who? Pratt’s thugs?’

‘It doesn’t matter who. Go on, ride as fast as you can to Kerack. Hide at your cousin’s. First thing tomorrow take that cheque to the bank. Then we’ll meet at The Crab and Garfish.’

‘What about you?’

‘Don’t worry about me.’

‘Geralt—’

‘Be quiet and spur on your horse. Ride. Fly!’

Dandelion obeyed, leaned forward in the saddle and spurred his horse to a gallop. Geralt turned back, waiting calmly.

Riders emerged from the gloom. Six riders.

‘The Witcher Geralt?’

‘It is I.’

‘You’re coming with us,’ the nearest one croaked, reaching for Geralt’s horse. ‘But no foolishness, d’you hear?’

‘Let go of my reins, or I’ll hurt you.’

‘No foolishness!’ The rider withdrew his hand. ‘And don’t be hasty. We be legal and lawful. We ain’t no cutpurses. We’re on the orders of the prince.’

‘What prince?’

‘You’ll find out. Follow us.’

They set off. Geralt recalled Pratt had claimed some sort of prince was staying in Ravelin, incognito. Things were not looking good. Contacts with princes were rarely pleasant. And almost never ended well.

They didn’t go far. Only to a tavern at a crossroads smelling of smoke, with lights twinkling. They entered the main chamber, which was almost empty, not counting a few merchants eating a

late supper. The entrance to the private chambers was guarded by two armed men wearing blue cloaks, identical in colour and cut to the ones Geralt's escort were wearing. They went in.

'Your Princely Grace—'

'Get out. And you sit down, Witcher.'

The man sitting at the table wore a cloak similar to that of his men, but more richly embroidered. His face was obscured by a hood. There was no need. The cresset on the table only illuminated Geralt; the mysterious prince was hidden in the shadows.

'I saw you in Pratt's arena,' he said. 'An impressive display indeed. That leap and blow from above, augmented by your entire body weight . . . The weapon, although just a bar, passed through the dragon's skull like a knife through butter. I think that had it been, let's say, a bear spear or a pike it would have passed through a mail shirt, or even plate armour . . . What do you think?'

'It's getting late. It's hard to think when you're feeling drowsy.'

The man in the shadows snorted.

'We shan't dally then. And let's get to the matter in hand. I need you. You, Witcher. To do a witcher's job. And it somehow appears that you also need me. Perhaps even more.

'I'm Prince Xander of Kerack. I desire, desire overwhelmingly, to be King Xander the First of Kerack. At the moment, to my regret and the detriment of the country, the King of Kerack is my father, Belohun. The old buffer is still sound in mind and body, and may reign for twenty more bloody years. I don't have either the time or the desire to wait that long. Why, even if I waited, I couldn't be certain of the succession, since the old fossil may name another successor at any moment; he has an abundant collection of offspring. And is presently applying himself to begetting another; he has planned his royal nuptials with pomp and splendour for the feast of Lughnasadh, which the country can ill afford. He – a miser who goes to the park to relieve himself to spare the enamel on his chamber pot – is spending a mountain of gold on the wedding feast. Ruining the treasury. I'll be a better king. The crux is that I want to be king at once. As soon as possible. And I need you to achieve that.'

'The services I offer don't include carrying out palace revolutions. Or regicide. And that is probably what Your Grace has in mind.'

‘I want to be king. And in order to ascend the throne my father has to stop being king. And my brothers must be eliminated from the succession.’

‘Regicide plus fratricide. No, Your Highness. I have to decline. I regret.’

‘Not true,’ the prince snapped from the shadows. ‘You haven’t regretted it yet. Not yet. But you will, I promise you.’

‘Your Royal Highness will deign to take note that threatening me with death defeats the purpose.’

‘Who’s talking about death? I’m a prince, not a murderer. I’m talking about a choice. Either my favour or my disfavour. You’ll do what I demand and you’ll enjoy my favour. And you absolutely *do* need it, believe me. Now, with a trial and sentence for a financial swindle awaiting you, it looks as though you’ll be spending the next few years at an oar aboard a galley. You thought you’d wriggled out of it, it appears. That your case has already been dismissed, that the witch Neyd, who lets you bed her on a whim, will withdraw her accusation and it’ll be over in a trice. You’re mistaken. Albert Smulka, the reeve of Ansegis, has testified. That testimony incriminates you.’

‘The testimony is false.’

‘It will be difficult to prove that.’

‘Guilt has to be proved. Not innocence.’

‘Good joke. Amusing indeed. But I wouldn’t be laughing, in your shoes. Take a look at these. They’re documents.’ The prince tossed a sheaf of papers on the table. ‘Certified testimonies, witness statements. The town of Cizmar, a hired witcher, a leucrote dispatched. Seventy crowns on the invoice, in actuality fifty-five paid, the difference split with a local pen-pusher. The settlement of Sotonin, a giant spider. Killed, according to the bill, for ninety, actually, according to the alderman’s testimony, for sixty-five. A harpy killed in Tiberghien, invoiced for a hundred crowns, seventy paid in actuality. And your earlier exploits and rackets; a vampire in Petrelsteyn Castle which didn’t exist at all and cost the burgrave a cool thousand orens. A werewolf from Guaamez had the spell taken from it and was magically de-werewolfed for an alleged hundred crowns. A very dubious affair, because it’s a bit too cheap for that kind of spell removal. An echinops, or rather something you brought to the alderman in Martindelcampo and called an echinops.

Some ghouls from a cemetery near the town of Zgraggen, which cost the community eighty crowns, although no one saw any bodies, because they were devoured by, ha-ha, other ghouls. What do you say to that, Witcher? This is proof.'

'Your Highness continues to err,' Geralt countered. 'It isn't proof. They are fabricated slanders, ineptly fabricated, to boot. I've never been employed in Tiberghien. I haven't even heard of the settlement of Sotonin. Any bills from there are thus blatant counterfeits; it won't be hard to prove it. And the ghouls I killed in Zgraggen were, indeed, devoured by, ha-ha, other ghouls, because such are the habits of ghouls. And the corpses buried in that cemetery from then on are decomposing peacefully, because the surviving ghouls have moved out. I don't even want to comment on the rest of the nonsense contained in those documents.'

'A suit will be brought against you on the basis of those documents.' The prince placed a hand on them. 'It will last a long time. Will the evidence turn out to be genuine? Who can say? What verdict will finally be reached? Who cares? It's meaningless. The important thing is the stink that will spread around. And which will trail after you to the end of your days.

'Some people found you disgusting, but tolerated you out of necessity, as a lesser evil, as the killer of the monsters that threaten them,' he continued. 'Some couldn't bear you as a mutant, felt repulsion and abomination as though to an inhuman creature. Others were terribly afraid of you and hated themselves for their own fear. All that will sink into oblivion. The renown of an effective killer and the reputation of an evil sorcerer will evaporate like feathers in the wind, the disgust and fear will be forgotten. They will remember you only as an avaricious thief and charlatan. He who yesterday feared you and your spells, who looked away, who spat at the sight of you or reached for an amulet, will tomorrow guffaw and elbow his companion: "Look, here comes the Witcher Geralt, that lousy fraudster and swindler!" If you don't undertake the task I'm commissioning you with, I'll destroy you, Witcher. I'll ruin your reputation. Unless you serve me. Decide. Yes or no?'

'No.'

'Let it not seem to you that your connections – Ferrant de Lettenhove or your red-headed sorceress lover – will help you with anything. The instigator won't risk his own career, and the Chapter will forbid the witch from getting involved in a criminal case. No

one will help you when the judicial machine entangles you in its gears. I've commanded you to decide. Yes or no?'

'No. Definitively no, Your Highness. The man hidden in the bedchamber can come out now.'

The prince, to Geralt's astonishment, snorted with laughter. And slapped a hand on the table. The door creaked and a figure emerged from the adjoining bedchamber. A familiar figure, in spite of the gloom.

'You've won the wager, Ferrant,' said the prince. 'Report to my secretary tomorrow for your winnings.'

'Thank you, Your Princely Grace,' Ferrant de Lettenhove, the royal instigator, replied with a slight bow. 'But I treated the wager purely in symbolic terms. To emphasise just how certain I was of being right. I was by no means concerned about the money—'

'The money you won,' the prince interrupted, 'is also a symbol to me, just like the emblem of the Novigradian mint and the profile of the reigning monarch stamped on it. Know also, both of you, that I have also won. I have regained something I thought was irretrievably lost. Namely, faith in people. Geralt of Rivia, Ferrant was absolutely certain of your reaction. I, however, admit that I thought him naive. I was convinced you would yield.'

'Everybody's won something,' Geralt stated sourly. 'And I?'

'You too.' The prince became grave. 'Tell him, Ferrant. Enlighten him as to what's at stake here.'

'His Grace Prince Egmund, here present,' explained the instigator, 'deigned for a moment to impersonate Xander, his younger brother. And also, symbolically, his other brothers, the pretenders to the throne. The prince suspected that Xander or another of his brothers would want to make use of this convenient witcher with the aim of seizing the throne. So we decided to stage this . . . spectacle. And now we know that if it were in fact to occur . . . Should someone indeed make a proposition, you wouldn't be lured into princely favour. Or be daunted by threats or blackmail.'

'Quite.' The Witcher nodded. 'And I acknowledge your talent. Your Majesty entered the role splendidly. I didn't detect any artifice in what you deigned to say about me, in the opinion you had of me. On the contrary. I sensed pure frankness—'

‘The masquerade had its objective.’ Egmund interrupted the awkward silence. ‘I achieved it and don’t intend to account for myself before you. And you will benefit. Financially. For I indeed mean to engage you. And reward your services amply. Tell him, Ferrant.’

‘Prince Egmund,’ said the instigator, ‘fears an attempt on the life of his father, King Belohun, which may happen during the nuptials planned for the feast of Lughnasadh. The prince would feel better if at that time somebody . . . like a witcher . . . could be responsible for the king’s safety. Yes, yes, don’t interrupt, we know witchers aren’t bodyguards, that their *raison d’être* is to defend people from dangerous magical, supernatural and unnatural monsters—’

‘That’s how it is in books,’ the prince interrupted impatiently. ‘In life it’s not so simple. Witchers have been employed to defend caravans, trekking through wildernesses and backwoods teeming with monsters. It has happened, however, that instead of monsters, the merchants were attacked by ordinary robbers, and the witcher’s role was not at all to assault their persons, and yet he did. I have grounds to fear that during the nuptials the king may be attacked by . . . basilisks. Would you undertake to defend him from basilisks?’

‘That depends.’

‘On what?’

‘On whether this is still a set-up. And whether I’m the object of another entrapment. From one of the other brothers, for instance. A talent for impersonation is not, I wager, a rarity in your family.’

Ferrant bristled with rage. Egmund banged a fist on the table.

‘Watch your step,’ he snapped. ‘And don’t forget yourself. I asked you if you would undertake it. Answer!’

‘I might undertake the defence of the king from hypothetical basilisks.’ Geralt nodded. ‘Unfortunately, my swords were stolen from me in Kerack. The royal services have still not managed to pick up the thief’s trail and are probably doing little in that regard. I’m unable to defend anyone without my swords. I must therefore decline for practical reasons.’

‘If it is merely a matter of your swords, there’s no problem. We shall recover them. Shan’t we, Lord Instigator?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘You see. The royal instigator confirms absolutely. Well?’

‘Let them first recover the swords. Absolutely.’

‘You’re a stubborn character. But let it be. I stress that you will receive payment for your services and I assure you that you won’t find me parsimonious. Regarding other benefits, however, some of them you will gain at once, as an advance, as proof of my goodwill, if you like. You may consider your court case dismissed. The formalities must be carried out, and bureaucracy doesn’t recognise the concept of haste, but you may now consider yourself a person free of suspicion, with freedom of movement.’

‘I am inordinately grateful. And the testimonies and invoices? The leucrote from Cizmar, the werewolf from Guaamez? What about the documents? The ones Your Royal Highness deigned to use as . . . theatrical properties?’

‘The documents will remain with me.’ Egmund looked him in the eye. ‘In a safe place. An absolutely safe place.’

*

King Belohun’s bell was just striking midnight when he returned.

Coral, it ought to be acknowledged, kept calm and reserved. She knew how to control herself. Even her voice didn’t change. Well, almost.

‘Who did that to you?’

‘A vigilosaur. A kind of lizard . . .’

‘A lizard put in those stitches? You let a lizard stitch you up?’

‘The stitches were put in by a physician. And the lizard—’

‘To hell with the lizard! Mozaïk! A scalpel, scissors and tweezers. A needle and catgut. Elixir of woundwort. Decoction of aloes. *Unguentum ortolani.* A compress and sterile dressing. And prepare a mustard seed and honey poultice. Move, girl!’

Mozaïk made short work of it. Lytta set about the procedure. The Witcher sat and suffered in silence.

‘Physicians who don’t know magic ought to be banned from

practising,' drawled the sorceress, putting in the stitches. 'Lecture at universities, why not? Sew up corpses after post-mortems, by all means. But they shouldn't be allowed to touch living patients. But I probably won't live to see it, everything's going the opposite way.'

'Not only magic heals,' Geralt risked an opinion. 'And physicians are necessary. There's only a handful of specialised healing mages, and ordinary sorcerers don't want to treat the sick. They either don't have time or they don't think it worth it.'

'They think right. The results of overpopulation may be disastrous. What's that? That thing you're fiddling with?'

'The vigilosaur was tagged with it. It had it permanently attached to its hide.'

'You tore it from it as a trophy deserving of the victor?'

'I tore it off to show you.'

Coral examined the brass oval plate the size of a child's hand. And the signs embossed on it.

'A curious coincidence,' she said, applying the mustard poultice to his back, 'bearing in mind the fact that you're heading that way.'

'Am I? Oh, yes, true, I'd forgotten. Your confraters and their plans concerning me. Have the plans taken shape, perhaps?'

'That's right. I've received news. You've been asked to go to Rissberg Castle.'

'Been asked? What an honour. To Rissberg. The seat of the renowned Ortolan. A request, I presume, I cannot decline.'

'I wouldn't advise it. You're asked to go forthwith. Bearing in mind your injuries, when will you be able to set off?'

'Bearing in mind my injuries, you tell me. Physician.'

'I shall tell you. Later . . . But now . . . You won't be around for some time and I shall miss you . . . How do you feel now? Will you be able . . . That'll be all, Mozaïk. Go to your room and don't disturb us. What's the meaning of that smirk? Am I to freeze it permanently to your mouth?'

INTERLUDE

Dandelion, *Half a Century of Poetry*

(a passage of a rough draft never officially published)

Verily, the Witcher was greatly in my debt. More and more every day.

The visit to Pyral Pratt in Ravelin, which ended, as you know, turbulently and bloodily, brought certain benefits, however. Geralt had picked up the sword thief's trail. It was to my credit, in a way, for it was I, using my cunning, who led Geralt to Ravelin. And the following day it was I, and no other, who fitted Geralt out with a new weapon. I couldn't bear to see him unarmed. You'll say that a witcher is never unarmed? That he is a mutant well-versed in every form of combat, twice as strong as a normal fellow and ten times as fast? Who can fell three armed thugs with a cooper's oaken stave in no time? That to cap it all he can work magic using his Signs, which are no mean weapon? True. But a sword is a sword. He repeated relentlessly that he felt naked without a sword. So, I fitted him out with one.

Pratt, as you now know, rewarded the Witcher and I financially, none too generously, but I mustn't grumble. The next day, as Geralt had instructed me, I hurried with the cheque to the Giancardi branch and cashed it. I'm standing there, looking around. And I see that somebody is observing me intently. A lady, not too old, but also not in the first flush of youth, tastefully and elegantly attired. I am no stranger to a lady's delighted look; plenty of women find my manly and wolfish features irresistible.

The lady suddenly walks over, introduces herself as Etna Asider and claims to know me. Huh, what a thing! Everybody knows me, my fame precedes me, wherever I go.

'News has reached me, m'lord poet,' she says, 'about the unfortunate accident that befell your comrade, the Witcher, Geralt of Rivia. I know he has lost his weapons and is in urgent need of new ones. I am also aware that a good sword is hard to find. It so happens that I possess one. Left by my deceased husband, may the Gods have mercy upon his soul. At this very moment, I've come to the bank to sell the sword; for what could a widow want with a

sword? The bank has valued it and wants to take it on a commission basis. While I, nonetheless, am in urgent need of ready coin, for I needs must pay the debts of the deceased, otherwise my creditors will torment me. Thus . . .'

Upon which the lady picks up a roll of damask and unwraps a sword from it. A marvel, let me tell you. Light as a feather. The scabbard tasteful and elegant, the hilt of lizard's skin, the cross guard gilt, with a jasper the size of a pigeon's egg in the pommel. I draw it and can't believe my eyes. A punch in the shape of the sun on the blade, just above the cross guard. And just beyond it the inscription: *Draw me not without reason; sheath me not without honour*. Meaning the blade was wrought in the Nilfgaardian city of Viroleda, a place famous throughout the world for its armourers' forges. I touch the blade with the tip of my thumb – razor-sharp, I swear.

Since I'm nobody's fool, I betray nothing, I look on indifferently as the bank clerks bustle around and some poor old woman polishes the brass doorknobs.

'The Giancardis' bank,' quoth the little widow, 'valued the sword at two hundred crowns. For official sale. But for cash in hand I'll part with it for a hundred and fifty.'

'Ho, ho,' I reply. 'A hundred and fifty is a deal of money. You can buy a house for that. A small one. In the suburbs.'

'Oh, Lord Dandelion.' The woman wrings her hands, shedding a tear. 'You're mocking me. You are a cruel fellow, sir, to take advantage of a widow so. Since I am trapped, so be it: a hundred.'

And thus, my dears, I solved the Witcher's problem.

I scurry off to The Crab and Garfish, Geralt is already sitting there over his bacon and scrambled eggs, ha, no doubt there was white cheese and chives for breakfast at the red-headed witch's. I stride up and – clang! – I slam the sword down on the table. Dumbfounding him. He drops his spoon, draws the weapon from the scabbard and examines it. His countenance stony. But I am accustomed to his mutant state and know that emotions have no effect on him. No matter how delighted or happy he might be, he doesn't betray it.

'How much did you give for it?'

I wished to answer that it wasn't his business, but I recalled in time that I had paid with his money. So I confessed. He squeezed

my arm, didn't say a word, the expression on his face unchanged. That is him all over. Simple, but sincere.

And he told me he was setting off. Alone.

'I'd like you to stay in Kerack.' He anticipated my protests. 'And keep your eyes and ears open.'

He told me what had happened the previous day, about his evening conversation with Prince Egmund. And fidgeted with the Viroledian sword the whole time, like a child with a new toy.

'I don't mean to serve the duke,' he recapitulated. 'Nor participate in the royal nuptials in August in the role of bodyguard. Egmund and your cousin are certain they will seize the sword thief forthwith. I don't share their optimism. And that actually suits me. With my swords, Egmund would have an advantage over me. I prefer to catch the thief myself, in Novigrad in July, before the auction at the Borsodys'. I'd get my swords back and I wouldn't show my face in Kerack again. And you, Dandelion, keep your mouth shut. No one can know what Pratt told us. No one. Including your cousin the instigator.'

I promised to be as silent as the grave. While he looked at me strangely. Quite as though he didn't trust me.

'And because anything might happen,' he continued, 'I must have an alternative plan. I'd like to know as much as possible about Egmund and his siblings, about all the possible pretenders to the throne, about the king himself, about the whole, dear royal family. I'd like to know what they're planning and plotting. Who's in with whom, what factions are active here and so on. Is that clear?'

'You don't want to involve Lytta Neyd in this, I gather,' I responded. 'And rightly so, I think. The red-haired beauty certainly has perfect insight into the matters interesting you, but the local monarchy binds her too much for her to consider double loyalty, for one thing. And for another, don't let on that you'll soon flee and won't be showing up again. Because her reaction may be violent. Sorceresses, as you've found out directly, don't like it when people disappear.

'As regards the rest,' I promised, 'you can count on me. I shall have my ears and eyes in readiness and directed at where they're needed. And I've become acquainted with the dear, local royal family and heard enough gossip. Our Gracious King Belohun has produced numerous offspring. He has changed his wife quite often.

Whenever he spots a new one, the old one conveniently bids farewell to this world, by an unfortunate twist of fate, suddenly falling into infirmity, in the face of which medicine turns out to be impotent. In this way, the king has four legal sons today, each one with a different mother. Not counting his innumerable daughters, as they can't pretend to the throne. Or bastards. It's worth mentioning, however, that all the significant positions and offices in Kerack are filled by his daughters' husbands – my cousin Ferrant is an exception. And his illegitimate sons manage commerce and industry.'

The Witcher, I heed, is listening attentively.

'The four legitimate sons,' I go on, 'are, in order of seniority, the firstborn, whose name I don't know; it's forbidden to mention his name at court. After a quarrel with his father he went away and disappeared without trace, no one has seen him since. The second, Elmer, is a deranged drunk kept under lock and key. It's supposedly a state secret, but in Kerack it's common knowledge. Egmund and Xander are the real pretenders. They detest each other, and Belohun exploits it cunningly, keeping both of them in a state of permanent uncertainty. In matters of the succession he is also often capable of ostentatiously favouring one of the bastards, and tantalising him with promises. Whereas now it's whispered in dark corners that he has promised the crown to the son to be borne by his new wife, the one he's officially marrying at Lughnasadh.

'Cousin Ferrant and I think, however, that they are but fine words,' I continue, 'used by the old prick with the intention of stirring the young thing to sexual fervour, since Egmund and Xander are the only true heirs to the throne. And if it comes to a *coup d'état* it'll be carried out by one of the two. I've met them both, through my cousin. They are both – I had the impression – as slippery as turds in mayonnaise. If you know what I mean.'

Geralt confirmed he knew and that he had the same impression when he spoke to Egmund, only he was unable to express it in such beautiful words. Then he pondered deeply.

'I'll return soon,' he finally said. 'And you, don't sit around, and keep an eye on things.'

'Before we say farewell,' I responded, 'be a good chap and tell me something about your witch's pupil. The one with the slicked-down hair. She's a true rosebud, all she needs is a little work and she'll bloom wonderfully. So I've decided that I'll devote myself—'

Geralt's face, however, changed. Without warning he slammed his fist down on the table, making the mugs jump.

'Keep your paws well away from Mozaïk, busker,' he started on me without a trace of respect. 'Knock that idea out of your head. Don't you know that sorceresses' pupils are strictly prohibited from even the most innocent flirting? For the smallest offence of that kind Coral will decide she's not worth teaching and send her back to the school, which is an awful embarrassment and loss of face for a pupil. I've heard of suicides caused by that. And there's no fooling around with Coral. She doesn't have a sense of humour.'

I felt like advising him to try tickling her with a hen's feather in her intergluteal cleft. For such a measure can cheer up even the greatest of sourpusses. But I said nothing, for I know him. He can't bear anyone to talk tactlessly about his women. Even brief dalliances. Thus, I swore on my honour that I would strike the slicked-down novice's chastity from the agenda and not even woo her.

'If that stings you so much,' he said brightly as he was leaving, 'then know that I met a lady lawyer in the local court. She looked willing. Pursue her instead.'

Not on your life. What, does he expect me to bed the judiciary?

Although, on the other hand . . .

INTERLUDE

Highly Honourable Madam

Lytta Neyd

Kerack, Upper Town

Villa Cyclamen

Rissberg Castle, 1 July 1245 p. R.

Dear Coral,

I trust my letter finds you in good health and mood. And that everything is as you would wish.

I hasten to inform you that the Witcher – called Geralt of Rivia – finally deigned to put in an appearance at our castle. Immediately after arriving, in less than an hour, he showed himself to be annoyingly unbearable and managed to alienate absolutely everyone, including the Reverend Ortolan, a person who could be regarded as kindness personified, and favourably disposed to everyone. The opinions circulating about that individual aren't, as it turns out, exaggerated in even the tiniest respect, and the antipathy and hostility that he encounters everywhere have their own deep-seated grounds. But, however, insomuch as esteem should be paid him I shall be the first to do so *sine ira et studio.* The fellow is every inch the professional and totally trustworthy as regards his trade. There can be no doubt that he executes whatever he attempts or falls trying to achieve it.

We may thus consider the goal of our enterprise accomplished, mainly thanks to you, dear Coral. We express our thanks to you for your efforts, and you shall find us – as always – grateful. You, meanwhile, have my especial gratitude. As your old friend, mindful of what we have shared, I – more than the others – understand your sacrifice. I realise how you must have suffered the proximity of that individual, who is, indeed, an amalgam of the vices you cannot bear. Cynicism derived from a profound complex, with a pompous and introvert nature, an insincere character, a primitive mind, mediocre intelligence and great arrogance. I pass over the fact that he has ugly hands and chipped fingernails, in order not to irritate

you, dear Coral; after all, I know you detest such things. But, as it's been said before, an end has come to your suffering, troubles and distress. Nothing now stands in the way of your breaking off relations with that individual and ceasing all contact with him. In the process, definitively putting an end to and making a stand against the false slander spread by unfriendly tongues, that have brazenly tried to turn your – let's be honest – simulated and feigned kindness to the Witcher into a vulgar affair. But enough of that, it's not worth belabouring the point.

I'd be the happiest of people, my dear Coral, if you were to visit me in Rissberg. I don't have to add that one word of yours, one gesture, one smile is enough for me to hasten to you as quickly as I might.

Yours with heartfelt respect,

Pinety

P.S. The unfriendly tongues I mentioned posit that your favour towards the Witcher comes from a desire to annoy our consoror Yennefer, who is still said to be interested in the Witcher. The naivety and ignorance of those schemers is indeed pitiful. Since it is widely known that Yennefer is in an ardent relationship with a certain young entrepreneur from the jewellery trade, and she cares as much about the Witcher and his transient love affairs as she does about last year's snow.

INTERLUDE

The Highly Honourable

Lord Algernon Guincamp

Rissberg Castle

Ex urbe Kerack,

die 5 mens. Jul. anno 1245 p. R.

My dear Pinety,

Thanks for the letter, you haven't written to me in ages. Why, there clearly has been nothing to write about or any reason to do so.

Your concern about my health and mood is endearing, also about whether things go as I would wish. I inform you with satisfaction that everything is turning out as it ought, and I'm sparing no effort in that regard. Every man, as you know, steers his own ship. Please note that I steer my ship with a sure hand through squalls and reefs, holding my head high, whenever the storm rages around.

As far as my health is concerned, everything is in order, as a matter of fact. Not only physically, but psychologically too, for some little time, since I've had what I'd long been lacking. I only realised how much I was missing it when I stopped missing it.

I'm glad the enterprise requiring the Witcher's participation is heading towards success; my modest contribution in the enterprise fills me with pride. Your sorrow is needless, my dear Pinety, if you think it involved suffering, sacrifices and difficulties. It wasn't quite so bad. Geralt is indeed a veritable conglomeration of vices. I nevertheless also uncovered in him – *sine ira et studio* – virtues. Considerable ones, at that. I vouch that many a man, were he to know, would worry. And many would envy.

We have become accustomed to the gossip, rumours, tall tales and intrigues of which you write, my dear Pinety, we know how to cope with them. And the method is simple: ignore them. I'm sure you recall the gossip about you and Sabrina Glevissig when it was

rumoured there was something between us? I ignored it. I advise you to do the same now.

Bene vale,

Coral

P.S. I'm extremely busy. A potential rendezvous seems impossible for the foreseeable future.

They wander through various lands, and their tastes and moods demand that they be sans *all dependencies. That means they recognise not any authority – human or divine. They respect not any laws or principles. They believe themselves innocent of and uncontaminated by any obedience. Being fraudsters by nature, they live by divinations with which they deceive simple folk, serve as spies, distribute counterfeit amulets, fraudulent medicaments, stimulants and narcotics, also dabble in harlotry; that is, they supply paying customers with lewd maidens for filthy pleasures. When they know poverty, they are not ashamed to beg or commit common theft, but they prefer swindles and fraud. They delude the naive that they supposedly protect people, that supposedly they kill monsters for the sake of folk's safety, but that is a lie. Long ago was it proven that they do it for their own amusement, for killing is a first-rate diversion to them. In preparing for their work, they make certain magic spells, howbeit it is but to delude the eyes of observers. Devout priests at once uncovered the falsity and jiggery-pokery to the confusion of those devil's servants who call themselves witchers.*

Anonymous, *Monstrum, or a description of witchers*

CHAPTER NINE

Rissberg looked neither menacing nor impressive. There it was, a small castle like many others, of average size, elegantly built into the mountain's steep sides, hugging a cliff, its bright wall contrasting with the evergreen of a spruce forest, the tiles of two quadrangular towers – one tall, the other lower – overlooking the treetops. The wall surrounding the castle wasn't – as it transpired from close up – too tall and wasn't topped by battlements, while the small towers positioned at the corners and over the gatehouse were more decorative than defensive.

The road meandering around the hill bore the signs of intensive use. For it was used, and used intensively. The Witcher was soon overtaking carts, carriages, lone riders and pedestrians. Plenty of travellers were also moving in the opposite direction, away from the castle. Geralt guessed at the destination of these pilgrimages. Which was proved correct, it turned out, after he'd only just left the forest.

The flat hilltop beneath the curtain of the wall was occupied by a small town built of timber, reeds and straw; an entire complex of large and small buildings and roofs surrounded by a fence and enclosures for horses and livestock. There was a hubbub and people moved around briskly, like at a market or a fair. For it was indeed a fair, a bazaar, an open market; except neither poultry, fish nor vegetables were traded there. The goods on sale below the castle were magic – amulets, talismans, elixirs, opiates, philtres, decocts, extracts, distillates, concoctions, incense, syrups, scents, powders and ointments, as well as various practical, enchanted objects, tools, domestic equipment, decorations, and even children's toys. The whole assortment attracted purchasers in great numbers. There was demand, there was supply – and business was clearly flourishing.

The road divided. The Witcher headed along the path leading towards the castle gate, considerably less rutted than the other, which led the buyers towards the marketplace. He rode across the cobbled area in front of the gatehouse, along an avenue of menhirs specially set there, mostly considerably taller than him on his horse. He was soon greeted by a gate, more suited to a palace than a castle, decorated with pilasters and a pediment. The Witcher's

medallion vibrated powerfully. Roach neighed, her horseshoes clattering on the cobbles, and stopped abruptly.

'Identity and purpose of visit.'

He raised his head. A rasping and echoing voice, undoubtedly female, seemed to emerge from the wide-open mouth of the harpy's head depicted on the tympanum. His medallion quivered and the mare snorted. Geralt felt a strange tightness at the temples.

'Identity and purpose of visit,' came the voice from the hole in the relief. A little louder than before.

'Geralt of Rivia, witcher. I'm expected.'

The harpy's head uttered a sound resembling a trumpet call. The magic blocking the portal vanished, the pressure at his temples stopped at once, and the mare set off without being urged. Her hooves clattered on the stones.

He rode from the portal into a cul-de-sac ringed by a cloister. Two servants – boys in practical brown and grey attire – ran over to him at once. One attended to the horse and the other served as a guide.

'This way, sire.'

'Is it always like this here? Such a commotion? Down there in the suburbs?'

'No, sire.' The servant threw a frightened glance at him. 'Nobbut on Wednesdays. Wednesday's market day.'

On the arcaded finial of the next portal was a cartouche bearing another relief, undoubtedly also magical, depicting an amphisbaena's maw. The portal was closed off by an ornate, solid-looking grille, which, however, opened easily and smoothly when the servant pushed against it.

The next courtyard was significantly larger. And the castle could only be properly admired from there. The view from a distance, it turned out, was very deceptive.

Rissberg was much larger than it appeared to be. A complex of severe and unsightly buildings – seldom encountered in castle architecture – extended deep into the mountain wall. The buildings looked like factories and probably were. For there were chimneys and ventilation pipes protruding from them. The smell of burning, sulphur and ammonia was in the air and the ground trembled slightly, proof that some kind of subterranean machinery was in

operation.

A cough from the servant drew Geralt's attention away from the industrial complex. For they were supposed to be going the other way, towards the lower of the two towers rising above the buildings with more classical architecture, befitting a palace. The interior also turned out to be typical of a palace: it smelled of dust, wood, wax and old junk. It was bright: magic balls veiled in haloes of light – the standard illumination of sorcerers' dwelling places – floated beneath the ceiling, as languid as fish in an aquarium.

'Welcome, Witcher.'

The welcome party turned out to be two sorcerers. He knew them both, although not personally. Yennefer had once pointed out Harlan Tzara to him, and Geralt remembered him because he was probably the only mage to cultivate a completely shaven head. He remembered the other, Algernon Guincamp, called Pinety, from the academy in Oxenfurt.

'Welcome to Rissberg,' Pinety greeted him. 'We're glad you agreed to come.'

'Are you mocking me? I'm not here of my own will. In order to force me to come, Lytta Neyd shoved me in the clink—'

'But, she extracted you later,' interrupted Tzara, 'and rewarded you amply. She made good your discomfort with great, hmm, devotion. Word has it that you've been enjoying her . . . company for at least a week.'

Geralt fought the overwhelming urge to punch him in the face. Pinety must have noticed it.

'*Pax.*' He raised a hand. '*Pax*, Harlan. Let's end these squabbles. Let's give this battle of snide remarks and acerbities a miss. We know Geralt has something against us, it's audible in every word he utters. We know why that is, we know how the affair with Yennefer saddened him. And the reaction of the wizarding community to the affair. We shan't change that. But Geralt is a professional, he will know how to rise above it.'

'He will,' Geralt admitted caustically. 'But the question is whether he'll want to. Can we finally get to the point? Why am I here?'

'We need you,' said Tzara dryly. 'You in particular.'

'Me in particular. Ought I to feel honoured? Or to start feeling

afraid?'

'You are celebrated, Geralt of Rivia,' said Pinety. 'Your deeds and exploits are indeed regarded by general consensus as spectacular and admirable. You may not especially count on *our* admiration, as you conclude. We aren't so inclined to show our esteem, particularly to someone like you. But we're able to acknowledge professionalism and respect experience. The facts speak for themselves. You are, I dare say, an outstanding . . . hmm —'

'Yes?'

'—eliminator.' Pinety found the word without difficulty; he had clearly prepared it in advance. 'Someone who eliminates monsters and beasts that endanger people.'

Geralt made no comment. He waited.

'Our aim, the aim of all sorcerers, is also people's prosperity and safety. Thus, we may talk of a community of interests. Occasional misunderstandings ought not to obscure that. The lord of this castle gave us to understand that not long ago. He is aware of you and would like to meet you personally. That is his wish.'

'Ortolan.'

'Grandmaster Ortolan. And his closest collaborators. You will be introduced. Later. The servants will show you to your quarters. You may refresh yourself after your journey. Rest. We'll send for you soon.'

*

Geralt pondered. He recalled everything he had ever heard about Grandmaster Ortolan. Who was – as general consensus had it – a living legend.

*

Ortolan was a living legend, a person who had rendered extraordinary service to the magic arts.

His obsession was the popularisation of magic. Unlike the

majority of sorcerers, he thought that the benefits and advantages deriving from supernatural powers ought to be a common good and serve to strengthen universal prosperity, comfort and general bliss. It was Ortolan's dream that everybody ought to have guaranteed free access to magical elixirs and medicaments. Magical amulets, talismans and every kind of artefact ought to be universally and freely available. Telepathy, telekinesis, teleportation and telecommunication ought to be the privilege of every citizen. In order to achieve that, Ortolan was endlessly coming up with things. Meaning inventions. Some just as legendary as he himself.

Reality painfully challenged the venerable sorcerer's fantasies. None of his inventions – intended to popularise and democratise magic – moved beyond the prototype phase. Everything that Ortolan thought up – and what in principle ought to have been simple – turned out to be horrendously complicated. Everything that was meant to be mass-produced turned out to be devilishly expensive. But Ortolan didn't lose heart and, instead of discouraging him, the fiascos aroused him to greater efforts. Leading to further fiascos.

It was suspected – although, naturally, this never dawned on Ortolan himself – that the cause of the inventor's failures was often sheer sabotage. It wasn't caused by – well, not *just* – by the simple envy of the sorcerers' brotherhood, the reluctance to popularise the art of magic, which sorcerers and sorceresses preferred to see in the hands of the elite – i.e. their own. The fears were more about inventions of a military and lethal nature.

And the fears were justified. Like every inventor, Ortolan had phases of fascination with explosive and flammable materials, siege catapults, armoured chariots, crude firearms, sticks that hit by themselves and poison gases. Universal peace among nations is a condition of prosperity, the old man tried to prove, and peace is achieved by arming oneself. The most certain method of preventing wars is to have a terrible weapon as a deterrent: the more terrible it is, the more enduring and certain the peace. Because Ortolan wasn't accustomed to listening to arguments, saboteurs who torpedoed his dangerous inventions were hidden among his inventing team. Almost none of the inventions saw the light of day. An exception was the notorious missile-hurler, the subject of numerous anecdotes. It was a kind of telekinetic arbalest with a large container for lead missiles. This missile-hurler – as the name suggested – was meant to throw missiles at a target, in whole series.

The prototype made it out of Rissberg's walls – astonishingly – and it was even tested in some skirmish or other. With pitiful results, however. The artilleryman using the invention, when asked about the weapon's usefulness, apparently said that the missile-hurler was like his mother-in-law. Heavy, ugly, totally useless and only fit to be taken and thrown in a river. The old sorcerer wasn't upset when this was relayed to him. The weapon was a toy – he was said to have declared – and he already had many more advanced projects on his drawing board capable of mass destruction. He, Ortolan, would give humanity the benefit of peace, even if it would first be necessary to destroy half of it.

*

The wall of the chamber where he was led was graced by a huge tapestry, a masterpiece of weaving, of Arcadian verdure. The tapestry was marred by a stain, somewhat resembling a large squid, that hadn't been completely washed off. *Someone*, thought the Witcher*, must have puked up on the masterpiece not long before.*

Seven people were seated at a long table occupying the centre of the chamber.

'Master Ortolan.' Pinety bowed slightly. 'Let me introduce to you Geralt of Rivia. The Witcher.'

Ortolan's appearance didn't surprise Geralt. It was believed he was the world's oldest living sorcerer. Perhaps that was really true, perhaps not, but the fact remained that Ortolan was the oldest-*looking* sorcerer. This was strange, in so far as Ortolan was the inventor of a celebrated mandrake decoction, an elixir used by sorcerers in order to arrest the ageing process. Ortolan himself, when he had finally developed a reliably acting formula for the magical liquid, didn't gain much benefit from it, because by then he was quite advanced in age. The elixir prevented ageing, but by no means rejuvenated. For which reason Ortolan too, although he had used the remedy for a long time, continued to look like an old codger – particularly when compared to his confraters: venerable sorcerers, who resembled men in the prime of life, and his consorors: world-weary sorceresses, who looked like maids. The sorceresses bursting with youth and charm and the slightly grey-haired sorcerers, whose real dates of birth had vanished in the mists of time, jealously guarded the secrets of Ortolan's elixir, and

sometimes quite simply even denied its existence. Meanwhile, they kept Ortolan convinced that the elixir was generally available, owing to which humanity was practically immortal and – consequently – absolutely happy.

'Geralt of Rivia,' repeated Ortolan, crushing a tuft of his grey beard in his hand. 'Indeed, indeed, we have heard. The Witcher. A defender, they say, a guardian, protecting people from Evil. A prophylactic agent and esteemed antidote to all fearsome Evil.'

Geralt assumed a modest expression and bowed.

'Indeed, indeed . . .' continued the mage, tugging at his beard. 'We know, we know. According to all testimony you spare not your strength to defend folk, my boy, you spare it not. And your practice is verily estimable, your craft is estimable. We welcome you to our castle, content that the fates brought you here. For though you may not know it yourself, you have returned like a bird to its nest . . . Verily, like a bird. We are glad to see you and trust that you also are glad to see us. Eh?'

Geralt was undecided about how to address Ortolan. Sorcerers didn't recognise polite forms and didn't expect them from others. But he didn't know if that was acceptable with regard to a grey-haired and grey-bearded old man, and a living legend to boot. Instead of speaking, he bowed again.

Pinety introduced the sorcerers seated at the table in turn. Geralt had heard of some of them.

The forehead and cheeks of Axel Esparza, more widely known as Pockmarked Axel, were indeed covered with pitted scars. He hadn't removed them, so went the rumour, out of sheer contrariness. The slightly grizzled Myles Trethevey and slightly more grizzled Stucco Zangenis examined the Witcher with moderate interest. The interest of Biruta Icarti, a moderately attractive blonde, seemed a little greater. Tarvix Sandoval, broad-shouldered, with a physique more befitting a knight than a sorcerer, looked to one side, at the tapestry, as though he was also admiring the stain and was wondering where it came from and who was responsible for it.

The seat nearest Ortolan was occupied by Sorel Degerlund, apparently the youngest of those present, whose long hair lent him a slightly effeminate look.

'We, too, welcome the famous Witcher, the defender of folk,'

said Biruta Icarti. ‘We are glad to welcome you, since we also toil in this castle under the auspices of Grandmaster Ortolan, in order that thanks to progress we will make people’s lives safer and easier. People’s best interests are our overriding goal, too. The grandmaster’s age doesn’t permit us overly to prolong the audience. Thus, I shall ask what is appropriate: do you have any wishes, Geralt of Rivia? Is there something we can do for you?’

‘I thank you, Grandmaster Ortolan.’ Geralt bowed again. ‘And you, distinguished sorcerers. And since you embolden me with the question . . . Yes, there is something you can do for me. You could enlighten me . . . about this. This thing. I tore it from a vigilosaur I killed.’

He placed on the table the oval plate the size of a child’s hand. With characters embossed in it.

‘*RISS PSREP Mk IV/002 025*,’ Pockmarked Axel read aloud. And passed the plate to Sandoval.

‘It’s a mutation, created here, by us, at Rissberg,’ Sandoval stated bluntly. ‘In the pseudoreptile section. It’s a guard lizard. Mark four, series two, specimen twenty-five. Obsolete, we’ve been manufacturing an improved model for a long time. What else needs explaining?’

‘He says he killed the vigilosaur.’ Stucco Zangenis grimaced. ‘So, it’s not about an explanation, but a claim. We only accept and look into complaints, Witcher, from legal buyers, and only on the basis of proof of purchase. We only service and remove defects on the basis of proof of purchase . . .’

‘That model’s guarantee expired long ago,’ added Myles Trethevey. ‘And anyway, no guarantee covers defects resulting from inappropriate use of the product or in breach of the operating instructions. If the product was used inappropriately, Rissberg doesn’t take responsibility. Of any kind.’

‘And do you take responsibility for this?’ Geralt took another plate from his pocket and threw it down on the table.

The other plate was similar in shape and size to the previous one, but darkened and tarnished. Dirt had become embedded and fused into the grooves. But the characters were still legible:

IDR UL Ex IX 0012 BETA.

A long silence fell.

‘Idarran of Ulivo,’ Pinety said at last, surprisingly quietly and surprisingly hesitantly. ‘One of Alzur’s students. I never expected . . .’

‘Where did you get it, Witcher?’ Pockmarked Axel leaned across the table. ‘How did you come by it?’

‘You ask as though you didn’t know,’ retorted Geralt. ‘I dug it out of the carapace of a creature I killed. One that had murdered at least twenty people in the district. At least twenty – for I think it was many more. I think it had been killing for years.’

‘Idarran . . .’ muttered Tarvix Sandoval. ‘And before him Malaspina and Alzur . . .’

‘But it wasn’t us,’ said Zangenis. ‘It wasn’t us. Not Rissberg.’

‘Experimental model nine,’ added Biruta Icarti pensively. ‘Beta version. Specimen twelve . . .’

‘Specimen twelve,’ Geralt chimed in, not without spitefulness. ‘And how many were there all together? How many were manufactured? I won’t be getting an answer to my question about responsibility, that’s clear, because it wasn’t you, it wasn’t Rissberg, you’re clean and you want me to believe that. But at least tell me, because you surely know how many of them there are wandering around in forests, murdering people. How many of them will have to be found? And hacked to death? I meant to say: eliminated.’

‘What is it, what is it?’ Ortolan suddenly became animated. ‘What do you have there? Show me! Ah . . .’

Sorel Degerlund leaned over towards the old man’s ear, and whispered for a long time. Myles Trethevey, showing him the plate, whispered from the other side. Ortolan tugged at his beard.

‘Killed it?’ he suddenly shouted in a high, thin voice. ‘The Witcher? Destroyed Idarran’s work of genius? Killed it? Unthinkingly destroyed it?’

The Witcher couldn’t control himself. He snorted. His respect for advanced age and grey hair suddenly abandoned him altogether. He snorted again. And then laughed. Heartily and relentlessly.

The stony faces of the sorcerers sitting at the table, rather than restraining him, made him even more amused. *By the devil*, he thought, *I don’t remember when I last laughed so heartily*. *Probably in Kaer Morhen*, he recalled, *yes, in Kaer Morhen. When that rotten plank broke underneath Vesemir in the privy*.

‘He’s still laughing, the pup,’ cried out Ortolan. ‘He’s neighing like an ass! Doltish whippersnapper! To think I came to your defence when others vilified you! *So what if he has become enamoured of little Yennefer?* I said. *And what if little Yennefer dotes on him? The heart is no servant*, I said, *leave them both in peace!’*

Geralt stopped laughing.

‘And what have you done, most stupid of assassins?’ the old man yelled. ‘What did you do? Do you comprehend what a work of art, what a miracle of genetics you have ruined? No, no, you cannot conceive of that with your shallow mind, layman! You cannot comprehend the ideas of brilliant people! Such as Idarran and Alzur, his teacher, who were graced with genius and extraordinary talent! Who invented and created great works, meant to serve humanity, without taking profit, nor taking base mammon into account, not recreation nor diversion, but solely progress and the commonweal! But what can you apprehend of such things? You apprehend nothing, nothing, nothing, not a scrap!

‘And indeed, I tell you further,’ Ortolan panted, ‘that you have dishonoured the work of your own fathers with this imprudent murder. For it was Cosimo Malaspina, and after him his student Alzur, yes, Alzur, who created the witchers. They invented the mutation owing to which men like you were bred. Owing to which you exist, owing to which you walk upon this earth, ungrateful one. You ought to esteem Alzur, his successors and their works, and not destroy them! Oh dear . . . Oh dear . . .’

The old sorcerer suddenly fell silent, rolled his eyes and groaned heavily.

‘I needs must to the stool,’ he announced plaintively. ‘I needs must quickly to the stool! Sorel! My dear boy!’

Degerlund and Trethevey leaped up from their seats, helped the old man stand up and led him out of the chamber.

A short while after, Biruta Icarti stood up. She threw the Witcher a very expressive glance, then exited without a word. Sandoval and Zangenis headed out after her, not even looking at Geralt at all. Pockmarked Axel stood up and crossed his arms on his chest. He looked at Geralt for a long time. Lengthily and rather unpleasantly.

‘It was a mistake to invite you,’ he said finally. ‘I knew it. But I deluded myself in thinking you’d muster up even a semblance of

good manners.'

'It was a mistake to accept your invitation,' Geralt replied coldly. 'I also knew it. But I deluded myself in thinking I would receive answers to my questions. How many numbered masterpieces are still at large? How many similar masterworks did Malaspina, Alzur and Idarran manufacture? And the esteemed Ortolan? How many more monsters bearing your plates will I have to kill? I, a witcher, prophylactic agent and antidote? I didn't receive an answer and I well apprehend why not. Regarding good manners, however: fuck off, Esparza.'

Esparza the Pockmarked slammed the door as he went out. So hard that plaster fell from the ceiling.

'I don't think I made a good impression,' concluded the Witcher. 'But I didn't expect to, hence there is no disappointment. But that probably isn't everything, is it? So much trouble to get me here . . . And that would be all? Why, if it's like that . . . Will I find a tavern selling alcohol in the suburbs? Can I toddle along now?'

'No,' replied Harlan Tzara. 'No, you can't.'

'Because it's by no means all,' added Pinety.

*

The chamber he was led to wasn't typical of the rooms where sorcerers usually received applicants. Usually – Geralt was well acquainted with the custom – mages gave audiences in large rooms with very formal, often severe and cheerless décor. It was practically unthinkable for a sorcerer to receive anybody in a private, personal room, a room able to provide information about the disposition, tastes and predilections of a mage – particularly about the type and specific character of the magic they made.

This time it was totally different. The chamber's walls were decorated with numerous prints and watercolours, every last one of them of erotic or downright pornographic character. Models of sailing ships were displayed on shelves, delighting the eye with the precision of their details. Miniature sails proudly billowed out on tiny ships in bottles. There were numerous display cases of various sizes full of toy soldiers: cavalry and infantry, in all sorts of formations. Opposite the entrance, also behind glass, hung a stuffed

and mounted brown trout. Of considerable size, for a trout.

'Be seated, Witcher.' Pinety, it became clear at once, was in charge.

Geralt sat down, scrutinising the stuffed trout. The fish must have weighed a good fifteen pounds alive. Assuming it wasn't a plaster imitation.

'Magic protects us from being eavesdropped upon.' Pinety swept a hand through the air. 'We shall thus be able finally to speak freely about the real reasons for your being brought here, Geralt of Rivia. The trout which so interests you was caught on a fly in the River Ribbon and weighed fourteen pounds nine ounces. It was released alive, and the display case contains a magically created copy. And now please concentrate. On what I'm about to tell you.'

'I'm ready. For anything.'

'We're curious to know what experience you have with demons.'

Geralt raised his eyebrows. He hadn't been expecting that. And a short time before, he had thought that nothing would surprise him.

'And what is a demon? In your opinion?'

Harlan Tzara grimaced and shifted suddenly. Pinety appeased him with a look.

'There is a department of supernatural phenomena at the Academy of Oxenfurt,' he said. 'Masters of magic give guest lectures there. Some of which concern the subject of demons and demonism, in the many aspects of that phenomenon, including the physical, metaphysical, philosophical and moral. But I think I'm telling you about it needlessly, for you attended those lectures, after all. I remember you, even though as a visiting student you would usually sit in the back row of the lecture theatre. I therefore repeat the question regarding your experience of demons. Be good enough to answer. Without being a smart aleck, if you please. Or feigning astonishment.'

'There isn't a scrap of pretence in my astonishment,' Geralt replied dryly. 'It's so sincere it pains me. How can it not astonish me when I, a simple witcher, a simple prophylactic agent and even more simple antidote, am asked about my experience with demons? And the questions are being asked by masters of magic, who lecture

about demonism and its aspects at the university.'

'Answer the question.'

'I'm a witcher, not a sorcerer. Which means my experience comes nowhere near yours regarding demons. I attended your lectures at Oxenfurt, Guincamp. Anything important reached the back row of the lecture theatre. Demons are creatures from different worlds than ours. Elemental planes . . . dimensions, spacetimes or whatever they're called. In order to have any kind of experience with a demon you have to invoke it, meaning forcibly extract it from its plane. It can only be accomplished using magic—'

'Not magic, but goetia,' interrupted Pinety. 'There's a fundamental difference. And don't tell us what we already know. Answer the question that was asked. I request it for the third time, amazed by my own patience.'

'I'll answer the question: yes, I have dealt with demons. I was hired twice in order to . . . eliminate them. I've dealt with two demons. With one that entered a wolf. And another that possessed a human being.'

'You "dealt" with them.'

'Yes, I did. It wasn't easy—'

'But it was feasible,' interjected Tzara. 'In spite of what's claimed. And it's claimed that it's impossible to destroy a demon.'

'I didn't claim I ever destroyed a demon. I killed a wolf and a human being. Do the details interest you?'

'Very much.'

'I acted alongside a priest in the case of the wolf that had, in broad daylight, killed and ripped eleven people to pieces. Magic and sword triumphed side by side. When, after a hard fight, I finally killed the wolf, the demon possessing it broke free in the form of a large glowing ball. And devastated a fair stretch of forest, scattering the trees all around. It didn't pay any attention to me or the priest, but cleared the forest in the opposite direction. And then it disappeared, probably returning to its dimension. The priest insisted he deserved the credit, that his exorcisms had dispatched the demon to the beyond. Although I think the demon went away because he was simply bored.'

'And the other case—?'

'—was more interesting.

‘I killed a possessed man,’ he continued without being pressed. ‘And that was it. No spectacular side effects. No ball lightning, auroras, thunderbolts or whirlwinds; not even a foul smell. I’ve no idea what happened to the demon. Some priests and mages – your confraters – examined the dead man. They didn’t find or discover anything. The body was cremated, because the process of decay proceeded quite normally, and the weather was very hot—’

He broke off. The sorcerers looked at each other. Their faces were inscrutable.

‘That would be, as I understand it, the only proper way of dealing with a demon,’ Harlan Tzara finally said. ‘To kill, to destroy the energumen, meaning the possessed person. The person, I stress. They must be killed at once, without waiting or deliberating. They should be chopped up with a sword. And that’s it. Is that the witcher method? The witcher technique?’

‘You’re doing poorly, Tzara. That’s not how it’s done. In order to insult someone properly, you need more than overwhelming desire, enthusiasm and fervour. You need technique.’

‘*Pax*, *pax.’* Pinety headed off an argument again. ‘We’re simply establishing the facts. You told us that you killed a man, those were your very words. Your witcher code is meant to preclude killing people. You claim to have killed an energumen, a person who’d been possessed by a demon. After that fact, i.e. the execution of a person, “no spectacular effects were observed”, to quote you again. Where, then, is your certainty that it wasn’t—’

‘Enough,’ Geralt interrupted. ‘Enough of that, Guincamp, these allusions are going nowhere. You want facts? By all means, they are as follows. I killed him, because it was necessary. I killed him to save the lives of other people. And I received a dispensation from the law to do it. It was granted to me in haste, albeit in quite high-sounding words. “A state of absolute necessity, a circumstance precluding the lawlessness of a forbidden deed, sacrificing one good in order to save another one, a real, direct threat.” It was, indeed, real and direct. You ought to regret you didn’t see the possessed man in action, what he did, what he was capable of. I know little of the philosophical and metaphysical aspects of demons, but their physical aspect is truly spectacular. It can be astonishing, take my word for it.’

‘We believe you,’ confirmed Pinety, exchanging glances with Tzara again. ‘Of course, we believe you. Because we’ve also seen a

thing or two.'

'I don't doubt it.' The Witcher grimaced. 'And I didn't doubt that during your lectures at Oxenfurt. It was apparent you knew what you were talking about. The theoretical underpinning really came in handy with that wolf and that man. I knew what it was about. The two cases had an identical basis. What did you call it, Tzara? A method? A technique? And thus, it was a magical method and the technique was also magical. Some sorcerer summoned a demon using spells, extracted it forcibly from its plane, with the obvious intention of exploiting it for their own magical goals. That's the basis of demonic magic—'

'—goetia.'

'—That's the basis of goetia: invoking a demon, using it, and then releasing it. In theory. Because in practice it happens that the sorcerer, instead of freeing the demon after using it, imprisons it magically in a body. That of a wolf, for example. Or a human being. For a sorcerer – as Alzur and Idarran have shown us – likes to experiment. Likes observing what a demon does in someone else's skin when it's set free. For a sorcerer – like Alzur – is a sick pervert, who enjoys and is entertained by watching the killing wrought by a demon. That has occurred, hasn't it?'

'Various things have occurred,' said Harlan Tzara in a slow, drawling voice. 'It's stupid to generalise, and low to reproach. And to remind you of witchers who didn't shrink from robbery. Who didn't hesitate to work as hired assassins. Am I to remind you of the psychopaths who wore medallions with a cat's head, and who were also amused by the killing being wrought around them?'

'Gentlemen.' Pinety raised a hand, silencing the Witcher, who was preparing to make a rejoinder. 'This isn't a session of the town council, so don't try to outdo one another in vices and pathologies. It's probably more judicious to admit that no one is perfect, everyone has their vices, and even celestial creatures are no strangers to pathologies. Apparently. Let's concentrate on the problem before us and which demands a solution.'

'Goetia is prohibited,' Pinety began after a long silence, 'because it's an extremely dangerous practice. Sadly, the simple evocation of a demon doesn't demand great knowledge, nor great magical abilities. It's enough to possess a necromantic grimoire, and there are plenty of them on the black market. It is, however, difficult to control a demon once invoked without knowledge or

skills. A self-taught goetic practitioner can think himself lucky if the invoked demon simply breaks away, frees itself and flees. Many of them end up torn to shreds. Thus, invoking demons or any other creatures from elemental planes and para-elements was prohibited and had the threat of severe punishments imposed on it. There exists a system of control that guarantees the observance of the prohibition. However, there is a place that was excluded from that control.'

'Rissberg Castle. Of course.'

'Of course. Rissberg cannot be controlled. For the system of goetia control I was talking about was created here, after all. As a result of experiments carried out here. Thanks to tests carried out here the system is still being perfected. Other research is being conducted here, and other experiments. Of a wide variety. Various things and phenomena are studied here, Witcher. Various things are done here. Not always legal and not always moral. The end justifies the means. That slogan could hang over the gate to Rissberg.'

'And beneath that slogan ought to be added: "What happens at Rissberg stays at Rissberg",' added Tzara. 'Experiments are carried out here under supervision. Everything is monitored.'

'Clearly not everything,' Geralt stated sourly. 'Because something escaped.'

'Something escaped.' Pinety was theatrically calm. 'There are currently eighteen masters working at the castle. And on top of that, well over four score apprentices and novices. Most of the latter are only a few formalities away from the title of "master". We fear . . . We have reason to suppose before that someone from that large group wanted to play at goetia.'

'Don't you know who?'

'We do not,' Harlan Tzara replied without batting an eye. But the Witcher knew he was lying.

'In May and at the beginning of June, three large-scale crimes were committed in the vicinity.' The sorcerer didn't wait for further questions. 'In the vicinity, meaning here, on the Hill, between twelve and twenty miles from Rissberg. Each time, forest settlements, the homesteads of foresters and other forest workers, were targeted. All the residents were murdered in the settlements, no one was left alive. Post-mortem examinations confirmed that the crimes must have been committed by a demon. Or more precisely,

an energumen, someone possessed by a demon. A demon that was invoked here, at the castle.'

'We have a problem, Geralt of Rivia. We have to solve it. And we hope you'll help us with it.'

Sending matter is an elaborate, sophisticated and subtle thing, hence before setting about teleporting, one must without fail defecate and empty the bladder.

Geoffrey Monck,

The Theory and Practice of Using Teleportals

CHAPTER TEN

As usual, Roach snorted and protested on seeing the blanket, and fear and protest could be heard in her snorting. She didn't like it when the Witcher covered her head. She liked even less what occurred right after it was covered. Geralt wasn't in the least surprised at the mare. Because he didn't like it either. Naturally, it didn't behove him to snort or splutter, but it didn't stop him expressing his disapproval in another form.

'Your aversion to teleportation is truly surprising,' said Harlan Tzara, showing his astonishment for the umpteenth time.

The Witcher didn't join in the discussion. Tzara hadn't expected him to.

'We've been transporting you for over a week,' he continued, 'and each time you put on the look of a condemned man being led to the scaffold. Ordinary people, I can understand. For them matter transfer remains a dreadful, unimaginable thing. But I thought that you, a witcher, had more experience in matters of magic. These aren't the times of Geoffrey Monck's first portals! Today teleportation is a common and absolutely safe thing. Teleportals are safe. And teleportals opened by me are absolutely safe.'

The Witcher sighed. He'd happened to observe the effects of the safe functioning teleportals more than once and he'd also helped sorting the remains of people who'd used teleportals. Which was why he knew that declarations about their safety could be classified along with such statements as: 'my little dog doesn't bite', 'my son's a good boy', 'this stew's fresh', 'I'll give you the money back the day after tomorrow at the latest', 'he was only getting something out of my eye', 'the good of the fatherland comes before everything', and 'just answer a few questions and you're free to go'.

There wasn't a choice or an alternative, however. In accordance with the plan adopted at Rissberg, Geralt's daily task was to patrol a selected region of the Hills and the settlements, colonies and homesteads there. Places where Pinety and Tzara feared another attack by the energumen. Settlements like that were spread over the entire Hills; sometimes quite far from each other. Geralt had to admit and accept the fact that effective patrolling wouldn't have been possible without the help of teleportational

magic.

To maintain secrecy, Pinety and Tzara had constructed the portals at the end of the Rissberg complex, in a large, empty, musty room in need of refurbishment, where cobwebs stuck to your face, and shrivelled up mouse droppings crunched under your boots. A spell was activated on a wall covered in damp patches and slimy marks and then the brightly shining outline of a door – or rather a gateway – appeared, beyond which whirled an opaque, iridescent glow. Geralt walked the blindfolded mare into the glow – and then things became unpleasant. There was a flash and he stopped seeing, hearing or feeling anything – apart from cold. Cold was the only thing felt inside the black nothingness, amid silence, amorphousness and timelessness, because the teleport dulled and extinguished all the other senses. Fortunately, only for a split second. The moment passed, the real world flared up, and the horse, snorting with terror, clattered its horseshoes on the hard ground of reality.

'The horse taking fright is understandable,' Tzara stated again. 'While your anxiety, Witcher, is utterly irrational.'

Anxiety is never irrational, Geralt thought to himself. *Aside from psychological disturbances. It was one of the first things novice witchers were taught. It's good to feel fear. If you feel fear it means there's something to be feared, so be vigilant. Fear doesn't have to be overcome. Just don't yield to it. And you can learn from it.*

'Where to today?' asked Tzara, opening the lacquer box in which he kept his wand. 'What region?'

'Dry Rocks.'

'Try to get to Maple Grove before sundown. Pinety or I will pick you up from there. Ready?'

'For anything.'

Tzara waved his hand and wand in the air as though conducting an orchestra and Geralt thought he could even hear music. The sorcerer melodiously chanted a long spell that sounded like a poem being recited. Flaming lines flared up on the wall, then linked up to form a shining, rectangular outline. The Witcher swore under his breath, calmed his pulsating medallion, jabbed the mare with his heels and rode her into the milky nothingness.

*

Blackness, silence, amorphousness, timelessness. Cold. And suddenly a flash and a shock, the thud of hooves on hard ground.

*

The crimes of which the sorcerers suspected the energumen, the person possessed by a demon, were carried out in the vicinity of Rissberg, in an uninhabited area called the Tukaj Hills, a chain of upland covered in ancient woodland, separating Temeria from Brugge. The hills owed their name – some people insisted – to a legendary hero called Tukaj, or to something completely different, as others claimed. Since there weren't any other hills in the region it became common to simply say 'the Hills', and that shortened name also appeared on many maps.

The Hills stretched in a wide belt about a hundred miles long and twenty to thirty miles wide. The western part, in particular, was worked intensively by foresters. Large-scale felling had been carried out and industries and crafts linked to felling and forestry had developed. Large, medium, small and quite tiny, permanent and makeshift, tolerably and poorly built settlements, colonies, homesteads and camps of the people earning their living by forest crafts had been established in the wilderness. The sorcerers estimated that around four dozen such settlements existed throughout the Hills.

Massacres – from whom no one escaped with their life – had occurred in three of them.

*

Dry Rocks, a complex of low limestone hills surrounded by dense forests, formed the westernmost edge of the Hills, the western border of the patrol region. Geralt had been there before; he knew the area. A lime kiln – used for burning limestone – had been built in a clearing at the edge of the forest. The end product of this burning was quicklime. Pinety, when they were there together, explained what the lime was for, but Geralt had listened inattentively and forgot it. Lime – of any kind – lay quite far beyond

his sphere of interests. But a colony of people had sprung up by the kiln who made a living from said lime. He had been entrusted with their protection. And only that mattered.

The lime burners recognised him, one of them waved his hat at him. Geralt returned the greeting. *I'm doing my job*, he thought. *I'm doing my duty. Doing what they pay me for.*

He guided Roach towards the forest. He had about a half-hour ride along a forest track ahead of him. Nearly a mile separated him from the next settlement. It was called Pointer's Clearing.

*

The Witcher covered a distance of from seven to ten miles over the course of a day. Depending on the region, that meant visiting anything from a handful to more than a dozen homesteads and then reaching an agreed-upon location, from where one of the sorcerers would teleport him back to the castle before sundown. The pattern was repeated the following day, when another region of the Hills was patrolled. Geralt chose the regions at random, wary of routines and patterns that might easily be decoded. Despite that, the task turned out to be quite monotonous. The Witcher, however, wasn't bothered by monotony, he was accustomed to it in his profession: in most cases, only patience, perseverance and determination guaranteed a successful kill. Actually, never before – and this was pertinent – had anyone ever been willing to pay for his patience, perseverance and determination as generously as the sorcerers of Rissberg. So he couldn't complain, he just had to do his job.

Without believing overly in the success of the enterprise.

*

'You presented me to Ortolan and all the high-ranking mages immediately after my arrival at Rissberg,' he pointed out to the sorcerers. 'Even if one assumes that the person guilty of the goetia and the massacres wasn't among them, news of a witcher at the castle must have spread. Your wrongdoer, assuming he exists, will understand in no time what's afoot, so will go into hiding and abandon his activities. Entirely. Or will wait until I leave and then

begin again.'

'We can stage your departure,' replied Pinety. 'And your continued stay at the castle will be a secret. Fear not, magic exists to guarantee the confidentiality of what must remain a secret. Believe us, we can work that kind of magic.'

'So you believe my daily patrols make sense?'

'They do. Do your job, Witcher. And don't worry about the rest.'

Geralt solemnly promised not to worry. Although he had his doubts. And didn't entirely trust the sorcerers. He had his suspicions.

But had no intention of divulging them.

*

Axes banged and saws rasped briskly in Pointer's Clearing, and there was a smell of fresh timber and resin. The relentless felling of the forest was being carried out by the woodcutter Pointer and his large family. The older members of the family chopped and sawed, the younger ones stripped the branches from the trunks and the youngest carried brushwood. Pointer saw Geralt, sank his axe into a trunk and wiped his forehead.

'Greetings.' The Witcher rode closer. 'How are things? Everything in order?'

Pointer looked at him long and sombrely.

'Things are bad,' he said at last.

'Why?'

Pointer said nothing for a long time.

'Someone stole a saw,' he finally snarled. 'Stole a saw! How can it be, eh? Why do you patrol the clearings, sire, eh? And Torquil roams the forests with his men, eh? Guarding us, are you? And saws going missing!'

'I'll look into it,' Geralt lied easily. 'I'll look into the matter. Farewell.'

Pointer spat.

*

In the next clearing, this time Dudek's, everything was in order, no one was threatening Dudek and probably no one had stolen anything. Geralt didn't even stop. He headed towards the next settlement. Called Ash Burner.

*

Forest tracks, furrowed by wagon wheels, eased his movement between the settlements. Geralt often happened upon carts, some loaded with forestry products and others unladen, on their way to be loaded up. He also met groups of pedestrian wayfarers; there was an astonishing amount of traffic. Even deep in the forest it was seldom completely deserted. Occasionally, the large rump of a woman on all fours gathering berries or other forest fruits emerged above the ferns like the back of a narwhal from the ocean waves. Sometimes, something with a stiff gait and the posture and expression of a zombie mooned about among the trees, turning out to be an old geezer looking for mushrooms. From time to time, something snapped the brushwood with a frenzied yell – it was children, the offspring of the woodsmen and charcoal burners, armed with bows made of sticks and string. It was astonishing how much damage the children were capable of causing in the forest using such primitive weapons. It was horrifying to think that one day these youngsters would grow up and make use of professional equipment.

*

Ash Burner settlement – where it was also peaceful, with nothing disturbing the work or threatening the workers – took its name, very originally, from the production of potash, a valued agent in the glassmaking and soap-making industries. Potash, the sorcerers explained to Geralt, was obtained from the ash of the charcoal which was burned in the locality. Geralt had already visited – and planned to visit again that day – the neighbouring charcoal burners'

settlement. The nearest one was called Oak Grove and the way there indeed led beside a huge stand of immense oaks several hundred years old. A murky shadow always lay beneath the oaks, even at noon, even in full sun and under a cloudless sky.

It was there by the oaks, less than a week before, that Geralt had first encountered Constable Torquil and his squad.

*

When men in green camouflage outfits with longbows on their backs galloped out of the oaks and surrounded him from all sides, Geralt first took them for Foresters, members of the notorious volunteer paramilitary unit, who called themselves the Guardians of the Forest, and whose mission was to hunt non-humans – elves and dryads in particular – and murder them in elaborate ways. It sometimes happened that people travelling through the forests were accused by the Foresters of supporting the non-humans or trading with them. They punished the former and the latter by lynching and it was difficult to prove one's innocence. The encounter by the oaks thus promised to be extremely violent – so Geralt sighed with relief when the green-coated horsemen turned out to be law enforcers carrying out their duties. Their commander, a swarthy character with a piercing gaze, having introduced himself as a constable in the service of the bailiff of Gors Velen, bluntly and brusquely demanded that Geralt reveal his identity, and when he was given it, demanded to see his witcher's emblem. The medallion with the snarling wolf was not only considered satisfactory proof, but aroused the evident admiration of the guardian of the law. The esteem, so it seemed, also extended to Geralt himself. The constable dismounted, asked the Witcher to do the same, and invited him for a short conversation.

'I am Frans Torquil.' The constable dropped the pretence of a brusque martinet, revealing himself to be a calm, businesslike man. 'You, indeed, are the Witcher Geralt of Rivia. The same Geralt of Rivia who saved a woman and child from death in Ansegis a month ago, by killing a man-eating monster.'

Geralt pursed his lips. He had happily already forgotten about Ansegis, about the monster with the plate and the man of whose death he was guilty. He had fretted over that a long time, had finally managed to convince himself that he'd done as much as he

could, that he'd saved the other two, and that the monster wouldn't kill anyone else. Now it all came back.

Frans Torquil could not have noticed the clouds that passed over the Witcher's brow following his words. And if he had he wasn't bothered.

'It would appear, Witcher, that we're patrolling these thickets for the same reasons,' he continued. 'Bad things began to happen in the Tukaj Hills after the spring, very unpleasant events have occurred here. And it's time to put an end to them. After the slaughter in Arches I advised the sorcerers from Rissberg to hire a witcher. They took it to heart, I see, although they don't like doing as they're told.'

The constable took off his hat and brushed needles and seeds from it. His headgear was of identical cut to Dandelion's, only made of poorer quality felt. And instead of an egret's feather it was decorated with a pheasant's tail feather.

'I've been guarding law and order in the Hills for a long time,' he continued, looking Geralt in the eyes. 'Without wishing to boast, I've captured many a villain and bedecked many a tall tree with them. But what's been going on lately . . . That requires an additional person; somebody like you. Somebody who is well-versed in spells and knows about monsters, who isn't scared of a beast or a ghost or a dragon. And so, right well, we shall guard and protect folk together. I for my meagre salary, you for the sorcerers' purse. I wonder if they pay you well for this work?'

Five hundred Novigradian crowns, transferred in advance to my bank account. Geralt had no intention of revealing that. *The sorcerers of Rissberg bought my services and my time for that sum. Fifteen days of my time. And when fifteen days have passed, irrespective of what happens, the same amount will be transferred again. A handsome sum. More than satisfactory.*

'Aye, they're surely paying a good deal.' Frans Torquil quickly realised he wouldn't be receiving an answer. 'They can afford to. And I'll tell you this: no money here is too much. For this is a hideous matter, Witcher. Hideous, dark and unnatural. The evil that raged here came from Rissberg, I swear. As sure as anything, something's gone awry in the wizards' magic. Because that magic of theirs is like a sack of vipers: no matter how tightly it's tied up, something venomous will always crawl out.'

The constable glanced at Geralt. That glance was enough for

him to understand that the Witcher would tell him nothing, no details of his agreement with the sorcerers.

'Did they acquaint you with the details? Did they tell you what happened in Yew Trees, Arches and Rogovizna?'

'More or less.'

'More or less,' Torquil repeated. 'Three days after Beltane, the Yew Trees settlement, nine woodcutters killed. Middle of May, a sawyers' homestead in Arches, twelve killed. Beginning of June, Rogovizna, a colony of charcoal burners. Fifteen victims. That's the state of affairs, more or less, for today, Witcher. For that's not the end. I give my word that it's not the end.'

Yew Trees, Arches, Rogovizna. Three mass crimes. And thus not an accident, not a demon who broke free and fled, whom a bungling goetic practitioner was unable to control. It was premeditated, it has all been planned. Someone has thrice imprisoned a demon in a host and sent it out thrice to murder.

'I've seen plenty.' The constable's jaw muscles worked powerfully. 'Plenty of battlefields, plenty of corpses. Robberies, pillages, bandits' raids, savage family revenge and forays, even one wedding that six corpses were carried out of, including the groom. But slitting tendons to then butcher the lame? Scalping? Biting out throats? Tearing apart someone alive, dragging their guts out of their bellies? And finally building pyramids from the heads of the slaughtered? What are we facing here, I ask? Didn't the wizards tell you that? Didn't they explain why they need a witcher?'

What do sorcerers from Rissberg need a witcher for? So much so that he needs to be forced by blackmail to co-operate? For the sorcerers could have coped admirably with any demon or any host themselves, without any great difficulty. Fulmen sphaericus *or* Sagitta aurea *– the first two spells of many that spring to mind – could have been used on an energumen at a distance of a hundred paces and it's doubtful if it would survive the treatment. But no, the sorcerers prefer a witcher. Why? The answer's simple: a sorcerer, confrater or comrade has become an energumen. One of their colleagues invokes demons and lets them enter him and runs around killing. He's already done it three times. But the sorcerers can't exactly shoot ball lightning at a comrade or run him through with a golden arrowhead. They need a witcher to deal with a comrade.*

There was something Geralt couldn't and didn't want to tell Torquil. He couldn't and didn't want to tell him what he'd told the

sorcerers in Rissberg. And which they had shrugged off. As you would something inconsequential.

*

‘You’re still doing it. You’re still playing at this, as you call it, goetia. You invoke these creatures, summon them from their planes, behind closed doors. With the same tired old story: we’ll control them, master them, force them to be obedient, we’ll set them to work. With the same inevitable justification: we’ll learn their secrets, force them to reveal their mysteries and arcana, and thus we’ll redouble the power of our own magic, we’ll heal and cure, we’ll eliminate illness and natural disasters, we’ll make the world a better place and make people happier. And it inevitably turns out that it’s a lie, that all you care about is power and control.’

Tzara, it was obvious, was spoiling to retaliate, but Pinety held him back.

‘Regarding creatures from behind closed doors,’ Geralt continued, ‘creatures we are calling – for convenience – “demons”, you certainly know the same as we witchers do. Which we found out a long time ago, which is written about in witcher registers and chronicles. Demons will never, ever reveal any secrets or arcana to you. They will never let themselves be put to work. They let themselves be invoked and brought to our world for just one reason: they want to kill. Because they enjoy it. And you know that. But you allow them in.’

‘Perhaps we’ll pass from theory to practice,’ said Pinety after a very long silence. ‘I think something like that has also been written about in witcher registers and chronicles. And it is not moral treatises, but rather practical solutions we expect from you, Witcher.’

*

‘Glad to have met you.’ Frans Torquil shook Geralt’s hand. ‘And now to work, patrolling. To guard, to protect folk. That’s what we’re here for.’

‘We are.’

Once in the saddle, the constable leaned over.

'I'll bet,' he said softly, 'that you're most aware of what I'm about to tell you. But I'll say it anyway. Beware, Witcher. Be heedful. You don't want to talk, but I know what I know. The wizards sure as anything hired you to fix what they spoiled themselves, to clear up the mess they made. But if something doesn't go right, they'll be looking for a scapegoat. And you have all the makings of one.'

*

The sky over the forest began to darken. A sudden wind blew up in the branches of the trees. Distant thunder rumbled.

*

'If it's not storms, it's downpours,' said Frans Torquil when they next met. 'There's thunder and rain every other day. And the result is that when you go looking for tracks they're all washed away by the rain. Convenient, isn't it? As though it's been ordered. It too stinks of sorcery – Rissberg sorcery, to be precise. It's said that wizards can charm the weather. Raise up a magical wind, or enchant a natural one to blow whichever way they want. Chase away clouds, stir up rain or hail, and unleash a storm, too, as if on cue. When it suits them. In order, for example, to cover their tracks. What say you to that, Geralt?'

'Sorcerers, indeed, can do much,' he replied. 'They've always controlled the weather, from the First Landing, when apparently only Jan Bekker's spells averted disaster. But to blame mages for all adversities and disasters is probably an exaggeration. You're talking about natural phenomena, after all, Frans. It's simply that kind of season. A season of storms.'

*

He spurred on his mare. The day was already drawing to a close, and he intended to patrol a few more settlements before dusk. First,

the nearest colony of charcoal burners, located in a clearing called Rogovizna. Pinety had been with him the first time he was there.

*

To the Witcher's amazement, instead of the site of the massacre being a gloomy, godforsaken wilderness, it turned out to be a place of intense work, full of people. The charcoal burners – who called themselves 'smokers' – were labouring on the building site of a new kiln used for burning charcoal. The charcoal kiln was a dome of wood, not some random heap by any means, but a meticulously and evenly arranged mound. When Geralt and Pinety arrived at the clearing they found the charcoal burners covering the mound with moss and carefully topping it with soil. Another charcoal kiln, built earlier, was already in operation, meaning it was smoking copiously. The entire clearing was enveloped in eye-stinging smoke and an acrid resinous smell attacked the nostrils.

'How long ago . . .' the Witcher coughed. 'How long ago, did you say, was—?'

'Exactly a month ago.'

'And people are working here as if nothing happened?'

'There's great demand for charcoal,' explained Pinety. 'Charcoal is the only fuel that can achieve a high enough temperature for smelting. The furnaces near Dorian and Gors Velen couldn't function without it, and smelting is the most important and most promising branch of industry. Because of demand, charcoal burning is a lucrative job, and economics, Witcher, is like nature and abhors a vacuum. The massacred smokers were buried over there, do you see the graves? The sand is still a fresh yellow colour. And new workers replaced them. The charcoal kiln's smoking, and life goes on.'

They dismounted. The smokers were too busy to pay them any attention. If anyone was showing them interest it was the women and children, a few of whom were running among the shacks.

'Indeed.' Pinety guessed the question before the Witcher could ask it. 'There are also children among those under the burial mound. Three. And three women. And nine men and youths. Follow me.'

They walked between cords of seasoning timber.

‘Several men were killed on the spot, their heads smashed in,’ the sorcerer said. ‘The rest of them were incapacitated and immobilised, the heel cords of their feet severed with a sharp instrument. Many of them, including all the children, had their arms additionally broken. The captives were then murdered. Their throats were torn apart, they were eviscerated and their chests ripped open. Their backs were flayed and they were scalped. One of the women—’

‘Enough.’ The Witcher looked at the black patches of blood, still visible on the birch trunks. ‘That’s enough, Pinety.’

‘You ought to know who – what – you’re dealing with.’

‘I already do.’

‘And so just the final details. Some of the bodies were missing. All the dead were decapitated. And the heads arranged in a pyramid, right here. There were fifteen heads and thirteen bodies. Two bodies disappeared.

‘The dwellers of two other settlements, Yew Trees and Arches, were murdered in almost identical fashion,’ the sorcerer continued after a short pause. ‘Nine people were killed in Yew Trees and twelve in Arches. I’ll take you there tomorrow. We still have to drop in at New Tarworks today, it’s not far. You’ll see what the manufacture of pitch and wood tar looks like. The next time you have to rub wood tar onto something you’ll know where it came from.’

‘I have a question.’

‘Yes?’

‘Did you really have to resort to blackmail? Didn’t you believe I’d come to Rissberg of my own free will?’

‘Opinions were divided.’

‘Whose idea was it to throw me into a dungeon in Kerack, then release me, but still threaten me with the court? Who came up with the idea? It was Coral, wasn’t it?’

Pinety looked at him. For a long time.

‘Yes,’ he finally admitted. ‘It was her idea. And her plan. To imprison, release and threaten you. And then finally have the case dismissed. She sorted it out immediately after you left, your file in

Kerack is now as clean as a whistle. Any other questions? No? Let's ride to New Tarworks then, and have a look at the wood tar. Then I'll open the teleportal and we'll return to Rissberg. In the evening, I'd like to pop out for a spot of fly-fishing. The mayflies are swarming, the trout will be feeding . . . Have you ever angled, Witcher? Does hunting attract you?'

'I hunt when I have an urge for a fish. I always carry a line with me.'

Pinety was silent for a long time.

'A line,' he finally uttered in a strange tone. 'A line, with a lead weight. With many little hooks. On which you skewer worms?'

'Yes. Why?'

'Nothing. It was a needless question.'

*

He was heading towards Pinetops, the next charcoal burner settlement, when the forest suddenly fell silent. The jays were dumbstruck, the cries of magpies went silent all of an instant, the drumming of a woodpecker suddenly broke off. The forest had frozen in terror.

Geralt spurred his mare to a gallop.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The charcoal kiln in Pinetops was close to a logging site, as the charcoal burners used woody debris left over after felling. The burning had begun a short time before and foul-smelling, yellowish smoke was streaming from the top of the dome, as though from a volcano's crater. The smell couldn't mask the odour of death hanging over the clearing.

Geralt dismounted. And drew his sword.

He saw the first corpse, without head or feet, just beside the charcoal kiln; blood spurting over the soil covering the mound. Not far away lay three more bodies, unrecognisably mutilated. Blood had soaked into the absorbent forest sand, leaving darkening patches.

Two more cadavers – those of a man and a woman – were lying nearer to the centre of the clearing and the campfire encircled by stones. The man's throat had been torn out so savagely his cervical vertebrae were visible. The upper part of the woman's body was lying in the embers of the fire, smeared in groats from an upturned cooking pot.

A little further away, by a woodpile, lay a child; a little boy, of perhaps five years old. He had been rent in two. Somebody – or rather something – had seized him by both legs and torn them apart.

Geralt saw another body; this one had been disembowelled and its guts pulled out. To their full length, or about two yards of the large bowel and over six of the small. The guts were stretched in a straight, shiny, greyish-pink line all the way to a shack of pine branches into which they vanished.

Inside the shelter, a slim man was lying on his back on a primitive pallet. It was clear at once that he was quite out of place there. His ornate clothing was completely covered in blood, soaked through. But the Witcher noticed it wasn't squirting, gushing or dripping from any of the main blood vessels.

Geralt recognised him despite his face being covered in drying blood. It was that long-haired, slim, somewhat effeminate fop, Sorel Degerlund, introduced to him during the audience with Ortolan. At

that time, he had also been wearing the same braided cloak and embroidered doublet as the other sorcerers, had been sitting among them and like the others had been observing the Witcher with barely concealed aversion. And now he was lying, unconscious, in a charcoal burner's shack, covered in blood, with a human intestine coiled around his right wrist. Pulled from the belly of a corpse lying not ten paces away.

The Witcher swallowed. *Shall I hack him to death*, he thought, *while he's unconscious? Are Pinety and Tzara expecting that? Shall I kill the energumen? Eliminate the goetic practitioner who amuses himself by evoking demons?*

A groan shook him out of his reflections. Sorel Degerlund, it appeared, was coming around. He jerked his head up, moaned, and then slumped back onto the pallet. He lifted himself up, looking vacantly around him. He saw the Witcher and opened his mouth, looked at his blood-spattered stomach and raised a hand. To see what he was holding. And began to scream.

Geralt looked at his sword, Dandelion's purchase with the gilt cross guard. He looked at the sorcerer's thin neck. At the swollen vein on it.

Sorel Degerlund unpeeled and stripped the intestine from his hand. He stopped screaming and just groaned, shaking. He got up, first onto his hands and knees and then onto his feet. He lurched out of the shelter, looked about him, shrieked and made to bolt. The Witcher grabbed him by the collar, set him in one place and pushed him down to his knees.

'What . . . has . . .' Degerlund mumbled, still shaking. 'What . . . . what happened . . . here?'

'I think you know.'

The sorcerer swallowed loudly.

'How . . . How did I end up here? Nothing . . . I don't remember anything . . . I don't remember anything. Nothing!'

'I don't actually believe you.'

'The invocation . . .' Degerlund seized his face in his hands. 'I invoked it . . . And it appeared. In the pentagram, in the chalk circle . . . And entered . . . Entered me.'

'Not for the first time, I imagine, eh?'

Degerlund sobbed. Somewhat theatrically, Geralt couldn't help

thinking. He regretted that he hadn't surprised the energumen before the demon had abandoned him. His regret, he realised, wasn't very rational, he was aware how dangerous a confrontation with a demon could be, and he should have been glad he'd avoided it. But he wasn't glad. Because at least he would have known what to do.

It just had to happen to me, he thought. *And not Frans Torquil and his troop. The constable wouldn't have had any qualms or scruples. Bloodied, caught with the entrails of his victim in his fist, the sorcerer would have had a noose around his neck at once and would have been dangling from the handiest bough. Neither hesitations nor doubts would have held Torquil back. It wouldn't have bothered Torquil that the effeminate and scrawny sorcerer was absolutely incapable of slaughtering so many people in such a short time that his blood-soaked clothing hasn't managed to dry out or stiffen. And wouldn't have been able to tear a child apart with his bare hands. No, Torquil wouldn't have had any qualms.*

But I do.

Pinety and Tzara were sure I wouldn't.

'Don't kill me . . .' Degerlund whined. 'Don't kill me, Witcher . . . I will never . . . Never more—'

'Shut up.'

'I swear I'll never—'

'Shut up. Are you conscious enough to use magic? To summon the sorcerers from Rissberg here?'

'I have a sigil . . . I can . . . I can teleport myself to Rissberg.'

'Not alone. With me. And no tricks. Don't try to stand up, stay on your knees.'

'I must stand up. And you . . . If the teleportation is to work, you must stand close to me. Very close.'

'Why exactly? Come on, what are you waiting for? Get that amulet out.'

'It's not an amulet. I said, it's a sigil.'

Degerlund undid his blood-soaked doublet and shirt. He had a tattoo on his skinny chest, two overlapping circles. The circles were dotted with points of various sizes. It looked a little like the diagram of the planets' orbits that Geralt had once admired at the

academy in Oxenfurt.

The sorcerer uttered a melodious spell. The circles shone blue, the points red. And began to rotate.

‘Now. Stand close.’

‘Close?’

‘Still closer. Cling to me.’

‘What?’

‘Get in close and hug me.’

Degerlund’s voice had changed. His eyes, a moment before tearful, now lit up hideously and his lips contorted repugnantly.

‘Yes, that’s right. Firmly and tenderly. As though I were your Yennefer.’

Geralt understood what was on the cards. But he didn’t manage to push Degerlund away, strike him with the pommel of his sword, or slash him across the neck with the blade. He was simply too slow.

An iridescent glow flashed in Geralt’s eyes. In a split second, he plunged into black nothingness. Into bitter cold, silence, amorphousness and timelessness.

*

They landed with a thud, the stone slabs of the floor seemingly leaping up to meet them. The impact threw them apart. Geralt was unable even to look around properly. An intense stench reached his nostrils, the odour of filth mixed with musk. Two sets of immense, mighty hands caught him under the arms and behind his head, fat fingers closed easily over his biceps, steely thumbs dug painfully into his nerves, into the brachial plexus. He went totally numb and his sword slipped from his inert hand.

He saw before him a hunchback with a hideous face covered in sores, his head dotted with sparse tufts of stiff hair. The hunchback, standing with his crooked legs wide apart, was pointing a large crossbow at him, or actually an arbalest with two steel bows one above the other. The two four-cornered bolts aimed at Geralt were a good two inches wide and razor-sharp.

Sorel Degerlund was standing in front of him.

'As you've probably realised,' he said, 'you haven't ended up at Rissberg. You're in my asylum and lair. A place – about which the people at Rissberg know nothing – where I conduct experiments with my master. I am, as you probably know, Sorel Albert Amador Degerlund, *magister magicus*. I am, which you don't know yet, he who will inflict pain and death on you.'

The feigned terror and simulated panic, all appearances, vanished as though blown away by the wind. Everything in the charcoal burners' clearing had been feigned. A quite different Sorel Degerlund was standing before Geralt as he hung in the paralysing grip of those gnarled hands. A triumphant Sorel Degerlund, bursting with arrogance and hubris. Sorel Degerlund grinning a vicious smile. A smile calling to mind centipedes squeezing through gaps under doors. Disturbed graves. White maggots squirming in carrion. Fat horseflies wriggling their legs in a bowl of broth.

The sorcerer came closer. He was holding a steel syringe with a long needle.

'I deceived you like a child in the clearing,' he hissed. 'You turned out to be as naive as a child. The Witcher Geralt of Rivia! Although his instinct didn't mislead him he didn't kill, because he wasn't certain. For he's a good witcher and a good man. Shall I tell you, good witcher, what good people are? They're people whom fate hasn't blessed with the chance of profiting from the benefits of being evil. Or alternatively people who were given a chance but were too stupid to take advantage of it. It doesn't matter which group you belong to. You let yourself be tricked, you fell into a trap, and I guarantee that you won't get out of it alive.'

He lifted the syringe. Geralt felt a prick and immediately acute pain. A stabbing pain that darkened his eyes, tensed his entire body, a pain so dreadful that only the greatest effort stopped him from screaming. His heart began to beat frantically and, compared to his usual pulse – four times slower than that of a normal person – it was an extremely unpleasant sensation. Everything went black, the world spun around, blurred and dissolved.

He was dragged away in the glow of magical balls dancing over the bare walls and ceilings. One of the walls he passed was covered in patches of blood and was hung with weapons. He saw broad, curved scimitars, huge sickles, gisarmes, battleaxes and morning stars. They were all streaked with blood. *They were used in*

Yew Trees, Arches and Rogovizna, he thought lucidly. They were used to massacre the charcoal burners in Pinetops.

He had gone quite numb, had stopped feeling anything, he couldn't even feel the crushing grip of the hands holding him.

'Buueh-hhhrrr-eeeehhh-bueeeeh! Bueeh-heeh!'

He didn't realise at once that what he could hear was merry chuckling. Whoever was dragging him was clearly enjoying the situation.

The hunchback walking in front with the crossbow was whistling.

Geralt had almost lost consciousness.

He was shoved down roughly into an upright chair. He could finally see who was dragging him, crushing his armpits with their huge hands.

He remembered the giant ogre-dwarf Mikita, Pyral Pratt's bodyguard. These two resembled him a little, they could just about have passed for close relatives. They were of similar height to Mikita, reeked similarly, like him had no neck, and like him their teeth protruded from their lower lips like wild boars' tusks. Mikita was bald and bearded, however, while these two didn't have beards. Their simian faces were covered in bristles and the tops of their egg-shaped heads were adorned with something like tousled oakum. Their eyes were small and bloodshot, their ears large, pointed and horribly hairy.

Their garb bore streaks of blood. And their breath stank as though they'd eaten nothing but garlic, shit and dead fish for many days.

'Bueeeeh! Bueeh-heeh-heeh!'

'Bue, Bang, enough laughter, get to work, both of you. Get out, Pastor. But stay close.'

The two giants went out, their great feet slapping. The hunchback addressed as 'Pastor' hurried after them.

Sorel Degerlund appeared in the Witcher's field of view. Scrubbed, hair combed, in fresh clothes and looking effeminate. He slid a chair closer, sat down, with a table piled with weighty tomes and grimoires behind him. He looked at the Witcher, grinning malevolently. At the same time he was playing with and swinging a medallion on a gold chain, which he was winding around a finger.

‘I treated you to extract of white scorpion’s venom,’ he said detachedly. ‘Nasty, isn’t it? Can’t move a hand, a leg; not even a finger? Can’t wink or even swallow? But that’s nothing. Uncontrollable movements of your eyeballs and disturbances to your sight will soon follow. Then you’ll feel cramps, really powerful cramps, they’ll probably strain your intercostal muscles. You won’t be able to control the grinding of your teeth, you’re certain to break a few. Then excessive salivation will occur and finally breathing difficulties. If I don’t give you the antidote, you’ll suffocate. But don’t worry, I shall. You’ll live, for now. But I think you’ll soon regret that you’ve survived. I’ll explain what it’s all about. We have time. But first I’d like to watch you turning blue.

‘I was observing you on the last day of June, during the audience,’ he continued a moment later. ‘You flaunted your arrogance before us. Before *us*, people a hundredfold your betters, people you’re no match for. Playing with fire amused and excited you, I saw that. It was then that I determined to prove to you that playing with fire will get you burnt, and interfering in matters of magic and mages has equally painful consequences. You’ll soon find out for yourself.’

Geralt tried to move, but couldn’t. His limbs and entire body were paralysed and insensitive. He felt an unpleasant tingling in his fingers and toes, his face was completely numb and his lips felt like they were laced together. His vision was deteriorating, his eyes were misting over and a cloudy mucus was gluing them together.

Degerlund crossed his legs and swung the medallion. There was a symbol on it, an emblem, in blue enamel. Geralt didn’t recognise it. His eyesight was getting worse. The sorcerer hadn’t lied, the disturbance to his sight was intensifying.

‘The thing is, you see, that I plan to go far in the sorcerers’ hierarchy,’ Degerlund continued casually. ‘In my designs and plans I’m relying on Ortolan, who’s known to you from your visit to Rissberg and the memorable audience.’

Geralt had the sensation that his tongue was swelling and filling his entire mouth. He was afraid it wasn’t just a sensation. The venom of the white scorpion was lethal. He’d never previously been exposed to its action and didn’t know how it might affect his witcher’s body. He was seriously worried, desperately fighting the toxin that was destroying him. The situation didn’t look good. It appeared he couldn’t expect help from anywhere.

‘A few years ago,’ said Sorel Degerlund, still delighting in the sound of his own voice, ‘I became Ortolan’s assistant. The Chapter assigned me to the post, and the Rissberg research team approved it. I was, like my predecessors, to spy on Ortolan and sabotage his more dangerous ideas. I didn’t owe my assignment merely to my magical talent, but also to my looks and personal charm. For the Chapter would supply the old man with the kind of assistants he was fond of.

‘You may not know, but during the times of Ortolan’s youth, misogyny and the fashion for male friendship, which very often turned into something more – or even something *much* more – were rife among sorcerers. Thus it happened that a young pupil or novice didn’t have a choice, had to be obedient to his seniors in this regard, as with all others. Some of them didn’t like it very much, but had to take it as it came. And some acquired a liking for it. As you’ve probably guessed, Ortolan belonged to the latter. The boy, whose avian nickname fitted him then, became, after the experiences with his preceptor, a lifelong enthusiast and champion of noble male friendship and love – as poets would have it. It would be defined in prose more bluntly and crudely, as you know.’

A large black cat, with its tail fluffed up like a brush and purring loudly, rubbed itself against the sorcerer’s calf. Degerlund leaned over, stroked it and swung the medallion in front of it. The cat swatted the medallion casually with its paw. It turned away, signalling that the game was boring it, and set about licking the fur on its chest.

‘As you’ve doubtless observed,’ continued the sorcerer, ‘I have exceptional looks and women have been known to call me an ephebe. I’m fond of women, indeed, but in principle I didn’t and don’t have anything against homosexuality. Under one condition: if it is to be, it must help me to advance my career.

‘My physical intimacy with Ortolan didn’t demand excessive sacrifices, the old man had long passed both the age limit for capability and desire. But I did my best for people to think otherwise and believe he’d utterly fallen for me. Believe there was nothing he would refuse his gorgeous lover. Believe that I knew his codes, that I had access to his secret books and notes. That he was giving me artefacts and talismans he hadn’t previously revealed to anyone. And that he was teaching me forbidden spells. Including goetia. And if previously the great men and women of Rissberg had disdained me, now they suddenly began to esteem me. I had grown

in their eyes. They believed I was doing what they themselves dreamed of. And that I was achieving success.

'Do you know what transhumanism is? What kind of specialisation it is? Radiation speciation? Introgression? No? There's nothing to be ashamed of. I don't really either. But everybody thinks I know a great deal. That under the tutelage and auspices of Ortolan I'm conducting research into perfecting the human race. With the lofty goal of refining and improving it. To improve the human condition, to eliminate illness and disability, to banish the ageing process, blah, blah, blah. For that is the goal and task of magic. To follow the path of the great masters: Malaspina, Alzur and Idarran. The masters of hybridisation, mutation and genetic modification.'

Announcing its arrival by meowing, the black cat appeared again. It jumped into the sorcerer's lap, stretched and purred. Degerlund stroked it rhythmically. The cat purred even louder, extending claws of truly tiger-like proportions.

'You surely know what hybridisation is, for it's another word for cross-breeding. The process of obtaining cross-breeds, hybrids, bastards – it's all the same. They actively experiment with that at Rissberg, they've produced endless peculiarities, monsters and sports. Some find wide practical applications, like, for example, para-zeugles cleaning municipal dust heaps, para-woodpeckers keeping down tree parasites and mutated gambezis feeding on the larvae of malarial mosquitos. Or vigilosaurs, guard lizards the killing of which you bragged about during the audience. But they consider them trifles, by-products. What really interests them is the hybridisation and mutation of people and humanoids. That is forbidden, but Rissberg disregards prohibitions. And the Chapter turns a blind eye to it. Or, which is more likely, it remains immersed in blissful, dull ignorance.

'Malaspina, Alzur and Idarran, it has been proved, took small, ordinary creatures to their workshops to create giants from them, like those centipedes, spiders, koshcheys and the devils know what else. What then, they asked, stands in the way of taking an ordinary little man and transforming him into a titan, into somebody stronger, able to work twenty hours a day, who's unaffected by illness, who can live fully fit to a hundred? It's known that they wanted to do it. Apparently, they managed to, apparently they were successful. But they took the secret of their hybrids to the grave. Even Ortolan, who has devoted his life to studying their works, has

achieved little. Bue and Bang, who dragged you here, have you observed them? They're hybrids, magical crosses of ogres and trolls. The marksman Pastor? No, in fact he is, so to speak, in the likeness and image, the completely natural result of a cross between a hideous woman and an ugly man. But Bue and Bang, ha, they came straight out of Ortolan's test tubes. You may ask: why the hell would anyone want such hideous creatures, what the hell would you create something like that for? Ha, I didn't know that myself until quite recently. Until I saw how they ripped the woodcutters and charcoal burners apart. Bue is capable of wresting someone's head from their shoulders with one tug, and Bang can tear a child apart like a roast chicken. And if you give them some sharp tools, ha! Then they can achieve a rip-roaring bloodbath. When you ask Ortolan he says that hybridisation is meant to be a way of eliminating hereditary illnesses, and witters on about increasing immunity to infectious diseases, or some such old fogey's nonsense. I know better! And you do too. Specimens like Bue and Bang, and the thing you tore Idarran's plate off, are only fit for one thing: killing. And that's good, because what I needed were killing tools. I wasn't certain about my own skills and capabilities in that regard. Unjustly, as a matter of fact, as it later transpired.

'But the sorcerers of Rissberg go on cross-breeding, mutating and genetically modifying, from dawn to dusk. And they've had numerous successes, they've produced so many hybrids it takes your breath away. They think all of them are useful, meant to make people's lives easier and more pleasant. Indeed, they're one step away from creating a woman with a perfectly flat back, so you can fuck her from behind and have somewhere to put a glass of champagne and play solitaire at the same time.

'But let's return *ad rem*, that is to my scientific career. Not having any tangible successes to boast of, I had to create semblances of those successes. It was easy.

'Do you know that other worlds, different from ours, exist, which the Conjunction of the Spheres cut off access to? Universes, called elemental and para-elemental planes. Inhabited by creatures called demons? The accomplishments of Alzur *et consortes* were excused by saying they had gained access to those planes and creatures. That they'd managed to invoke and tame such creatures, that they'd wrested from them and gained possession of their secrets and knowledge. I think that's all nonsense and fabrication, but everybody believes it. And what can one do when faith is so

strong? In order for people to believe I was close to discovering the secrets of the old masters, I had to convince Rissberg that I know how to invoke demons. Ortolan, who'd once successfully carried out goetia, didn't want to teach me that art. He had an insultingly low opinion of my magical abilities and made me remember where my place was. Why, for the good of my career I'll remember that. They'll see!'

The black cat, weary of being stroked, hopped off the sorcerer's lap. He swept a cold glance of his golden, wide-open eyes over the Witcher. And walked away, tail held aloft.

Geralt was having more and more difficulty breathing and felt shivers shooting through his body which he couldn't control at all. The situation looked grave and only two circumstances augured well, giving him reason to hope. Firstly, he was still alive, *and where there's life there's hope*, as his preceptor in Kaer Morhen, Vesemir, used to say.

The second circumstance that augured well was Degerlund's swollen ego and conceitedness. It seemed the sorcerer had fallen in love with his own words as a young man and they were clearly the love of his life.

'Unable, thus, to become a goetic practitioner,' the sorcerer went on, twisting the medallion and endlessly delighting in his own voice, 'I had to pretend to be one. Pretend. It's known that a demon invoked by a goetic practitioner often breaks free and wreaks destruction. So, I did just that. Several times. I slaughtered several settlements. And they believed it was a demon.

'You'd be astonished how gullible they are. I once decapitated a peasant I had caught and sewed the head of a large goat onto his neck using biodegradable catgut, disguising the stitches with plaster and paint. After that I displayed it to my learned colleagues as a baphomet, the result of an extremely difficult experiment in the field of creating humans with animal heads. Only a partly successful one, because the end result didn't survive. They believed me, just imagine. I rose even higher in their esteem. They're still waiting for me to create something that will survive. I confirm their belief in this by constantly sewing some head or other onto a decapitated corpse.

'But that was a digression. Where was I? Aha, the massacred settlements. As I expected, the masters of Rissberg took them as acts of demons or energumens possessed by them. But I made a mistake,

I went too far. No one would have bothered with one settlement of woodcutters, but we slaughtered several. Bue and Bang did most of the work, but I also contributed as much as I could.

'In the first colony, Yew Trees, or some such, I didn't exactly distinguish myself. When I saw what Bue and Bang were doing I vomited, puking all over my cloak. It was only fit to be thrown away. A cloak of the best wool, trimmed with silver mink, it cost almost a hundred crowns. But then I did better and better. Firstly, I attired myself suitably, like a labourer. Secondly, I grew fond of those expeditions. It turned out there can be great pleasure in chopping off somebody's legs and watching the blood spurting from the stump. Or gouging out somebody's eye. Or tugging a handful of steaming guts from a mutilated belly . . . I shall be brief. Along with today's haul it comes to almost two score and ten persons of both sexes of various ages.

'Rissberg decided that I must be stopped. But how? They still believed in my power as a goetic practitioner and feared my demons. And feared infuriating Ortolan, who was enamoured of me. You were meant to be the solution. The Witcher.'

Geralt was breathing shallowly. And growing in optimism. His eyesight was much better and the shivers were abating. He was immune to most known toxins, and the venom of the white scorpion – fatal to an ordinary mortal – was no exception, as it was fortunately turning out. The symptoms – which were dangerous at first – were weakening and fading with time, and it was turning out that the Witcher's body was capable of neutralising the poison quite quickly. Degerlund didn't know that, or in his conceitedness was underestimating it.

'I found out they planned to send you to get me. I got slightly cold feet, I don't deny it, since I'd heard this and that about witchers, and about you in particular. I ran to Ortolan as quickly as I could, crying *save me, my beloved master.* My beloved master first told me off and muttered something about killing woodcutters being very naughty, that it wasn't nice and that it was to be the last time. But then he advised me how to trick you and lure you into a trap. How to capture you, using a teleportational sigil that I had tattooed on my manly chest a few years ago. He forbade me, however, from killing you. Don't think that it's out of kindness. He needs your eyes. To be precise: the *tapetum lucidum*, the layer of tissue lining the inside of your eyeballs, a tissue that reflects and intensifies the light directed at the photoreceptor cells, thanks to

which you can see at night and in the dark like a cat. Ortolan's newest *idée fixe* is to equip the whole of humanity with the ability to see like cats. As part of the preparations for such a lofty goal he intends to graft your *tapetum lucidum* onto some other mutation he's creating and the tissue for the implant must be taken from a live donor.'

Geralt cautiously moved his fingers and hand.

'Ortolan, an ethical and merciful mage, intends – in his boundless goodness – to spare your life after removing your eyeballs. He thinks that it's better to be blind than deceased, furthermore he hesitates at the thought of causing pain to your lover, Yennefer of Vengerberg, for whom he feels a great and – in his case, strange – affection. On top of that, he, Ortolan, is now close to completing a magical regenerational formula. In several years you'll be able to report to him and he'll restore your eyesight. Are you pleased? No? And rightly. What? Do you want to say something? Please speak.'

Geralt pretended to be having difficulty moving his lips. Actually, he didn't have to pretend at all. Degerlund raised himself from his chair and leaned over him.

'I can't understand anything.' He grimaced. 'In any case, what you have to say doesn't interest me much. Whereas I, indeed, still have something to announce to you. So, know that clairvoyance is among my numerous talents. I can see quite clearly that when Ortolan restores your freedom to you as a blind man, Bue and Bang will be waiting for you. And you will land up in my laboratory, definitively this time. I shall vivisect you. Mainly for pleasure, although I'm also a little curious as to what's inside you. When I finish, however, I shall – to use the terminology of the abattoir – portion you up. I shall send your remains piece by piece to Rissberg, as a warning of what befalls my foes. Let them see.'

Geralt gathered all his strength. There wasn't much of it.

'But where Yennefer is concerned—' the sorcerer leaned over even closer, the Witcher could smell his minty breath '—unlike Ortolan, the thought of causing her suffering pleases me inordinately. Thus, I shall cut off the part she valued most in you; I shall send it to her in Vengerb—'

Geralt placed his fingers in a Sign and touched the sorcerer's face. Sorel Degerlund choked and drooped on the chair. He snorted. His eyes had sunk deep into his skull, his head lolled on his

shoulder. The medallion chain slipped from his limp fingers.

Geralt leaped to his feet – or rather tried to. The only thing he managed to do was to fall from the chair onto the floor, his head right in front of Degerlund's shoe. The sorcerer's medallion was in front of his nose. With a blue enamel dolphin *naiant* on a golden oval. The emblem of Kerack. He didn't have time either to be surprised or to think about it. Degerlund began to wheeze loudly, it was apparent he was about to awaken. The Somne Sign had been effective, but faint and fleeting – the Witcher was too weakened by the effect of the venom.

He stood up, holding on to the table, knocking the books and scrolls from it.

Pastor burst into the room. Geralt didn't even try to use a Sign. He grabbed a leather and brass-bound grimoire from the table and struck the hunchback in the throat with it. Pastor sat down heavily on the floor, dropping the arbalest. The Witcher hit him one more time. And would have repeated it, but the incunable slipped from his numb fingers. He seized a carafe standing on the books and shattered it on Pastor's forehead. The hunchback, although covered in blood and red wine, didn't yield. He rushed at Geralt, not even brushing the slivers of crystal from his eyelids.

'Bueee!' he yelled, grabbing the Witcher by the knees. 'Baaang! Get to me! Get to—'

Geralt seized another grimoire from the table. It was heavy, with a binding encrusted with fragments of a human skull. He slammed the hunchback with it, sending bone splinters flying in all directions.

Degerlund spluttered, fighting to raise a hand. Geralt realised he was trying to cast a spell. The growing thud of heavy feet indicated that Bue and Bang were approaching. Pastor scrambled up from the floor, fumbling around, searching for the crossbow.

Geralt saw his sword on the table and seized it. He staggered, almost falling over. He grasped Degerlund by the collar and pressed the blade against his throat.

'Your sigil!' he screamed into his ear. 'Teleport us out of here!'

Bue and Bang, armed with scimitars, collided with each other in the doorway and got caught there, jammed solid. Neither of them thought of letting the other one through. The door frame creaked.

‘Teleport us!’ Geralt grabbed Degerlund by the hair, bending his head backwards. ‘Now! Or I’ll slit your throat.’

Bue and Bang tumbled out of the doorway, taking the frame with them. Pastor found the crossbow and raised it.

Degerlund opened his shirt with a trembling hand and shrieked out a spell, but before the darkness engulfed them he broke free of the Witcher and pushed him away. Geralt caught him by a lace cuff and tried to pull the sorcerer towards him, but at that moment the portal was activated and all his senses, including touch, vanished. He felt an elemental force sucking him in, jerking him and spinning him as though in a whirlpool. The cold was numbing. For a split second. One of the longer and more ghastly split seconds of his life.

He thudded against the ground. On his back.

He opened his eyes. Black gloom, impenetrable darkness, was all around him. *I’ve gone blind*, he thought. *Have I lost my sight?*

He hadn’t. It was simply a very dark night. His *tapetum lucidum* – as Degerlund had eruditely named it – had started working, picking up all the light there was in those conditions. A moment later he recognised around him the outlines of some tree trunks, bushes or undergrowth.

And above his head, when the clouds parted, he saw stars.

INTERLUDE

The following day

You had to hand it to them: the builders of Findetann knew their trade and hadn't been idle. In spite of having seen them in action several times, Shevlov watched in fascination as they assembled the piledriver again. The three connected timbers formed a tripod at the top of which a pulley was hung. A rope was tossed over the pulley and a heavy metal-edged block – called a ram in the builders' jargon – was fastened to it. Shouting rhythmically, the builders tugged on the line, lifting the ram right to the top of the tripod, then quickly released it. The ram fell heavily onto a post positioned in the hole, forcing it deep into the ground. It took three, at most four, blows of the ram for the pile to be standing securely. The builders swiftly dismantled the tripod and loaded the parts onto a wagon, during which time one of them climbed up a ladder and nailed an enamel plaque with the Redanian coat of arms – a silver eagle on a red field – to the post.

Thanks to Shevlov and his free company – and also to the piledrivers and their operation – the province of Riverside, part of the Kingdom of Redania, had increased in area that day. Quite significantly.

The foreman walked over, wiping his forehead with his cap. He was in a sweat, although he hadn't done anything, unless you count effing and blinding. Shevlov knew what the foreman would ask, because he did so each time.

'Where's the next one going? Commander?'

'I'll show you.' Shevlov reined his horse around. 'Follow me.'

The carters lashed the oxen and the builders' vehicles moved sluggishly along the ridge, along ground somewhat softened by the recent storm. They soon found themselves by the next post, which was decorated with a black plaque painted with lilies. The post was lying on the ground, having been previously rolled into the bushes; Shevlov's crew had made sure of that.

Here's how progress triumphs, thought Shevlov. *Here's how*

technical thought triumphs. The hand-sunk Temerian posts could be torn out and tossed down in a trice. The Redanian post driven in by a piledriver couldn't be pulled out of the ground so easily.

He waved a hand, indicating the direction to the builders. A few furlongs south. Beyond the village.

The residents of the village – insofar as a handful of shacks and huts could be called a village – had already been driven onto the green by Shevlov's riders, and were scurrying around, raising dust, being pushed back by the horses. The always hot-headed Escayrac wasn't sparing them the bullwhip. Others spurred their horses around the homesteads. Dogs barked, women wailed and children bawled.

Three riders trotted over to Shevlov. Yan Malkin, as skinny as a rake and nicknamed Poker. Prospero Basti, better known as Sperry. And Aileach Mor-Dhu, nicknamed Fryga, on a grey mare.

'They're gathered together, as you ordered,' said Fryga, pushing back a lynx-fur calpac. 'The entire hamlet.'

'Silence them.'

The crowd were quietened, not without the help of knouts and staves. Shevlov went closer.

'What do you call this dump?'

'Woodend.'

'Woodend, again? These peasants don't have a scrap of imagination. Lead the builders on, Sperry. Show them where they're to drive in the post, because they'll get the place wrong again.'

Sperry whistled, reining his horse around. Shevlov rode over to the huddled villagers. Fryga and Poker flanked him.

'Dwellers of Woodend!' Shevlov stood up in the stirrups. 'Heed what I say! By the will and order of His Majesty by grace here reigning King Vizimir, I inform you that this day the land up to the border posts belongs to the Kingdom of Redania, and His Majesty King Vizimir is your lord and monarch! You owe him honour, obedience and levies. And you're behind with your rent and taxes! By order of the king you are to settle your debts immediately. Into this here bailiff's coffer.'

'How so?' yelled a man in the crowd. 'What do you mean pay? We'm paid!'

‘You’ve already fleeced us for levies!’

‘Temerian bailiffs fleeced you. And illegally, for this is not Temeria, but Redania. Look where the posts are.’

‘But yesterday it was still Temeria!’ howled one of the settlers, ‘How can it be? We paid as they ordered . . .’

‘You have no right!’

‘Who?’ roared Shevlov. ‘Who said that? It is my right! I have a royal decree! We are royal troops! I said whoever wants to stay on their farm must pay the levies to the last penny! Any who resist will be banished! You paid Temeria? So you clearly think yourselves Temerians! Then scram, get over the border! But only with what you can carry, because your farms and livestock belong to Redania!’

‘Robbery! That’s robbery and plunder!’ yelled a large peasant with a shock of hair, stepping forward. ‘And you aren’t the king’s man but a brigand! You have no r—’

Escayrac rode over and lashed the loudmouth with a bullwhip. The loudmouth fell. Others were quelled with pikestaffs. Shevlov’s company knew how to cope with peasants. They had been moving the border for a week and had pacified plenty of settlements.

‘Someone’s approaching at speed.’ Fryga indicated with her scourge. ‘Will it be Fysh?’

‘And none other.’ Shevlov shielded his eyes. ‘Have that freak taken from the wagon and hand her over. And you take a few of the boys and ride around the place. Various odd settlers remain dotted throughout the clearings and logging sites, you need to inform them as well to whom they’re now paying rent. Should anyone offer resistance, you know what to do.’

Fryga smiled evilly, flashing her teeth. Shevlov sympathised with the settlers she’d be visiting. Although their fate didn’t bother him much.

He glanced up at the sun. *We must hurry*, he thought. *It’d be worth knocking down a few Temerian posts before noon. And driving in a few of ours.*

‘You, Poker, follow me. Let’s ride out to meet our guests.’

There were two guests. One was wearing a straw hat, had prominent jawbones and a jutting out chin, and his whole face was blue with several days’ beard. The second was powerfully built, a veritable giant.

‘Fysh.’

‘Sergeant.’

That annoyed Shevlov. Javil Fysh – not without reason – had brought up their old friendship, the times when they had served together in the regular army. Shevlov didn’t like to be reminded of those days. He didn’t want to be reminded about Fysh, about serving, or about his non-commissioned officer’s pay.

‘Free company.’ Fysh nodded towards the village, from where yells and crying reached them. ‘Busy, I see. Punitive expedition, is it? Will you be doing some burning?’

‘That’s my business.’

I won’t be, he thought. With regret, because he liked burning down villages, and the company did too. But he had no orders to do so. The orders were to redraw the border and collect levies from the settlers. Drive away insubordinate individuals, but not touch goods or property. For they would serve the new settlers who would be brought there. From the North, where it was crowded even on barren land.

‘I caught the freak and am holding her,’ he declared. ‘As ordered. Tied up. It wasn’t easy. Had I known I would have asked for more. But we agreed on five hundred, so I’m due five hundred.’

Fysh nodded and the giant rode up and gave Shevlov two plump purses. He had a viper curled around a dagger blade tattooed on his forearm. Shevlov knew that tattoo.

A horseman from the company appeared with the captive. The freak had a sack over her head reaching her knees, with a cord restraining her arms. Bare legs, as thin as rakes, protruded from the sack.

‘What’s this?’ Fysh pointed at the captive. ‘My dear sergeant? Five hundred Novigradian crowns? Bit steep for a pig in a poke.’

‘The sack comes free,’ replied Shevlov coldly. ‘Like this good advice. Don’t untie her and don’t look inside.’

‘Why?’

‘It’s risky. She bites. And might cast a spell.’

The giant slung the captive across his saddle. The freak, until then calm, struggled, kicked and howled in the sack. It was very little use, as the sack was holding her fast.

‘How do I know it is what I’m paying for?’ asked Fysh, ‘and not some chance maid? Like from this here village?’

‘Are you accusing me of lying?’

‘Not in the least,’ Fysh appeased him, helped by the sight of Poker stroking the shaft of a battleaxe hanging from his saddle. ‘I believe you, Shevlov. I know I can count on you. I mean we’re mates, aren’t we? From the good old days—’

‘I’m in a hurry, Fysh. Duty calls.’

‘Farewell, sergeant.’

‘I wonder,’ said Poker, watching them riding away. ‘I wonder what they want of her. That freak. You didn’t ask.’

‘I didn’t,’ Shevlov confessed coldly. ‘Because you don’t ask about things like that.’

He pitied the freak a little. But he wasn’t too bothered about her fate. He guessed it would be miserable.

CHAPTER TWELVE

A signpost stood at the crossroads, a post with planks nailed to it, indicating the four points of the compass.

*

Dawn found him where he had landed, tossed out of the portal, on the dew-soaked grass, in a thicket beside a swamp or small lake, teeming with birds, whose gaggling and quacking roused him from his sound and exhausting sleep. He had drunk a witcher's elixir during the night. He always made sure to keep some on him, in a silver tube in a hiding place sewn into his belt. The elixir, called Golden Oriole, was used as a panacea which was particularly effective against every kind of poisoning, infections and the action of all kinds of venoms and toxins. Golden Oriole had saved Geralt more often than he could remember, but drinking the elixir had never caused the effects it had that night. For an hour after drinking it he had fought cramps and extremely powerful vomiting reflexes, aware that he couldn't let himself be sick. As a result, although he had won the battle, he fell wearily into a deep sleep. Which may also have been a consequence of the combination of the scorpion's venom, the elixir and the teleportational journey.

As far as the journey was concerned, he wasn't certain what had happened, how and why the portal opened by Degerlund had spat him out here, onto the boggy wilderness. He doubted whether the sorcerer had done that deliberately; more likely it was simply a teleportational failure, something he had been afraid of for a week. Something he had heard about many times and had witnessed several times, when a portal, instead of sending the traveller where they were meant to go, threw them out somewhere else, in a totally unexpected place.

When he came to his senses, he was holding his sword in his right hand and in his clenched left hand he had a shred of material, which he identified in the morning light as a shirt sleeve. The material was cut through cleanly as though by a knife. It didn't bear the marks of blood, however, so the teleportal hadn't cut off the

sorcerer's hand, but only his shirt, Geralt realised with regret.

The worst portal failure Geralt had witnessed – which had forever discouraged him from teleportation – had occurred at the beginning of his witcher career. At that time, a fashion for being transported from place to place had prevailed among the *nouveaux riches*, wealthy lordlings and gilded youth, and some sorcerers offered such entertainment for astronomical sums. One day – the Witcher happened to have been there – a teleportation enthusiast had appeared in a portal bisected precisely down the middle. He looked like an open double bass case. Then everything flopped out of him and poured down. Fascination with teleportals decreased perceptibly after that accident.

Compared to something like that, he thought, *landing on a marsh was quite simply a luxury*.

He still hadn't fully regained his strength, was still experiencing dizziness and nausea. But there was no time to rest. He knew that portals left tracks and sorcerers had ways of tracking the path of the teleportal. Although if, as he suspected, there was a flaw in the portal, tracking his flight would be virtually impossible. But in any case, remaining for too long in the proximity of the landing place wouldn't be prudent.

He set off at a brisk pace to get warm and loosen up. *It began with the swords*, he thought, splashing through a puddle. *How had Dandelion expressed it? It's a streak of bad luck and unlucky incidents. First, I lost the swords. It's barely three weeks later, and now I've lost my mount. Roach, who I left in Pinetops, is sure to be eaten by wolves, presuming somebody doesn't find and steal her. The swords, the horse. What next? I dread to think.*

After an hour of traipsing through the marsh, he emerged onto drier ground, and after another hour happened upon a tramped down highway. And reached the crossroads after half an hour's march along it.

*

A signpost stood at the crossroads, a post with planks nailed to it, indicating the four points of the compass. They had all been shat on by birds of passage and copiously dotted by crossbow bolt holes. It appeared that every traveller felt duty bound to shoot at the

signpost. In order, then, to decipher the words, one had to approach quite close.

The Witcher went over. And decoded the directions. The plank pointing westwards – according to the position of the sun – bore the name of Chippira, and the opposite one pointed to Tegmond. The third plank indicated the way to Findetann, while the fourth God knew where, because someone had covered the lettering in pitch. In spite of that, Geralt already more or less knew where he was.

The teleport had tossed him out on the marsh created by two branches of the River Pontar. The southern branch, owing to its size, had even been given its own name by cartographers – and thus appeared on many maps as the Embla. The land lying between the branches – or rather the scrap of land – was called Emblonia. At least it had been once. And quite a long time ago had stopped being called anything. The Kingdom of Emblonia had ceased to exist around half a century before. And there were reasons for that.

In most kingdoms, duchies and other forms of government and social communities in the lands Geralt knew, things were in order and in fairly good shape – it would be reasonable to state. Admittedly, the system faltered occasionally, but it functioned. In the vast majority of the social communities the ruling class ruled, rather than just stealing and organising by turns gambling and prostitution. Only a small percentage of the social elite consisted of people who thought that ‘Hygiene’ was a prostitute and ‘gonorrhoea’ a member of the lark family. Only a small number of the labouring and farming folk were morons who lived solely for today and today’s vodka, incapable of comprehending with their vestigial intellects something as incomprehensible as tomorrow and tomorrow’s vodka. Most of the priests didn’t corrupt minors or swindle money out of the people, but dwelt in temples, devoting themselves wholly to attempts at fathoming the insoluble mysteries of their faith. Psychopaths, freaks, oddballs, and dullards kept away from politics and important positions in the government and administration, busying themselves instead with the ruination of their own personal lives. Village idiots hunkered down behind barns and didn’t try to act as tribunes of the people. Thus it was in most states.

But the Kingdom of Emblonia wasn’t part of the majority. It was a minority in all the above-mentioned respects. And in many others.

Hence, it fell into decline. And finally disappeared. So its powerful neighbours, Temeria and Redania, fought over it. Emblonia, though a politically inept creation, possessed certain wealth. For it lay in the alluvial valley of the River Pontar, which for centuries had deposited silt there, carried by floods. Fen soil – an extremely fertile and agriculturally high-yield variety – was formed from the silt. Under the rule of Emblonia's kings, the fen soil began to turn into a swampy wasteland, on which little could be grown – much less harvested. Meanwhile, Temeria and Redania were recording considerable increases in population, and agricultural production had become a matter of vital importance. Emblonia's fen soil tempted. So, the two kingdoms, divided by the River Pontar, carved up Emblonia between themselves without further ado and struck its name from the map. The part annexed by Temeria was called Pontaria and what fell to Redania became Riverside. Hordes of settlers were brought in to work the soil. Under the gaze of able stewards and owing to judicious agriculture and drainage, the region, though small, soon became a veritable agrarian Horn of Plenty.

Disputes also quickly sprang up, becoming more heated the more abundant became the harvests yielded by the Pontarian fen soil. The treaty demarcating the border between Temeria and Redania contained clauses permitting all sorts of interpretations, and the maps appended to the treaty were useless because the cartographers botched their work. The river itself also played a part – after periods of heavy rain it would alter and move its course by two or even three miles. And so the Horn of Plenty turned into a bone of contention. The plans for dynastic marriages and alliances came to naught, and diplomatic notes, tariff wars and trade embargos began. The border conflicts grew stronger and bloodshed seemed inevitable. Then finally occurred. And continued to occur regularly.

In his wanderings in search of work, Geralt usually avoided places beset by armed clashes, because it was difficult to find a job. Having experienced regular armies, mercenaries and marauders once or twice, the farmers became convinced that werewolves, strigas, trolls under bridges and barrow wights were actually trifling problems and minor threats and that by and large hiring a witcher was a waste of money. And that there were more urgent matters like, say, rebuilding a cottage burned down by the army and buying new hens to replace the ones the soldiers had stolen and devoured. For these reasons, Geralt was unfamiliar with the lands of Emblonia

– or Pontaria and Riverside, according to more recent maps. He didn't especially have any idea which of the places named on the signpost were closer and where he ought to head from the crossroads in order to bid farewell to the wilderness as quickly as possible and greet any kind of civilisation again.

Geralt decided on Findetann, which meant heading north. For more or less in that direction lay Novigrad, where he had to get to if he was to recover his swords, and by the fifteenth of July at that.

After around an hour of brisk marching he walked right into what he had so wanted to avoid.

*

There was a thatched peasant homestead and several shacks close to the logging site. The fact that something was occurring there was being announced by the loud barking of a dog and the furious clucking of poultry. The screaming of a child and the crying of a woman. And swearing.

He approached, cursing under his breath both his ill luck and his scruples.

Feathers were flying and an armed man was tying a fowl to his saddle. Another was thrashing a peasant cringing on the ground with a scourge. Another was struggling with a woman in torn clothing and the child hanging on to her.

He walked up and without thinking twice or speaking, seized the raised hand holding the scourge and twisted. The armed man howled. Geralt shoved him against the wall of a hen house. He hauled the other one away from the woman by the collar and pushed him up against the fence.

'Begone,' he stated curtly. 'This minute.'

He quickly drew his sword as a sign for them to treat him in accordance with the gravity of the situation. And remind them emphatically of the possible consequences of wrong-headed behaviour.

One of the armed men laughed loudly. The other joined in, taking hold of his sword hilt.

'Who are you assaulting, vagabond? Do you seek death?'

‘Begone, I said.’

The armed soldier tying on the fowl turned around from the horse. And was revealed to be a woman. A pretty one, in spite of her unpleasantly narrowed eyes.

‘Had enough of life?’ It turned out the woman was able to contort her lips even more grotesquely. ‘Or perhaps you’re retarded? Perhaps you can’t count? I’ll help you. There’s only one of you, there are three of us. Meaning you’re outnumbered. Meaning you ought to turn around and sod off as fast as your legs can carry you. While you still have any.’

‘Begone. I won’t say it again.’

‘Aha. Three people are a piece of cake to you. And a dozen?’

The sound of hooves thudding. The Witcher looked around. Nine armed riders. Pikes and bear spears were pointed at him.

‘You! Good-for-nothing! Drop your sword!’

He ignored the instruction and dodged towards the hen house to have some protection at his back.

‘What’s going on, Fryga?’

‘This settler is resisting,’ snorted the woman addressed as Fryga. ‘Claiming that he won’t pay the levy because he’s already paid it, blah, blah, blah. So, we decided to teach the oaf some sense, and then suddenly this grey-haired fellow sprang up from nowhere. A knight, it turns out, a noble man, a defender of the poor and oppressed. Just him alone and he went for our throats.’

‘So high-spirited?’ chortled one of the horsemen, advancing on Geralt and aiming his pike at him. ‘Let’s have him dance a jig!’

‘Drop your sword,’ ordered a horseman in a plumed beret, who seemed to be the commander. ‘Sword on the ground!’

‘Shall I spear him, Shevlov?’

‘Leave him, Sperry.’

Shevlov looked down on the Witcher from the saddle.

‘You won’t drop your sword, eh?’ he commented. ‘Are you such a hero? Such a hard man? You eat oysters in their shells? Washed down with turpentine? Bow down before no one? And only stand up for the unjustly accused? Are you so sensitive to wrongs? We’ll find out. Poker, Ligenza, Floquet!’

The three armed soldiers obeyed their leader at once, clearly having experience in that regard. They dismounted, their movements well-drilled. One of them held a knife to the settler's throat, the other yanked the woman by the hair and the third grabbed the child. The child began yelling.

'Drop your sword,' said Shevlov. 'This second. Or . . . Ligenza! Slit the peasant's throat.'

Geralt dropped his sword. They immediately leaped on him, pressing him against the planks and menacing him with their blades.

'Aha!' said Shevlov, dismounting. 'Success!'

'You're in trouble, peasant champion,' he added dryly. 'You've obstructed and sabotaged a royal detachment. And I have orders to arrest and put before the courts anyone guilty of that.'

'Arrest?' The man named Ligenza scowled. 'Burden ourselves? Throw a noose round his neck and string him up! And that's that!'

'Or cut him to pieces on the spot!'

'I've seen this fellow before,' one of the riders suddenly said. 'He's a witcher.'

'A what?'

'A witcher. A wizard making his living killing monsters for money.'

'A wizard? Urgh, urgh! Kill him before he casts a spell on us.'

'Shut up, Escayrac. Speak, Trent. Where did you see him and in what circumstances?'

'It was in Maribor. In the service of the castellan there, who had hired him to kill some beast. I don't recall what. But I remember him from his white hair.'

'Ha! So, if he attacked us, somebody must have hired him to.'

'Monsters are witchers' work. They just defend people from monsters.'

'Aha!' Fryga pushed back her lynx-fur calpac. 'I said so! A defender! He saw Ligenza flogging the peasant and Floquet making ready to ravish that woman . . .'

'And categorised you correctly?' Shevlov snorted. 'As monsters? So, you were lucky. I jest. Because the matter is simple, it

seems to me. When serving in the army I heard something quite different about witchers. They hire themselves out for everything: to spy, to guard, even to assassinate. They called them the “Cats”. Trent saw this one here in Maribor, in Temeria. Meaning he’s a Temerian hireling, employed regarding the border posts. They warned me in Findetann about Temerian mercenaries and are promising a bounty for any caught. So, let’s take him in fetters to Findetann, turn him in to the commandant and claim the reward. Come on, tie him up. What are you waiting for? Are you afraid? He’s not offering resistance. He knows what we’d do to the little peasants if he tries anything.’

‘And who’s going to fucking touch him? If he’s a wizard?’

‘Knock on wood!’ Ligenza spat on the ground.

‘Lily-livered cowards!’ yelled Fryga, untying the strap of her saddle bags. ‘Yellow-bellies! I’ll do it, since no one here has the balls!’

Geralt allowed himself to be tied up. He decided to comply. For the time being.

Two ox wagons trundled out of the forest, wagons laden with posts and elements of some kind of wooden construction.

‘Someone go to the carpenters and the bailiff.’ Shevlov pointed. ‘Send them back. We’ve sunk enough posts, it’ll suffice for now. We shall take a rest here, meanwhile. Search the farmyard for anything fit as fodder for the horses. And some vittals for us.’

Ligenza picked up and examined Geralt’s sword, Dandelion’s acquisition. Shevlov snatched it out of his hand. He hefted it, wielded it and whirled it around.

‘You were lucky we came in force,’ he said. ‘He would have carved you up no problem: you, Fryga and Floquet. Legends circulate about these witcher swords. The best steel, oftentimes folded and forged, folded and forged again. And they’re protected by special spells. Thus achieving exceptional tensile strength and sharpness. A witcher edge, I tell you, pierces armour plate and mail like a linen shift, and cuts through every other blade like noodles.’

‘That cannot be,’ stated Sperry. Like many of the others, his whiskers were dripping with the cream they had found in the cottage and guzzled. ‘Not like noodles.’

‘I can’t believe it either,’ added Fryga.

‘Difficult to believe something like that,’ threw in Poker.

‘Really?’ Shevlov assumed a swordsman’s pose. ‘Face me, one of you, and we’ll find out. Come on, who’s willing? Well? Why has it gone so quiet?’

‘Very well.’ Escayrac stepped forward and drew his sword. ‘I shall face you. What do I care? We shall see whether . . . *En garde*, Shevlov.’

‘*En garde*. One, two . . . three!’

The swords struck each other with a clang. The metal whined mournfully as it snapped. Fryga ducked as a broken piece of blade whistled past her temple.

‘Fuck,’ said Shevlov, staring disbelievingly at the blade, which had broken a few inches above the gilded cross guard.

‘And not a notch on mine!’ Escayrac raised his sword. ‘Ha, ha, ha! Not a notch! Nor even a mark.’

Fryga giggled like a schoolgirl. Ligenza bleated like a billy goat. The rest guffawed.

‘Witcher sword?’ snorted Sperry. ‘Cuts through like noodles? *You’re* the fucking noodle.’

‘It’s . . .’ Shevlov pursed his lips. ‘It’s sodding scrap. It’s trash . . . And you . . .’

He tossed away the remains of the sword, glowered at Geralt and pointed an accusing finger at him.

‘You’re a fraudster. An imposter and a fraudster. You feign to be a witcher, and wield such trash . . . You carry junk like this instead of a decent blade? How many good people have you deceived, I wonder? How many paupers have you fleeced, swindler? Oh, you’ll confess your peccadillos in Findetann, the starosta will see to that!’

He panted, spat and stamped his foot.

‘To horse! Let’s get out of here!’

They rode away, laughing, singing and whistling. The settler and his family gloomily watched them go. Geralt saw their lips moving. It wasn’t difficult to guess what fate and what mishaps they were wishing on Shevlov and company.

The settler couldn’t have expected in his wildest dreams that

his wishes would come true to the letter. And that it would happen so swiftly.

*

They arrived at the crossroads. The highway leading westwards along the ravine was rutted by wheels and hooves; the carpenters' wagons had clearly gone that way. As did the company. Geralt walked behind Fryga's horse, tied to a rope attached to the pommel of her saddle.

The horse of Shevlov – who was riding at the front – whinnied and reared up.

Something suddenly flared on the side of the ravine, lit up and became a milky, iridescent globe. Then the globe vanished and a strange group appeared in its stead. There were several figures embraced and intertwined together.

'What the devil?' cursed Poker and rode over to Shevlov, who was quietening down his horse. 'What's going on?'

The group separated. Into four figures. A slim, long-haired and slightly effeminate man. Two long-armed giants with bow legs. And a hunched dwarf with a great double-limbed steel arbalest.

'Buueh-hhhrrr-eeeehhh-bueeeeh! Bueeh-heeh!'

'Draw your weapons!' yelled Shevlov. 'Draw your weapons, stand your ground!'

First one and then the other bowstring of the great arbalest clanged. Shevlov died at once from a bolt to the head. Poker looked down at his belly, through which a bolt had just passed, before he fell from his saddle.

'Fight!' The company drew their swords as one. 'Fight!'

Geralt had no intention of standing idly by to wait for the result of the engagement. He formed his fingers in the Igni Sign and burned through the rope binding his arms. He caught Fryga by the belt and hurled her to the ground. And leaped into the saddle.

There was a blinding flash and the horses began to neigh, kick and thrash the air with their forehooves. Several horsemen fell and screamed as they were trampled. Fryga's grey mare also bolted before the Witcher could bring her under control. Fryga leaped up,

jumped and seized the bridle and reins. Geralt drove her away with a punch and spurred the mare into a gallop.

Pressed to the steed's neck, he didn't see Degerlund frightening the horses and blinding their riders with magical lightning bolts. Or see Bue and Bang falling on the horsemen, roaring, one with a battleaxe, the other with a broad scimitar. He didn't see the splashes of blood, didn't hear the screams of the slaughtered.

He didn't see Escayrac die, and immediately after him Sperry, filleted like a fish by Bang. He didn't see Bue fell Floquet and his steed, and then drag him out from under the horse. But Floquet's stifled cry, the sound of a rooster being butchered, lingered long.

Until he turned from the highway and dashed into the forest.

Mahakam potato soup is prepared thus: gather chanterelles in the summer and men-on-horseback in the autumn. If it is the winter or early spring, take a sizeable handful of dried mushrooms. Put them in a pan and cover them with water, soak them overnight, salt them in the morning, toss in half an onion and boil. Drain them, but do not discard the broth; instead be vigilant in removing the sand that has surely settled at the bottom of the pan. Boil the potatoes and dice them. Take some fatty bacon, chop and fry it. Cut the onion into half slices and fry them in the bacon fat until they almost stick. Take a great cauldron, toss everything into it, not forgetting the chopped mushrooms. Pour on the mushroom broth, add water as needs be, pour on sour rye starter to taste. (How to execute the starter may be found elsewhere in another receipt.) Boil and season with salt, pepper and marjoram according to taste and liking. Add melted fatback. Stirring in cream is a matter of taste, but heed: it is against our dwarven tradition, for it is a human fashion to add cream to potato soup.

Eleonora Rhundurin-Pigott, *Perfect Mahakam Cuisine, the Precise Science of Cooking and Making Dishes from Meats, Fishes and Vegetables, also Seasoning Diverse Sauces, Baking Cakes, Making Jam, Preparing Cooked Meats, Preserves, Wines, Spirits, and Various Useful Cooking and Preserving Secrets, Essential for Every Good and Thrifty Housewife*

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Like almost all post stations, this one was located at a junction where two roads intersected. It was a building with a shingle roof and a columned arcade with an adjoining stable and woodshed, set among white-barked birches. It was empty. There seemed to be no guests, nor travellers.

The exhausted grey mare stumbled, walking stiffly and unsteadily, her head hanging almost to the ground. Geralt led her and handed the reins over to the stable lad. He looked about forty and was bent over under the burden of his years. He stroked the mare's neck and examined his hand. He looked Geralt up and down, then spat right between his feet. Geralt shook his head and sighed. It didn't surprise him. He knew he was at fault, that he'd overdone it with the gallop, and over difficult terrain, what's more. He'd wanted to get as far away as possible from Sorel Degerlund and his minions. He was aware that it was a woeful justification; he also had a low opinion of people who drove their mounts into the ground.

The stable lad went away, leading the mare and muttering to himself. It wasn't difficult to guess what he was muttering and what he thought. Geralt sighed, pushed the door open and entered the station.

It smelled agreeable inside and the Witcher realised he hadn't eaten for more than a day.

'There's no horse,' said the postmaster, emerging from behind the counter and anticipating his question. 'And the next mail coach won't be here for two days.'

'I could use some food.' Geralt looked upwards at the ridge and rafters of the high vault. 'I'll pay.'

'We have none.'

'Oh, come, postmaster,' came a voice from the corner of the chamber. 'Does it behove you to treat a traveller so?'

In the corner, seated at a table, was a dwarf. Flaxen-haired and flaxen-bearded, he was dressed in an embroidered, patterned maroon jerkin, embellished with brass buttons on the front and

sleeves. He had ruddy cheeks and a prominent nose. Geralt had occasionally seen unusually shaped, slightly pink potatoes at the market. The dwarf's nose was of an identical colour. And shape.

'You offered me potato soup.' The dwarf glared sternly at the postmaster from under very bushy eyebrows. 'You surely won't contend that your wife only prepares one portion of it. I'll wager any sum that it also suffices for this gentleman. Be seated, traveller. Will you take a beer?'

'With pleasure, thank you,' replied Geralt, sitting down and digging out a coin from the hiding place in his belt. 'But allow me to treat you, good sir. Despite the misleading impression, I am neither a tramp nor a vagrant. I am a witcher. On the job, which is why my apparel is shabby and my appearance unkempt. Which I beg you to forgive. Two beers, postmaster.'

The beers appeared on the table in no time.

'My wife will serve the potato soup shortly,' grunted the postmaster. 'And don't look askance at what just happened. I have to have vittals ready the whole time. For were some magnate, royal messengers or post to arrive . . . And were I to run out and have nothing to serve them—'

'Yes, yes . . .'

Geralt raised his mug. He knew plenty of dwarves and knew their drinking customs and proposed a toast.'To the propitiousness of a good cause!'

'And to the confusion of whoresons!' added the dwarf, knocking his mug against Geralt's. 'It's pleasant to drink with someone who observes custom and etiquette. I am Addario Bach. Actually Addarion, but everyone calls me Addario.'

'Geralt of Rivia.'

'The Witcher Geralt of Rivia,' declared Addario Bach, wiping the froth from his whiskers. 'Your name rings a bell. You're a well-travelled fellow and it's no wonder you're familiar with customs. I, mark you, have come here on the mail coach, or the dilly, as they call it in the South. And I'm waiting for a transfer to the mail coach plying between Dorian and Tretogor in Redania. Well, that potato soup is here at last. Let's see what it's like. You ought to know that our womenfolk in Mahakam make the best potato soup, you'll never eat its like. Made from a thick starter of black bread and rye flour, with mushrooms and well-fried onions . . .'

The post station potato soup was excellent, rich with chanterelles and fried onions, and if it was inferior to the Mahakam version made by dwarven women then Geralt never found out in what respect, as Addario Bach ate briskly, in silence and without commenting.

The postmaster suddenly looked out of the window and his reaction made Geralt do likewise.

Two horses had arrived outside the station, both looking even worse than Geralt's captured mount. And there were three horsemen. To be precise, two men and a woman. The Witcher looked around the chamber vigilantly.

The door creaked. Fryga entered the station. And behind her Ligenza and Trent.

'If it's horses—' The postmaster stopped abruptly when he saw the sword in Fryga's hand.

'You guessed,' she finished his sentence. 'Horses are precisely what we need. Three. So, move yourself, bring them from the stable.'

'—you want—'

The postmaster didn't finish that time, either. Fryga leaped at him and flashed a blade before his eyes. Geralt stood up.

'Hey there!'

All three of them turned towards him.

'It's you,' drawled Fryga. 'You. Damned vagabond.'

She had a bruise on her cheek where he'd punched her.

'All because of you,' she rasped. 'Shevlov, Poker, Sperry . . . All slaughtered, the entire squad. And you, whoreson, knocked me from the saddle, stole my horse and bolted like a coward. For which I shall now repay you.'

She was short and slightly built. It didn't deceive the Witcher. He was aware, because he had experienced it, that in life – as at a post station – even very hideous things could be delivered in quite unspectacular packages.

'This is a post station!' the postmaster yelled from behind the counter. 'Under royal protection!'

'Did you hear that?' Geralt asked calmly. 'A post station. Get

you gone.'

'You, O grey scallywag, are still feeble with your reckoning,' Fryga hissed. 'Do you need help counting again? There's one of you and three of us. Meaning there are more of us.'

'There are three of you.' He swept his gaze over them. 'And one of me. But there aren't more of you at all. It's something of a mathematical paradox and an exception to the rule.'

'Meaning?'

'Meaning get the fuck out of here. While you're still capable.'

He spotted a gleam in her eye and knew at once that she was one of those few who could strike in quite a different place than where they're looking. Fryga must only recently have begun perfecting that trick, for Geralt effortlessly dodged her treacherous blow. He outmanoeuvred her with a short half-twist, kicked her left leg out from under her and threw her onto the counter. She slammed against the wood with a loud thud.

Ligenza and Trent must have previously seen Fryga in action, because her failure left them simply dumbfounded. They froze open-mouthed. For long enough to allow the Witcher to seize a broom he had spied earlier in the corner. First, Trent was hit in the face with the birch twigs, then across the head with the handle. And after that Geralt put the broom in front of his legs, kicked him behind the knees and tripped him up.

Ligenza calmed down, drew his sword and leaped forward, slashing powerfully with a reverse blow. Geralt evaded it with a half-turn, spun right around, stuck out his elbow, and Ligenza – his momentum carrying him forward – jabbed his windpipe onto Geralt's elbow. He wheezed and fell to his knees. Before he fell, Geralt plucked the sword from his fingers and threw it vertically upwards. The sword plunged into a rafter and remained there.

Fryga attacked low and Geralt barely had time to dodge. He knocked her sword hand, caught her by the arm, spun her around, tripped her with the broom handle and slammed her onto the counter again.

Trent leaped for him and Geralt struck him very fast in the face with the broom: once, twice, three times. Then hit him with the handle on one temple, then on the other and then very hard in the neck. The Witcher shoved the broom handle between his legs, stepped in close, seized Trent by the wrist, twisted it, took the

sword from his hand and threw it upwards. The sword sank into a rafter and remained there. Trent stepped back, tripped over a bench and fell down. Geralt decided there was no need to harm him any further.

Ligenza got to his feet, but stood motionless, with arms hanging limp, staring upwards at the swords stuck high up in the rafters, out of reach. Fryga attacked.

She whirled her blade, feinted, then made a short reverse stroke. The style was well-suited to tavern brawls, at close quarters and in poor lighting. The Witcher wasn't bothered by lighting or the lack of it, and was only too familiar with the style. Fryga's blade cut through the air and the feint wheeled her around so the Witcher ended up behind her back. She screamed as he put the broom handle under her arm and twisted her elbow. He yanked the sword from her fingers and shoved her away.

'I thought I'd keep this one for myself,' he said, examining the blade. 'As compensation for the effort I've put in. But I've changed my mind. I won't carry a bandit's weapon.'

He threw the sword upwards. The blade plunged into the rafters and shuddered. Fryga, as pale as parchment, flashed her teeth behind twisted lips. She hunched over, snatching a knife from her boot.

'That,' he said, looking her straight in the eyes, 'was a singularly foolish decision.'

Hooves thudded on the road, horses snorted, weapons clanked. The courtyard outside the station suddenly teemed with riders.

'If I were you I'd sit down on a bench in the corner.' Geralt addressed the three of them. 'And pretend I wasn't here.'

The door slammed open, spurs jangled and soldiers in fox fur hats and short black jerkins with silver braiding entered the chamber. Their leader was a man with a moustache and a scarlet sash.

'Royal forces!' he announced, resting his fist on a mace stuck into his belt. 'Sergeant Kovacs, Second Squadron of the First Company, the armed forces of graciously reigning King Foltest, the Lord of Temeria, Pontaria and Mahakam. In pursuit of a Redanian gang!'

Fryga, Trent and Ligenza, on a bench in the corner, examined

the tips of their boots.

‘The border was crossed by a lawless band of Redanian marauders, hired thugs and robbers,’ Kovacs went on. ‘Those ne’er-do-wells are knocking over border posts, burning, pillaging, torturing and killing royal subjects. They would stand no chance in an engagement with the royal army, thus they are hiding in the forests, waiting for a chance to slip across the border. More such as them may appear in the locality. May you be warned that giving them help, information or any support will be construed as treason, and treason means the noose!

‘Have any strangers been seen here at the station? Any newcomers? I mean suspicious individuals? And I say further that for identifying a marauder or helping in his capture there is a reward. Of one hundred orens. Postmaster?’

The postmaster shrugged, bowed his head, mumbled something and began wiping the counter, leaning very low over it.

The sergeant looked around and walked over to Geralt, spurs clanking.

‘Who are you? Ha! I believe I’ve seen you before. In Maribor. I recognise you by your white hair. You are a witcher, aren’t you? A tracker and despatcher of divers monsters. Am I right?’

‘You are.’

‘Then I have no quarrel with you; and your profession, I must say, is an honest one,’ pronounced the sergeant, simultaneously eying Addario Bach appraisingly. ‘Master Dwarf is also beyond suspicion, since no dwarves have been seen among the marauders. But for form’s sake I ask: what are you doing at the station?’

‘I came from Cidaris on a stagecoach and await a transfer. Time is dragging, so the honourable witcher and I are sitting together, conversing and converting beer into urine.’

‘A transfer, you say,’ repeated the sergeant. ‘I understand. And you two men? Who might you be? Yes, you, I’m talking to you!’

Trent opened his mouth. Blinked. And blurted something out.

‘What? Hey? Get up! Who are you, I ask?’

‘Leave him, officer,’ Addario Bach said freely. ‘He’s my servant, employed by me. He’s a halfwit, an errant imbecile. It’s a family affliction. By great fortune his younger siblings are normal. Their mother finally understood she shouldn’t drink from the

puddles outside a plague house when pregnant.'

Trent opened his mouth even wider, lowered his head, grunted and groaned. Ligenza also grunted and made a movement as though to stand up. The dwarf laid a hand on his shoulder.

'Don't get up, lad. And keep quiet, keep quiet. I know the theory of evolution, I know what creature humans evolved from, you don't have to keep reminding me. Let him off, too, commandant, sir. He's also my servant.'

'Hm, yes . . .' The sergeant continued to examine them suspiciously. 'Servants, is it? If you say so . . . And she? That young woman in male attire? Hey! Get up, for I wish to look at you! Who be you? Answer when you're asked!'

'Ha, ha, commandant, sir,' the dwarf laughed. 'She? She's a harlot, I mean a wife of loose morals. I hired her in Cidaris in order to bed her. You don't miss home if you journey with a supply of fanny, any philosopher will certify to that.'

He gave Fryga a firm slap on the backside. Fryga blanched in fury and ground her teeth.

'Indeed.' The sergeant grimaced. 'How come I didn't notice at once? Why, it's obvious. A half-elf.'

'You've got half a prick,' Fryga snapped. 'Half the size of what's considered normal.'

'Quiet, quiet,' Addario Bach soothed her. 'Don't take umbrage, colonel. I simply landed an obstreperous whore.'

A soldier rushed into the chamber and submitted a report. Sergeant Kovacs stood up straight.

'The gang has been tracked down!' he declared. 'We must give chase at all speed! Forgive the disturbance. At your service!'

He exited with the soldiers. A moment later the thud of hooves reached them from the courtyard.

'Forgive me that spectacle, forgive my spontaneous words and coarse gestures,' Addario Bach said to Fryga, Trent and Ligenza, after a moment's silence. 'In truth, I know you not, I care little for you and rather don't like you, but I like scenes of hanging even less, the sight of hanged men kicking their feet depresses me deeply. Which explains my dwarven frivolity.'

'You owe your lives to his dwarven frivolity,' added Geralt. 'It

would be polite to thank the dwarf. I saw you in action in the peasant homestead, and I know what kind of rogues you are. I wouldn't lift a finger in your defence. I wouldn't want or even know how to play such a scene as this noble dwarf did. And you'd already be hanging, all three of you. So be gone from here. I would advise the opposite direction to the one chosen by the sergeant and his cavalry.

'Not a chance,' he cut them off on seeing their gaze directed towards the swords stuck into the rafters. 'You won't get them back. Without them you'll be less inclined towards pillage and extortion. Begone.'

'It was tense,' sighed Addario Bach, soon after the door closed on the three of them. 'Damn it, my hands are still shaking a bit. Yours are not?'

'No.' Geralt smiled at his recollections. 'In that respect, I am . . . somewhat impaired.'

'Lucky for some.' The dwarf grinned. 'Even their impairments are nice. Another beer?'

'No thank you.' Geralt shook his head. 'Time I was going. I've found myself in a situation, so to say, where haste is rather advisable. And it would be rather unwise to stay in one place too long.'

'I rather noticed. And won't ask questions. But do you know what, Witcher? Somehow the urge to stay at this station and wait idly for the coach for two days has left me. Firstly, because the boredom would do for me. And secondly, because that maiden you defeated with a broom in that duel said goodbye to me with a strange expression. Why, in the fervour, I exaggerated a tiny bit. She probably isn't one of those you can get away with slapping on the bottom and calling a whore. She's liable to return, and I'd prefer not to be here when she does. Perhaps, then, we'll set off together?'

'Gladly.' Geralt smiled again. 'It's not so lonely on a journey with a good companion, any philosopher will certify to that. As long as the direction suits us both. I must to Novigrad. I must get there by the fifteenth of July. By the fifteenth without fail.'

He had to be in Novigrad by the fifteenth of July at the latest. He stressed that when the sorcerers were hiring him, buying two weeks of his time. *No problem*. Pinety and Tzara had looked at him superciliously. *No problem, Witcher. You'll be in Novigrad before you*

know it. We'll teleport you straight into the Main Street.

'By the fifteenth, ha.' The dwarf ruffled up his beard. 'Today is the ninth. There's not much time left, for it's a long road. But there's a way for you to get there on time.'

He stood up, took a wide-brimmed, pointed hat down from a peg and put it on. He slung a bag over his shoulder.

'I'll explain the matter to you on the road. Let's be going, Geralt of Rivia. For this way suits me down to the ground.'

*

They walked briskly, perhaps too briskly. Addario Bach turned out to be a typical dwarf. Although dwarves were, when in need or for reasons of comfort, capable of using every kind of vehicle or riding, pack or harness animal, they decidedly preferred walking. They were born walkers. A dwarf was able to cover a distance of thirty miles a day, as many as a man on horseback, and, what's more, carrying luggage that a normal man couldn't even lift. A human was incapable of keeping up with an unburdened marching dwarf. And neither was the Witcher. Geralt had forgotten that, and after some time was forced to ask Addario to slow down a little.

They walked along forest trails and even at times across rough ground. Addario knew the way, he was very knowledgeable about the area. He explained that in Cidaris lived his family, which was so large that some kind of festivity was forever being held, be it a wedding, christening, funeral or wake. In keeping with dwarven customs, failure to appear at such a gathering could only be excused with a death certificate signed by a notary, and living family members could not get out of them. Thus Addario knew the way to Cidaris and back perfectly.

'Our destination,' he explained as he walked, 'is the settlement of Wiaterna, which lies in the overflow area of the Pontar. There's a port in Wiaterna where barques and boats often moor. With a bit of luck, we'll soon happen upon some specimen or other and embark. I must to Tretogor, so I shall disembark in Crane Tussock, while you will sail further and be in Novigrad in some three or four days. Believe me, it's the quickest way.'

'I do. Slow down, Addario, please. I can barely keep up. Is

your profession in some way connected to walking? Are you a hawker?'

'I'm a miner. In a copper mine.'

'Of course. Every dwarf is a miner. And works in the mine in Mahakam. Stands at the coalface with a pick and mines coal.'

'You're succumbing to stereotypes. Soon you'll be saying that every dwarf uses coarse language. And after a few stiff drinks attacks people with a battleaxe.'

'Wouldn't dream of it.'

'My mine isn't in Mahakam, but in Coppertown, near Tretogor. I don't stand up or mine, but I play the horn in the colliery brass band.'

'Interesting.'

'Actually, something else is interesting here,' laughed the dwarf. 'An amusing coincidence. One of our brass band's showpieces is called *The March of the Witchers.* It goes like this: *Tara-rara, boom, boom, umpa-umpa, rim-sim-sim, paparara-tara-rara, tara-rara, boom-boom-boom . . .*'

'How the hell did you come up with that name? Have you ever seen a witcher marching? Where? When?'

'In truth—' Addario Bach became a little disconcerted '—it's only a slightly reworked version of *The Parade of the Strongmen*. But all colliery brass bands play either *The Parade of the Strongmen, The Entrance of the Athletes* or *The Marches of the Old Comrades*. We wanted to be original. *Ta-ra-ra, boom-de-ay*!'

'Slow down or I'll croak!'

*

It was totally deserted in the forests. And quite the opposite in the meadows and forest clearings they often happened upon. Work was in full swing there. Hay was being mowed, raked and formed into ricks and stooks. The dwarf greeted the mowers with cheerful shouts, and they responded in kind. Or didn't.

'That reminds me of another of our band's marches.' Addario pointed at the toiling labourers. 'Entitled *Haymaking*. We often play

it, especially in the summer season. And sing along to it, too. We have a poet at the pit, he composed some clever rhymes; you can even sing it *a cappella*. It goes like this:

The men go forth to mow
The women they follow
They look up and they cower
They fear a damp'ning shower
We huddle to keep warm
And hide from the fierce storm
Our shafts we proudly vaunt
And the tempest we taunt

And from the beginning. It's fine to march to, isn't it?'

'Slow down, Addario!'

'You can't slow down! It's a marching song! With a marching rhythm and metre!'

*

There were some remains of a wall showing white on a hillock, and the ruins of a building and a familiar-looking tower. Geralt recognised the temple from the tower; he couldn't remember which deity was linked to it, but he'd heard various stories about it. Priests had lived there long ago. Rumour had it that when their rapacity, riotous debauchery and lasciviousness could no longer be tolerated, the local residents chased them away and drove them into a dense forest, where, as rumour had it, they occupied themselves converting the forest spirits. Apparently with miserable results.

'It's Old Erem,' pronounced Addario. 'We're sticking to our route and making good time. We should arrive in Sylvan Dam by evening.'

*

Upstream, the brook they were walking beside had bubbled over boulders and races, and once downstream spread out wide, forming a large pool. This was helped by a wood and earth dam that arrested the current. Some work was going on by the dam, a group of people were busily toiling there.

'We're in Sylvan Dam,' said Addario. 'The construction you can see down there is the dam itself. It's used for floating timber from the clearing. The river, as you heed, is not navigable, being too shallow. So, the water level rises, the timber is gathered and then the dam is opened. That causes a large wave facilitating the rafting. The raw material for the production of charcoal is transported this way. Charcoal—'

'—is indispensable for the smelting of iron,' Geralt finished his sentence. 'And smelting is the most important and most promising branch of industry. I know. That was clarified for me quite recently by a certain sorcerer. One familiar with charcoal and smelting.'

'No wonder he's familiar,' snorted the dwarf. 'The Sorcerers' Chapter is the major shareholder of the companies of the industrial complex at Gors Velen and it owns several foundries and metalworks outright. The sorcerers derive substantial profits from smelting. From other branches as well. Deservedly too; after all, they largely created the technology. They might, however, give up their hypocrisy and admit that magic isn't charity, isn't altruistic philanthropy, but an industry calculated to make a profit. But why am I telling you this? You know yourself. Come with me, there's a small tavern over there, let's rest. And we can doubtless get a bed there, for look, it's growing dark.'

*

The small tavern was in no way worthy of the name, but neither could one be surprised. It served woodcutters and rafters from the dam, who didn't mind where they drank as long as there was something to drink. A shack with a leaky thatched roof, an awning resting on poles, a few tables and benches made of rough planks, a stone fireplace – the local community didn't require or expect greater luxuries; what counted what was behind the partition: the barrels from which the innkeeper poured beer, and from where he

occasionally served sausage, which the innkeeper's wife – if she felt like it and was in the right mood – was willing to grill over the embers for a fee.

Neither were Geralt and Addario's expectations excessive, particularly since the beer was fresh, from a newly unbunged barrel, and not many compliments were needed for the innkeeper's wife to agree to fry and serve them a skillet of blood pudding and onion. After a whole day's wandering through forests Geralt could compare the blood pudding to veal shank in vegetables, shoulder of boar, turbot in ink and the other masterpieces offered by the chef of the Natura Rerum osteria. Although to tell the truth, he did miss the osteria a little.

'Do you by any chance know the fate of that prophet?' said Addario, gesturing the innkeeper's wife over and ordering another beer.

Before they sat down to eat they had examined a moss-grown boulder standing beside a mighty oak. Carved into its surface were letters informing that in that precise place, on the day of the holiday of Birke in 1133 *post Resurrectionem*, the Prophet Lebioda gave a sermon to his acolytes, and the obelisk honouring the event was financed and erected in 1200 by Spyridon Apps, a master braid-maker from Rinde, based in the Minor Market Place, goods of excellent quality, affordable prices, please visit.

'Do you know the story of that Lebioda, whom some called a prophet?' asked Addario, scraping the rest of the blood pudding from the skillet. 'I mean the real story.'

'I don't know any stories,' replied the Witcher, running a piece of bread around the pan. 'Neither real nor invented. I was never interested.'

'Then listen. The thing occurred over a hundred years ago, I think not long after the date carved on that boulder. Today, as you well know, one almost never sees dragons, unless it's somewhere in the wild mountains, in the badlands. In those times, they occurred more often and could be vexing. They learned that pastures full of cattle were great eating places where they could stuff themselves without undue effort. Fortunately for the farmers, even a great reptile would limit itself to one or two feasts every quarter, but devoured enough to threaten the farm, particularly when it had it in for some region. One huge dragon became fixated on a certain village in Kaedwen. It would fly in, eat a few sheep, two or three

cows, and then catch a few carp from the fishponds for dessert. Finally, it would breathe fire, set alight a barn or hayrick and then fly off.'

The dwarf sipped his beer and belched.

'The villagers tried hard to frighten the dragon away, using various traps and trickery, but all to no avail. As luck would have it, Lebioda had just arrived in nearby Ban Ard with his acolytes. At that time, he was already celebrated, was called a prophet, and had masses of followers. The peasants asked him for help, and he, astonishingly, didn't decline. When the dragon arrived, Lebioda went to the pasture and began to exorcise it. The dragon started by singeing him, as you would a duck. And then swallowed him. Simply swallowed him. And flew off into the mountains.'

'Is that the end?'

'No. Keep listening. The acolytes wept over the prophet, despaired and then hired some hunters. Our boys, dwarven hunters, well-versed in draconian matters. They stalked the dragon for a month. Conventionally following the droppings the reptile was dumping. And the acolytes fell on their knees beside every turd and rummaged around in it, weeping bitterly, fishing out their master's remains. They finally put the whole thing together, or rather what they considered to be the whole thing, but what was actually a collection of none-too-clean human, bovine and ovine bones. Today it's all kept in the Novigrad temple in a sarcophagus. As a miraculous relic.'

'Own up, Addario. You made up that story. Or greatly embellished it.'

'Why the suspicion?'

'Because I often keep company with a certain poet. And he, when he has to choose between the real version of an event and a more attractive one, always chooses the latter, which he moreover embroiders. Regarding that, he laughs off all accusations using sophistry, saying that if something isn't truthful it doesn't mean at all that it's a lie.'

'Let me guess who the poet is. It's Dandelion, of course. And a story has its own rules.'

'"A story is a largely false account, of largely trivial events, fed to us by historians who are largely idiots",' smiled the Witcher.

‘Let me also guess who the author of that quotation is.’ Addario Bach grinned. ‘Vysogota of Corvo, philosopher and ethicist. And also a historian. However, regarding the prophet Lebioda . . . Why, history, as it’s been said before, is history. But I heard that in Novigrad the priests sometimes remove the prophet’s remains from its sarcophagus and give them to the faithful to be kissed. If I were there, however, I’d refrain from kissing them.’

‘I shall too,’ promised Geralt. ‘But as regards Novigrad, since we’re on the subject—’

‘Be at ease,’ interrupted the dwarf. ‘You won’t be late. We’ll rise early and go at once to Wiaterna. We’ll find a good deal and you’ll be in Novigrad on time.’

Let’s hope, thought the Witcher. *Let’s hope.*

People and animals belong to various species, while foxes live among people and animals. The quick and the dead wander along various roads, while foxes move between the quick and the dead. Deities and monsters march down various paths, while foxes walk between deities and monsters. The paths of the light and the darkness never join up or cross; vulpine ghosts lurk between them. The immortal and demons tread their own ways – vulpine ghosts are somewhere between.

Ji Yun, a scholar from the times of the Qing Dynasty

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A storm passed in the night.

After sleeping in a hay barn, they set off at dawn on a chilly, though sunny, morning. Keeping to the waymarked path, they passed through broadleaved woodland, peat bogs and marshy meadows. After an hour of heavy marching they reached some buildings.

'Wiaterna.' Addario Bach pointed. 'This is the harbour I was telling you about.'

They arrived at the river, where a brisk wind fanned them. They stepped onto a wooden jetty. The river formed a broad water there as large as a lake and the current was scarcely perceptible, as it was flowing some way off. The branches of willows, osiers and alders on the bank hung down to the water. Waterfowl, emitting various sounds, were swimming all around: mallards, garganeys, pintails, divers and grebes. A little ship was gliding gracefully over the water, merging into the landscape without frightening the whole feathered rabble. It had a single mast, with one large sail astern and several triangular ones aft.

'Someone once rightly listed the three most beautiful sights in the world,' said Addario Bach, staring at the spectacle. 'A ship in full sail, a galloping horse and you know . . . a naked woman lying in bed.'

'Dancing.' A faint smile played around the Witcher's lips. 'A woman dancing, Addario.'

'If you say so,' the dwarf agreed. 'A naked woman dancing. And that little boat, ha, you have to admit, looks lovely on the water.'

'It's not a little boat, it's a little ship.'

'It's a cutter,' a stout, middle-aged man in an elk-skin jerkin corrected him as he approached. 'A cutter, gentlemen. Which can easily be seen from the rig. A large mainsail, a jib and two staysails on the forestays. Classic.'

The little ship – or cutter – sailed close enough to the jetty for them to admire the figurehead on the prow. The carving depicted a

bald old man with an aquiline nose rather than the standard large-breasted woman, mermaid, dragon or sea serpent.

'Dammit,' Addario Bach grunted to himself. 'Does the prophet have it in for us, or what?'

'A sixty-four-footer,' went on the elderly gentleman in a proud voice. 'With a total sail area of three thousand three hundred square feet. That, gentlemen, is the *Prophet Lebioda,* a modern Koviran-type cutter, built in the Novigradian shipyard and launched almost a year ago.'

'You're familiar with that craft, as we can see.' Addario Bach cleared his throat. 'You know plenty about her.'

'I know everything about her, since I'm the owner. Do you see the ensign at the stern? There's a glove on it. It's my company's emblem. If I may: I am Kevenard van Vliet, a merchant in the glove-making trade.'

'Delighted to make your acquaintance.' The dwarf shook his right hand, eyeing up the merchant astutely. 'And we congratulate you on the little ship, for it is well-favoured and swift. It's a wonder that it's here, in Wiaterna, on the broad water, away from the main Pontarian shipping lanes. It's also a wonder that the ship's on the water and you, its owner, are on the land, in the middle of nowhere. Is anything the matter?'

'Oh, no, no, nothing the matter,' said the glove merchant, in Geralt's opinion too quickly and too emphatically. 'We're taking on provisions here, nothing more. And in the middle of nowhere, oh well, cruel necessity rather than our wishes has brought us here. For when you are hastening to rescue someone you don't pay heed to the route you take. And our rescue mission—'

'Let's not go into details, Mr van Vliet, sir,' interrupted one of a group of characters whose steps made the jetty suddenly tremble as they came closer. 'I don't think that interests the gentlemen. Nor ought it to.'

Five characters had stepped onto the jetty from the direction of the village. The one who had spoken, wearing a straw hat, was conspicuous by his well-defined jaw with several days' stubble and large protruding chin. His chin had a cleft, owing to which it looked like a miniature arse. He was accompanied by a tall bruiser, a veritable giant, although from his face and expression he was by no means a moron. The third – stocky and weather-beaten – was every

inch a sailor, down to the woollen cap and earring. The other two, clearly deckhands, were lugging chests containing provisions.

'I don't think,' continued the one with the cleft chin, 'that these gentlemen, whoever they are, need know anything about us, what we're doing, or about our other private affairs. These gentlemen certainly understand that no one has the right to know our private business, in particular total strangers who we've come across by accident—'

'Perhaps not total strangers,' interjected the giant. 'Master Dwarf, I know you not, indeed, but this gentleman's white hair betrays his identity. Geralt of Rivia, I believe? The Witcher? Am I not mistaken?'

I'm becoming popular, thought Geralt, folding his hands on his chest. *Too popular. Should I dye my hair, perhaps? Or shave it off like Harlan Tzara?*

'A witcher!' Kevenard van Vliet was clearly delighted. 'A real witcher! What a stroke of luck! Noble gentlemen! Why he's a veritable godsend!'

'The famous Geralt of Rivia!' repeated the giant. 'What a stroke of luck that we've met him now, in our situation. He'll help get us out of it—'

'You talk too much, Cobbin,' interrupted the one with the chin. 'Too fast and too much.'

'What do you mean, Mr Fysh?' snorted the glove-maker. 'Can't you see what a turn-up this is? The help of someone like a witcher —'

'Mr van Vliet! Leave it to me. I have more experience in dealings with such as this one here.'

A silence fell, in which the character with the cleft chin eyed the Witcher up and down.

'Geralt of Rivia,' he finally said. 'Vanquisher of monsters and supernatural creatures. A legendary vanquisher, I would say. If I believed in the legends, that is. And where are your celebrated witcher swords? I can't seem to see them.'

'It's no wonder you can't see them,' replied Geralt. 'Because they're invisible. What, haven't you heard the legends about witcher swords? The uninitiated can't see them. They appear when I utter a spell. When the need arises. If one arises. Because I'm

capable of doing a lot of damage even without them.'

'I'll take your word for it. I am Javil Fysh. I run a company in Novigrad offering various services. This is my partner, Petru Cobbin. And this is Mr Pudlorak, captain of the *Prophet Lebioda*. And the honourable Kevenard van Vliet, whom you've already met, the owner of this little ship.

'I see, Witcher, that you're standing on a jetty in the only settlement within a radius of twenty-odd miles,' Javil Fysh continued, looking around. 'In order to get out of here and find civilised roads, one must tramp through forests. It looks to me like you'd prefer to sail from this wilderness, embarking on something that floats on water. And the *Prophet* is sailing to Novigrad this very moment. And can take on passengers. Like you and your companion dwarf. Does that suit you?'

'Go on, Mr Fysh. I'm all ears.'

'Our ship, as you see, isn't any old tub, you have to pay to sail on her, and a pretty penny. Don't interrupt. Would you be prepared to take us under the protection of your invisible swords? We can pay for your valuable witcher services, meaning escorting us and protecting us during the voyage from here to the Novigradian port, as payment for the trip. What price, I wonder, do you put on your witcher services?'

Geralt looked at him.

'Including the price of getting to the bottom of this?'

'What?'

'There are tricks and catches concealed in your proposition,' Geralt said calmly. 'If I have to find them myself, I'll put a higher price on it. It'll be cheaper if you decide to be honest.'

'Your mistrust arouses suspicion,' Fysh replied coldly. 'Since swindlers forever sniff out deviousness. As it's said: a guilty conscience needs no accuser. We wish to hire you as an escort. It's rather a simple task, free of complications. What tricks could be hidden in it?'

'This whole escorting business is a tall story,' Geralt said, without lowering his gaze. 'Thought up on the spot and patently obvious.'

'Is that what you think?'

'It is. Because my lord the glove merchant let slip something

about a rescue expedition, and you, Mr Fysh, are rudely silencing him. In no time, your associate will spill the beans about the situation you have to be extracted from. So, if I'm to co-operate, please leave out the fabrication. What kind of expedition is it and to whose rescue is it hastening? Why so secretive? What trouble do you need to get out of?'

'We shall explain it.' Fysh forestalled van Vliet. 'We shall explain everything, my dear witcher—'

'But on board,' croaked Captain Pudlorak, who had been silent up to then. 'There's no point dallying any longer on this jetty. We have a favourable wind. Let's sail, gentlemen.'

*

Once it had the wind in its sails, the *Prophet Lebioda* sped swiftly across the widely spread waters of the bay, holding a course for the main channel, dodging between islets. The lines rattled, the boom groaned, and the ensign with a glove flapped briskly on the flagpole.

Kevenard van Vliet kept his promise. No sooner had the cutter pushed off from the jetty in Wiaterna than he called Geralt and Addario to the bow and set about explaining.

'The expedition undertaken by us,' he began, constantly glancing at a sullen Fysh, 'is aimed at freeing a kidnapped child. Xymena de Sepulveda, the only daughter of Briana de Sepulveda. That name rings a bell with you, no doubt. Fur tanneries, soaking and stitching workshops, and furrieries. Huge annual production, immense sums of money. If you ever see a lady in a gorgeous and expensive fur, it's sure to be from her factory.'

'And it's her daughter that was abducted. For a ransom?'

'Actually no. You won't believe it, but . . . A monster seized the little girl. A she-fox. I mean a shape-changer. A vixen.'

'You're right,' said the Witcher coldly. 'I won't. She-foxes or vixens, or more precisely aguaras, only abduct elven children.'

'That's right, that's absolutely right,' snapped Fysh. 'Because although it's an unprecedented thing, the furriery in Novigrad is run by a non-human. The mother, Breainne Diarbhail ap Muigh, is a pure-blooded she-elf. The widow of Jacob de Sepulveda, whose

entire estate she inherited. The family didn't manage to nullify the will, or declare the mixed marriage invalid, even though it's against custom and divine law—'

'Get to the point,' interrupted Geralt. 'Get to the point, please. You claim that this furrier, a pure-blood she-elf, charged you with recovering her kidnapped daughter?'

'You having us on?' Fysh scowled. 'Trying to catch us out? You know very well that if a she-fox kidnaps an elven child they never try to recover it. They give up on it and forget it. They accept that it was fated to happen—'

'At first, Briana de Sepulveda also pretended,' Kevenard van Vliet butted in. 'She despaired, but in the elven fashion, secretly. Outside: inscrutable, dry eyes . . . *Va'esse deireádh aep eigean, va'esse eigh faidh'ar*, she repeated, which in their tongue comes out as—'

'—something ends, something begins.'

'Indeed. But it's nothing but stupid elf talk, nothing is ending, what is there to end? And why should it? Briana has lived among humans for many years, observing our laws and customs, and is only a non-human by blood; in her heart, she's almost a human being. Elven beliefs and superstitions are powerful, I agree, and perhaps Briana is just feigning her composure to other elves, but it's clear she secretly misses her daughter. She'd give anything to get her only daughter back, she-fox or no she-fox . . . Indeed, Lord Witcher, she asked for nothing, she didn't expect help. Despite that we determined to help her, unable to look on her despair. The entire merchants' guild clubbed together and funded the expedition. I offered the *Prophet* and my own participation, as did the merchant Mr Parlaghy, whom you'll soon meet. But since we're businessmen and not thrill-seekers, we turned for help to the honourable Javil Fysh, known to us as a shrewd fellow and resourceful, unafraid of risk, adept in exacting matters, famous for his knowledge and experience . . .'

'The honourable Fysh, famous for his experience—' Geralt glanced at him '—neglected to inform you that the rescue expedition is pointless and was doomed to failure from the start. I see two explanations. Firstly: the honourable Fysh has no idea what he's landing you in. Secondly, and more likely: the honourable Fysh has received a payment, sizeable enough to lead you around the middle of nowhere and return empty-handed.'

'You toss accusations around too eagerly!' With a gesture,

Kevenard van Vliet held back Fysh, who was spoiling to give a furious rejoinder. ‘You also too hastily predict a failure. While we, merchants, always think positively . . .’

‘You deserve credit for such thinking. But in this case it won’t help.’

‘Why?’

‘It’s impossible to recover a child kidnapped by an aguara,’ explained Geralt calmly. ‘Absolutely impossible. And it’s not even that the child won’t be found owing to the fact that she-foxes lead extremely secretive lives. It’s not even that the aguara won’t let you take the child away; and it’s not an opponent to be trifled with in a fight, either in vulpine or human form. The point is that a kidnapped child ceases to be a child. Changes occur in little girls abducted by she-foxes. They metamorphosise and became she-foxes themselves. Aguaras don’t reproduce. They maintain the species by abducting and transforming elven children.’

‘That vulpine species ought to perish.’ Fysh finally had the floor. ‘All those shape-changing abominations ought to perish. It’s true that she-foxes seldom get in people’s way. They only kidnap elven pups and only harm elves, which is good in itself, for the more harm is done to non-humans, the greater the benefits for real folk. But she-foxes are monsters, and monsters should be exterminated, destroyed, should be wiped out as a race. You live from that, after all, Witcher, you contribute to it. And I hope you won’t bear us a grudge either that we’re contributing to the extermination of monsters. But, it seems to me, these digressions are in vain. You wanted explanations; you’ve got them. You know now what you’re being hired to do and against what . . . against what you have to defend us.’

‘No offence, but your explanations are as foggy as urine from an infected bladder,’ Geralt commented calmly. ‘And the loftiness of your expedition’s goal is as dubious as a maiden’s virginity after a village fête. But that’s your business. It’s my job to advise you that the only way to defend yourself against an aguara is to stay well away from it. Mr van Vliet?’

‘Yes?’

‘Return home. The expedition is senseless, so it’s time to accept that and abandon it. That’s as much as I can advise you as a witcher. The advice is free.’

‘But you won’t disembark, will you?’ mumbled van Vliet, paling somewhat. ‘Lord Witcher? Will you stay with us? And were . . . And were something to happen, will you protect us? Please agree . . . by the Gods, please say yes . . .’

‘He’ll agree, don’t worry,’ snorted Fysh. ‘He’ll sail with us. For who else will get him out of this wilderness? Don’t panic, Mr van Vliet. There’s nothing to fear.’

‘Like hell there isn’t!’ yelled the glove-maker. ‘That’s a good one! You got us into this mess, and now you’re playing the hero? I want to sail to Novigrad safe and sound. Someone must protect us, now that we’re in difficulties . . . When we’re in danger of—’

‘We aren’t in any danger. Don’t fret like a woman. Go below decks like your companion Parlaghy. Drink some rum with him, then your courage will soon return.’

Kevenard van Vliet blushed, then blanched. Then met Geralt’s eyes.

‘Enough fudging,’ he said emphatically, but calmly. ‘Time to confess the truth. Master Witcher, we already have that young vixen. She’s in the afterpeak. Mr Parlaghy’s guarding her.’

Geralt shook his head.

‘That’s unbelievable. You snatched the furrier’s daughter from the aguara. Little Xymena?’

Fysh spat over the side. Van Vliet scratched the back of his head.

‘It wasn’t what we planned,’ he finally mumbled. ‘A different one mistakenly fell into our hands . . . A she-fox too, but a different one . . . And kidnapped by quite another vixen. Mr Fysh bought her . . . from some soldiers who tricked the maid out of a she-fox. To begin with we thought it was Xymena, just transformed . . . But Xymena was seven years old and blonde, and this one’s almost twelve and dark-haired . . .’

‘We took her, even though she was the wrong one,’ Fysh forestalled the Witcher. ‘Why should elven spawn mature into an even worse monster? And in Novigrad we might be able to sell her to a menagerie; after all she’s a curiosity, a savage, a half she-fox, raised in the forest by a vixen . . . An animal park will surely shower us with coin . . .’

The Witcher turned his back on him.

‘Captain, steer towards the bank!’

‘Not so fast,’ growled Fysh. ‘Hold your course, Pudlorak. You don’t give the commands here, Witcher.’

‘I appeal to your good sense, Mr van Vliet.’ Geralt ignored him. ‘The girl should be freed immediately and set down on the bank. Otherwise you’re doomed. The aguara won’t abandon her child. And is already certainly following you. The only way to stop her is to give up the girl.’

‘Don’t listen to him,’ said Fysh. ‘Don’t let him frighten you. We’re sailing on the river, on wide, deep water. What can some fox do to us?’

‘And we have a witcher to protect us,’ added Petru Cobbin derisively. ‘Armed with invisible swords! The celebrated Geralt of Rivia won’t take fright before any old she-fox!’

‘I don’t know, myself,’ the glove-maker mumbled, his eyes sweeping from Fysh to Geralt and Pudlorak. ‘Master Geralt? I’ll be generous with a reward in Novigrad, I’ll repay you handsomely for your exertions . . . If you’ll only protect us.’

‘I’ll protect you by all means. In the only way possible. Captain, to the bank.’

‘Don’t you dare!’ Fysh blanched. ‘Not a step towards the afterpeak, or you’ll regret it! Cobbin!’

Petru Cobbin tried to seize Geralt by the collar, but was unable to because Addario Bach – up to that moment calm and taciturn – entered the fray. The dwarf kicked Cobbin vigorously behind the knee. Cobbin lurched forward into a kneeling position. Addario Bach leaped on him, gave him a tremendous punch in the kidney and then on the side of the head. The giant slumped onto the deck.

‘So what if he’s a big ’un?’ said the dwarf, his gaze sweeping around the others. ‘He just makes a louder bang when he hits the ground.’

Fysh’s hand was hovering near his knife, but a glance from Addario Bach made him think better of it. Van Vliet stood open-mouthed. Like Captain Pudlorak and the rest of the crew.

Petru Cobbin groaned and peeled his head from the deck.

‘Stay where you are,’ the dwarf advised him. ‘I’m neither impressed by your corpulence, nor the tattoo from Sturefors. I’ve done more damage to bigger fellows than you and inmates of

harder prisons. So don't try getting up. Geralt, do what's necessary.

'If you're in any doubt,' he turned to the others, 'the Witcher and I are saving your lives this very moment. Captain, to the bank. And lower a boat.'

The Witcher descended the companionway, tugged open first one, then another door. And stopped dead. Behind him Addario Bach swore. Fysh also swore. Van Vliet groaned.

The eyes of the skinny girl sprawled limply on a bunk were glazed. She was half-naked, quite bare from the waist downwards, her legs spread obscenely. Her neck was twisted unnaturally. And even more obscenely.

'Mr Parlaghy . . .' van Vliet stammered out. 'What . . . What have you done?'

The bald individual sitting over the girl looked up at them. He moved his head as though he couldn't see them, as though he were searching for the origin of the glove-maker's voice.

'Mr Parlaghy!'

'She was screaming . . .' muttered the man, his double chin wobbling and his breath smelling of alcohol. 'She started screaming . . .'

'Mr Parlaghy . . .'

'I meant to quiet her . . . Only quiet her.'

'But you've killed her.' Fysh stated a fact. 'You've simply killed her!'

Van Vliet held his head in his hands.

'And what now?'

'Now,' the dwarf told him bluntly, 'we're well and truly fucked.'

*

'There's no cause for alarm!' Fysh punched the railing hard. 'We're on the river, on the deep water. The banks are far away. Even if – which I doubt – the she-fox is following us, she can't endanger us on the water.'

‘Master Witcher?’ Van Vliet timidly raised his eyes. ‘What say you?’

‘The aguara is stalking us,’ Geralt repeated patiently. ‘There is no doubt about that. If anything is doubtful, it’s the expertise of Mr Fysh, whom I would ask to remain silent in relation to that. Things are as follows, Mr van Vliet: had we freed the young she-fox and left her on land, the aguara might have let up on us. But what is done, is done. And now only flight can save us. The miracle that the aguara didn’t attack you earlier shows indeed that fortune favours fools. But we may not tempt fate any longer. Hoist all the sails, captain. As many as you have.’

‘We can also raise the lower topsail,’ Pudlorak said slowly. ‘The wind’s in our favour—’

‘And if . . .’ van Vliet cut him off. ‘Master Witcher? Will you defend us, sir?’

‘I’ll be straight, Mr van Vliet. Ideally, I’d leave you. Along with Parlaghy, the very thought of whom turns my stomach, and who’s below deck, getting plastered over the corpse of the child he killed —’

‘I’d also be inclined to do that,’ interjected Addario Bach, looking upwards. ‘For, to paraphrase the words of Mr Fysh about non-humans: the more harm happens to idiots, the greater the benefits to the judicious.’

‘I’d leave Parlaghy to the mercy of the aguara. But the code forbids me. The witcher code doesn’t permit me to act according to my own wishes. I cannot abandon anyone in peril of death.’

‘Witcher nobility!’ snorted Fysh. ‘As though no one had ever heard of your villainy! But I support the idea of a swift escape. Unfurl all the canvas, Pudlorak, sail onto the shipping route and let’s beat it!’

The captain issued his orders and the deckhands set about the rigging. Pudlorak himself headed for the bow, and after a moment of consideration Geralt and the dwarf joined him. Van Vliet, Fysh and Cobbin were quarrelling on the afterdeck.

‘Mr Pudlorak?’

‘Yes?’

‘Why is the ship so named? And that pretty unusual figurehead? Was it meant to persuade the priests to finance you?’

‘The cutter was launched as *Melusine*.’ The captain shrugged. ‘With a figurehead that suited the name and pleased the eye. Then they were both changed. Some said it was all about sponsorship. Others that the Novigradian priests were constantly accusing van Vliet of heresy and blasphemy, so he wanted to kiss their . . . Wanted to curry favour with them.’

The *Prophet Lebioda*’s prow cut through the water.

‘Geralt?’

‘What, Addario?’

‘That she-fox . . . I mean the aguara . . . From what I’ve heard she can change shape. She can appear as a woman, but may also assume the form of a fox. Just like a werewolf?’

‘Not exactly. Werewolves, werebears, wererats and similar creatures are therianthropes, humans able to shapeshift. The aguara is an antherion. An animal – or rather a creature – able to assume the form of a human.’

‘And its powers? I’ve heard incredible stories . . . The aguara is said to be able to—’

‘I hope we’ll get to Novigrad before the aguara shows us what she’s capable of,’ the Witcher interrupted.

‘And if—’

‘It’d be better to avoid the “if”.’

The wind sprang up. The sails fluttered.

‘The sky’s growing darker,’ said Addario Bach, pointing. ‘And I think I detected some distant thunder.’

The dwarf’s hearing served him well. After barely a few moments it thundered again. This time they all heard it.

‘A squall’s approaching!’ yelled Pudlorak. ‘On the deep water, it’ll capsize us! We must flee, hide, protect ourselves from the wind! All hands to the sails, boys!’

He shoved the steersman out of the way and took the helm himself.

‘Hold on! Hold on, every man!’

The sky over starboard had turned a dark indigo. Suddenly a gale blew in, whipping the trees on the steep riverbank, tossing them around. The crowns of the larger trees swayed, the smaller

ones bent over. A cloud of leaves and entire branches, even large boughs, were blown away. Lightning flashed blindingly, and almost at the same moment a piercing crack of thunder reverberated. Another crash followed it almost immediately. And a third.

The next moment, presaged by a growing swooshing noise, the rain came lashing down. They could see nothing beyond the wall of water. The *Prophet Lebioda* rocked and danced on the waves, rolling and pitching sharply every few seconds. On top of that everything was creaking. It seemed to Geralt that each plank was groaning. Each plank was living its own life and moving, so it seemed, totally independently of the others. He feared that the cutter would simply disintegrate. The Witcher repeated to himself that it was impossible, that the ship had been constructed to sail even rougher waters, and that after all they were on a river, not an ocean. He repeated it to himself, spitting water and tightly clutching the rigging.

It was difficult to tell how long it lasted. Finally, though, the rocking ceased, the wind stopped raging, and the heavy downpour churning up the water eased off, becoming rain, then drizzle. At that moment, they saw that Pudlorak's manoeuvre had succeeded. The captain had managed to shelter the cutter behind a tall, forested island where the gale didn't toss them around so much. The raincloud seemed to be moving away, the squall dying down.

Fog rose from the water.

*

Water was dripping from Pudlorak's drenched cap and running down his face. In spite of that the captain didn't remove it. He probably never did.

'Blood and thunder!' he said, wiping the drops from his nose. 'Where has it taken us? Is it a distributary? Or an old river bed? The water is almost still . . .'

'But the current's still carrying us.' Fysh spat into the water and watched the spittle flow past. He'd lost his straw hat; the gale must have blown it off.

'The current is weak, but it's carrying us,' he repeated. 'We're in an inlet between some islands. Hold the course, Pudlorak. It must finally take us to the deep water.'

‘I reckon the waterway is to the north,’ said the captain, stooping over the compass. ‘So we ought to take the starboard branch. Not the port, but the starboard . . .’

‘Where do you see branches?’ asked Fysh. ‘There’s one river. Hold the course, I say.’

‘A moment ago there were two,’ Pudlorak insisted. ‘But maybe I had water in me eyes. Or it was that fog. Very well, let the current carry us. It’s just that—’

‘What now?’

‘The compass. It’s pointing completely . . . No, no, it’s all right. I couldn’t see it clearly. Water was dripping onto the glass from my cap. We’re sailing.’

‘So, let’s sail.’

The fog was growing denser and thinner by turns, and the wind had completely died down. It had grown very warm.

‘The water,’ Pudlorak said. ‘Can you smell it? It has a different kind of smell. Where are we?’

The fog lifted and they saw dense undergrowth on the banks, which were strewn with rotten tree trunks. Instead of the pines, firs and yews covering the islands, there were now bushy river birches and tall cypresses, bulbous at the base. The trunks of the cypresses were entwined around with climbing trumpet vines, whose garish red flowers were the only vibrant feature among the brownish green swampy flora. The water was carpeted in duckweed and was full of water weed, which the *Prophet* parted with its prow and dragged behind it like a train. The water was cloudy and indeed gave off a hideous, somehow rank odour. Large bubbles rose up from the bottom. Pudlorak was at the helm by himself again.

‘There may be shallows,’ he said, suddenly becoming anxious. ‘Hey, there! Leadsman fore!’

They sailed on, borne by the weak current, never leaving the marshy landscape. Or rotten stench. The deckhand at the prow yelled monotonously, calling out the depth.

‘Take a look at this, Master Witcher,’ said Pudlorak, stooping over the compass and tapping the glass.

‘At what?’

‘I thought the glass was steamed up . . . But if the needle

hasn't gone doolally, we're sailing eastwards. Meaning we're going back. Where we came from.'

'But that's impossible. We're being carried by the current. The river—'

He broke off.

A huge tree, its roots partly exposed, hung over the water. A woman in a long, clinging dress was standing on one of the bare boughs. She was motionless, looking at them.

'The wheel,' said the Witcher softly. 'The wheel, captain. Towards that bank. Away from the tree.'

The woman vanished. And a large fox slunk along the bough, dashed away and hid in the thicket. The animal seemed to be black and only the tip of its bushy tail white.

'She's found us.' Addario Bach had also seen her. 'The vixen has found us . . .'

'Blood and thunder—'

'Be quiet, both of you. Don't spread panic.'

They glided on. Watched by pelicans from the dead trees on the banks.

INTERLUDE

A hundred and twenty-seven years later

'That'll be Ivalo, miss, yonder, beyond the hillock,' said the merchant, pointing with his whip. 'Half a furlong, no more, you'll be there in a trice. I head eastwards towards Maribor at the crossroads, so the time has come to part. Farewell, may the gods lead you and watch over you on your way.'

'And over you, good sir,' said Nimue, hopping down from the wagon, taking her bundle and the rest of her things and then curtsying clumsily. 'My sincere thanks for the ride on your wagon. Back there in the forest . . . My sincere thanks . . .'

She swallowed at the memory of the dark forest, deep into which the highway had led her for the last two days. At the memory of the huge, ghastly trees with their twisted boughs, entwined into a canopy above the deserted road. A road where she'd suddenly found herself all alone. At the memory of the horror that had seized her. And the memory of the desire to turn tail and fly. Home. Abandoning the preposterous thought of journeying into the world alone. And banishing that preposterous thought from her memory.

'My goodness, don't thank me, it's a trifle,' laughed the merchant. 'Anyone would help a traveller. Farewell!'

'Farewell. I wish you a safe journey.'

She stood for a moment at the crossroads, looking at a stone post, polished to a smooth slipperiness by the wind and rain. *It must have stood here for ages*, she thought. *Who knows, perhaps more than a hundred years? Perhaps this post remembers the Year of the Comet? The army of the northern kings, marching to Brenna, and the battle with Nilfgaard?*

As every day, she repeated the route she'd learned by heart. Like a magical formula. Like a spell.

Vyrva, Guado, Sibell, Brugge, Casterfurt, Mortara, Ivalo, Dorian, Anchor, Gors Velen.

The town of Ivalo made itself known from a distance. By its

noise and foul smell.

The forest ended at the crossroads. Further on, there was only a bare clearing, bristling with tree stumps, stretching out far away towards the horizon and the first buildings. Smoke was trailing everywhere. Rows of iron vats – retorts for making charcoal – were smoking. There was a smell of resin. The nearer the town, the louder grew the noise: a strange metallic clank, making the ground shudder perceptibly beneath her feet.

Nimue entered the town and gasped in amazement. The source of the noise and the shuddering of the ground was the most bizarre machine she had ever seen. A huge, bulbous copper cauldron with an enormous wheel, whose revolutions drove a piston shining with grease. The machine hissed, smoked, spluttered boiling water and belched steam, then at a certain moment uttered a whistle, a whistle so horrifying and dreadful that Nimue was dumbfounded. But she quickly overcame her fear, even approaching closer and curiously examining the belts which the gears of the hellish machine used to drive the saws in the mill, cutting trunks at incredible speed. She would have continued watching, but her ears began to hurt from the rumbling and grinding of the saws.

She crossed a bridge; the small river below was murky and stank repugnantly, bearing woodchips, bark and flecks of foam. The town of Ivalo, however, which she had just entered, reeked like one great latrine, a latrine, where, to make matters worse, somebody had insisted on roasting bad meat. Nimue, who'd spent the previous week among meadows and forests, began to choke. The town of Ivalo, which marked the end of another stage on her route, had seemed like a resting place to her. Now she knew she wouldn't tarry any longer than was absolutely necessary. Nor add Ivalo to her store of pleasant recollections.

As usual she sold a punnet of mushrooms and medicinal roots at the market. It didn't take long; she was now practised, knowing what there was demand for, and whom she should go to with her wares. She pretended to be half-witted, owing to which she had no problem selling, the stallholders vying with each other to outwit the dull girl. She earned little but didn't waste time. For speed mattered.

The only source of clean water in the vicinity was a well in a narrow little square, and in order to fill her canteen, Nimue had to wait her turn in a lengthy queue. Acquiring provisions for the next

stage of her journey went more smoothly. Enticed by the smell, she also bought several stuffed pasties, which on closer inspection seemed suspicious. She sat down by a dairy to eat them while they were still tolerably fit to be consumed without seriously damaging her health. For it didn't look as though they would continue in that state for long.

Opposite was a tavern called the Green-something; the sign's missing lower plank had turned the name into a riddle and intellectual challenge. A moment later, Nimue became engrossed by her attempts to guess what – apart from frogs and lettuce – could be green. She was startled out of her reverie by a loud discussion being conducted on the tavern's steps by a small group of regulars.

'The *Prophet Lebioda*, I tell you,' ranted one of them. 'The legendary brig. That ghost ship that vanished without trace more than a hundred years back with all hands. And would later appear on the river when misfortune was in the air. Manned by a ghostly crew; many saw it. People said it would continue to appear as a spectre until the wreck was found. Well, and they finally found it.'

'Where?'

'In Rivermouth, on an old river bed, in the mud, in the very heart of a bog what they was drying out. It was all overgrown with weed. And moss. After they'd scraped off the weed and moss they found the inscription. The *Prophet Lebioda*.'

'And treasure? Did they find any treasure? There was meant to be treasure there, in the hold. Did they find any?'

'No one knows. The priests, they say, confiscated the wreck. Calling it a holy relic.'

'What nonsense,' hiccupped another regular. 'Believing in them childish tales. They found some old tub, and then at once: ghost ship, treasure, relics. I tell you, all that's bullshit, trashy writing, foolish rumours, old wives' tales. I say, you there! Wench! Who be you? Whose are you?'

'My own.' Nimue had a ready answer by then.

'Brush your hair aside and show us your ear! For you look like elven spawn. And we don't want elven half-breeds here!'

'Let me be, for I don't incommode you. And I'll soon be setting off.'

'Ha! And whither do you go?'

‘To Dorian.’ Nimue had also learned to always give as her destination only the next stage, in order never, ever, to reveal the final objective of her trek, because that only caused great merriment.

‘Ho-ho! You’ve a long road ahead of you.’

‘Hence, I am about to go. And I’ll just tell you, noble gentlemen, that the *Prophet Lebioda* wasn’t carrying any treasure, the legend doesn’t say anything about that. The ship vanished and became a ghost because she was cursed and her skipper hadn’t acted on good advice. The witcher who was there advised them to turn the ship around, not to venture into an offshoot of the river until he’d removed the curse. I read about that—’

‘Still wet behind the ears and such a clever clogs?’ pronounced the first regular. ‘You should be sweeping floors, wench, minding pots and laundering smalls, simple as that. Says she can read – whatever next?’

‘A witcher!’ snorted a third. ‘Tall tales, naught but tall tales!’

‘If you’re such a know-it-all you must have heard of our Magpie Forest,’ interjected another. ‘What, you haven’t? Then we’ll tell you: something evil lurks there. But it awakes every few years, and then woe betide anyone who wanders through the forest. And your route, if you’re truly headed for Dorian, passes right through Magpie Forest.’

‘And do any trees still stand there? For you’ve cut down everything, nothing but bare clearings remain.’

‘Just look what a know-it-all she is, a mouthy stripling. What’s a forest for if not to be cut down, eh? What we felled, we felled, what remains, remains. But the woodcutters fear to enter Magpie Forest, such a horror is there. You’ll see for yourself if you get that far. You’ll piss in your pants from fear!’

‘I’d better be off then.’

Vyrva, Guado, Sibell, Brugge, Casterfurt, Mortara, Ivalo, Dorian, Anchor, Gors Velen.

I’m Nimue verch Wledyr ap Gwyn.

I’m headed for Gors Velen. To Aretuza, to the school of sorceresses on the Isle of Thanedd.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

‘You’ve made a pretty mess, Pudlorak!’ Javil Fysh spat furiously. ‘You’ve got us in a pretty tangle! We’ve been wandering around these offshoots for an hour! I’ve heard about these bogs, I’ve heard evil things about them! People and ships perish here! Where’s the river? Where’s the shipping channel? Why—’

‘Shut your trap, by thunder!’ said the captain in annoyance. ‘Where’s the shipping channel, where’s the shipping lane? Up my arse, that’s where! So clever, are you? Be my guest, now’s a chance to distinguish yourself! There’s another fork! Where should we sail, smart aleck? To port, as the current carries us? Or perhaps you’ll order us starboard?’

Fysh snorted and turned his back on him. Pudlorak grabbed the wheel and steered the cutter into the left branch.

The leadsman gave a cry. Then a moment later Kevenard van Vliet yelled, but much louder.

‘Away from the bank, Pudlorak!’ screamed Petru Cobbin. ‘Hard-a-starboard! Away from the bank! Away from the bank!’

‘What is it?’

‘Serpents! Don’t you see them? Seeerpents!’

Addario Bach swore.

The left bank was teeming with snakes. The reptiles were writhing among the reeds and riverside weeds, crawling over half-submerged trunks, dangling down, hissing, from overhanging branches. Geralt recognised cottonmouths, rattlesnakes, jararacas, boomslangs, green bush vipers, puff adders, arietes, black mambas and others he didn’t know.

The entire crew of the *Prophet* fled in panic from the port side, yelling at various pitches. Kevenard van Vliet ran astern and squatted down, trembling all over, behind the Witcher. Pudlorak turned the wheel and the cutter began to change course. Geralt placed his hand on Pudlorak’s shoulder.

‘No,’ he said. ‘Hold the course, as you were. Don’t go near the starboard bank.’

‘But the snakes . . .’ Pudlorak pointed at the branch they were approaching, hung all over with hissing reptiles. ‘They’ll drop onto the deck—’

‘There are no snakes! Hold the course. Away from the starboard bank.’

The sheets of the mainmast caught on a hanging branch. Several snakes coiled themselves around them, and several others – including two mambas – dropped onto the deck. Raising their heads and hissing, they attacked the men huddled up against the starboard side. Fysh and Cobbin fled aft and the deckhands, yelling, bolted astern. One of them jumped into the water and disappeared before he could cry out. Blood frothed on the surface.

‘A lopustre!’ shouted the Witcher, pointing at a wave and a dark shape moving away. ‘It’s real – unlike the snakes.’

‘I detest reptiles . . .’ sobbed Kevenard van Vliet, huddled up by the side. ‘I detest snakes—’

‘There aren’t any snakes. And there weren’t any. It’s an illusion.’

The deckhands shouted and rubbed their eyes. The snakes had vanished. Both from the deck and from the bank. They hadn’t even left any tracks.

‘What . . .’ Petru Cobbin grunted. ‘What was it?’

‘An illusion,’ repeated Geralt. ‘The aguara has caught up with us.’

‘You what?’

‘The vixen. She’s creating illusions to confuse us. I wonder how long she’s been doing it. The storm was probably genuine. But there were two offshoots, the captain’s eyes didn’t deceive him. The aguara cloaked one of the offshoots in an illusion. And faked the compass needle. She also created the illusion of the snakes.’

‘Witcher tall tales!’ Fysh snorted. ‘Elven superstitions! Old wives’ tales! What, some old fox has abilities like that? Hides rivers, confounds compasses? Conjures up serpents where there aren’t any? Fiddlesticks! I tell you it’s these waters! We were poisoned by vapours, venomous swamp gases and miasmas! That’s what caused those hallucinations . . .’

‘They’re illusions created by the aguara.’

‘Do you take us for fools?’ yelled Cobbin. ‘Illusions? What illusions? Those were real vipers! You all saw them, didn’t you? Heard the hissing? I even smelled their stench!’

‘That was an illusion. The snakes weren’t real.’

The *Prophet*’s sheets snagged on overhanging branches again.

‘That’s a hallucination, is it?’ asked one of the deckhands, holding out his hand. ‘An illusion? That snake isn’t real?’

‘No! Stand still!’

The huge ariete hanging from a bough gave a blood-curdling hiss and struck like lightning, sinking its fangs into the sailor’s neck: once, twice. The deckhand gave a piercing scream, fell, shaking in convulsions, banging the back of his head rhythmically against the deck. Foam appeared on his lips and blood began to ooze from his eyes. He was dead before they could get to him.

The Witcher covered the body in a canvas sheet.

‘Dammit, men,’ he said. ‘Be heedful! Not everything here is a mirage!’

‘Beware!’ yelled the sailor in the bow. ‘Bewaaare! There’s a whirlpool ahead of us! A whirlpool!’

The old river bed branched again. The left branch, the one the current was carrying them into, was swirling and churned up in a raging whirlpool. The swirling maelstrom was surging with froth like soup in a cauldron. Logs and branches, and even an entire tree with a forked crown, were revolving in the whirlpool. The leadsman fled from the bow and the others began to yell. Pudlorak stood calmly. He turned the wheel, steering the cutter towards the calmer offshoot to the right.

‘Uff!’ He wiped his forehead. ‘Just in time! Would have been ill if that whirlpool had sucked us in. Aye, would have given us a right old spinning . . .’

‘Whirlpools!’ shouted Cobbin. ‘Lopustres! Alligators! Leeches! We don’t need no illusions, these swamps are teeming with monstrosities, with reptiles, with every kind of venomous filth. It’s too bad, too bad that we strayed here. Many ships—’

‘—have vanished here.’ Addario Bach finished the sentence, pointing. ‘And that’s probably real.’

There was a wreck lying stuck in the mud on the right bank. It

was rotten and smashed, buried up to the bulwarks, covered in water weed, coiled around with vines and moss. They observed it as the *Prophet* glided past, borne by the faint current.

Pudlorak prodded Geralt with his elbow.

'Master Witcher,' he said softly. 'The compass has gone doolally again. According to the needle we've moved from an eastwards course to a southern. If it's not a vulpine trick, it's not good. No one has ever charted these swamps, but it's known they extend southwards from the shipping channel. So, we're being carried into the very heart of them.'

'But we're drifting,' observed Addario Bach. 'There's no wind, we're being borne by the current. And the current means we're joining the river, the river current of the Pontar—'

'Not necessarily,' said Geralt, shaking his head. 'I've heard about these old river courses. The direction of the flow can change. Depending on whether the tide's coming in or going out. And don't forget about the aguara. This might also be an illusion.'

The banks were still densely covered in cypresses, and large, pot-bellied tupelos, bulbous at the base, were also growing more common. Many of the trees were dead and dry. Dense festoons of bromeliads hung from the decayed trunks and branches, their leaves shining silver in the sun. Egrets lay in wait on the branches, surveying the passing *Prophet* with unmoving eyes.

The leadsman shouted.

This time everybody saw it. Once again, she was standing on a bough hanging over the water, erect and motionless. Pudlorak unhurriedly leaned on a handle, steering the cutter towards the left bank. And the vixen suddenly barked, loudly and piercingly. She barked again as the *Prophet* sailed past.

A large fox flashed across the bough and hid in the undergrowth.

*

'That was a warning,' said the Witcher, when the hubbub on deck had quietened down. 'A warning and a challenge. Or rather a demand.'

‘We would free the girl,’ Addario Bach added astutely. ‘Of course we would. But we can’t free her if she’s dead.’

Kevenard van Vliet groaned and clutched his temples. Wet, dirty and terrified, he no longer resembled a merchant who could afford his own ship. More an urchin caught scrumping plums.

‘What to do?’ he moaned. ‘What to do?’

‘I know,’ Javil Fysh suddenly declared. ‘We’ll fasten the dead wench to a barrel and toss her overboard. The vixen will stop to mourn the pup. We’ll gain time.’

‘Shame on you, Mr Fysh.’ The glove-maker’s voice suddenly hardened. ‘It doesn’t do to treat a corpse thus. It’s not civilised.’

‘And was she civilised? A she-elf, on top of that half an animal. I tell you; that barrel’s a good idea . . .’

‘That idea could only occur to a complete idiot,’ said Addario Bach, drawing out his words. ‘And it would be the death of us all. If the vixen realises we’ve killed the girl we’re finished—’

‘It wasn’t us as killed the pup,’ butted in Petru Cobbin, before Fysh – now scarlet with anger – could react. ‘It wasn’t us. Parlaghy did it. He’s to blame. We’re clean.’

‘That’s right,’ confirmed Fysh, turning not towards van Vliet and the Witcher, but to Pudlorak and the deckhands. ‘Parlaghy’s guilty. Let the vixen take vengeance on him. We’ll shove him in a boat with the corpse and they can drift away. And meanwhile, we’ll . . .’

Cobbin and several deckhands received the idea with an enthusiastic cry, but Pudlorak immediately dampened their enthusiasm.

‘I shan’t permit it,’ he said.

‘Nor I.’ Kevenard van Vliet was pale. ‘Mr Parlaghy may indeed be guilty, perhaps it’s true that his deed calls for punishment. But abandon him, leave him to his death? I will not agree.’

‘It’s his death or ours!’ yelled Fysh. ‘For what are we to do? Witcher! Will you protect us when the she-fox boards the craft?’

‘I shall.’

A silence fell.

The *Prophet Lebioda* drifted among the stinking water seething

with bubbles, dragging behind it garlands of water weed. Egrets and pelicans watched them from the branches.

*

The leadsman in the bow warned them with a cry. And a moment later they all began to shout. To see the rotten wreck, covered in climbing plants and weed. It was the same wreck they'd passed an hour before.

'We're sailing around in circles.' The dwarf confirmed the fact. 'We're back where we started. The she-fox has caught us in a trap.'

'There's only one way out.' Geralt pointed at the left offshoot and the whirlpool seething in it. 'To sail through that.'

'Through that geyser?' yelled Fysh. 'Have you gone quite mad? It'll smash us to pieces!'

'Smash us to pieces,' confirmed Pudlorak. 'Or capsize us. Or throw us onto the bog, and we'll end up like that wreck. See those trees being tossed about in the maelstrom? That whirlpool is tremendously powerful.'

'Indeed. It is. Because it's probably an illusion. I think it's another of the aguara's illusions.'

'You think? You're a witcher and you can't tell?'

'I'd recognise a weaker illusion. And these ones are incredibly powerful. But I reckon—'

'You reckon. And if you're wrong?'

'We have no choice,' snapped Pudlorak. 'Either we go through the whirlpool or we sail around in circles—'

'—to our deaths.' Addario Bach finished his sentence. 'To our miserable deaths.'

*

Every few moments the boughs of the tree spinning around in the whirlpool stuck up out of the water like the outstretched arms of a drowned corpse. The whirlpool churned, seethed, surged and

sprayed foam. The *Prophet* shivered and suddenly shot forward, sucked into the maelstrom. The tree being tossed by the whirlpool slammed against the side, splashing foam. The cutter began to rock and spin around quicker and quicker.

The entire crew were yelling at various pitches.

And suddenly everything went quiet. The water calmed down and the surface became smooth. The *Prophet Lebioda* drifted very slowly between the tupelos on the banks.

'You were right, Geralt,' said Addario Bach, clearing his throat. 'It was an illusion after all.'

Pudlorak looked long at the witcher. And said nothing. He finally took off his cap. His crown, as it turned out, was as shiny as an egg.

'I signed up for river navigation,' he finally croaked, 'because my wife asked me to. *It'll be safer on the river*, she said. *Safer than on the sea. I won't have to fret each time you set sail*, she said.'

He put his cap back on, shook his head, then tightly grabbed a handle of the wheel.

'Is that it?' Kevenard van Vliet whimpered from under the cockpit. 'Are we safe now?'

No one answered his question.

*

The water was thick with algae and duckweed. Cypresses began to dominate the riverside trees, their pneumatophores – or aerial roots, some of them almost six feet tall – sticking up densely from the bog and the shallows by the bank. Turtles basked on islands of weed. Frogs croaked.

This time they heard her before they saw her. A loud, raucous barking like a threat or a warning being intoned. She appeared on the bank in her vulpine form, on a withered, overturned tree trunk. She was barking, holding her head up high. Geralt detected strange notes in her voice and understood that apart from the threats there was an order. But it wasn't them she was giving orders to.

The water under the trunk suddenly frothed and a monster emerged. It was enormous, covered all over in a greenish-brown

pattern of tear-shaped scales. It gobbled and squelched, obediently following the vixen's order, and swam, churning up the water, straight at the *Prophet*.

'Is that . . .?' Addario Bach swallowed. 'Is that an illusion too?'

'Not exactly,' said Geralt. 'It's a vodyanoy!' He yelled at Pudlorak and the deckhands. 'She's bewitched a vodyanoy and set it on us! Boathooks! All hands to the boathooks!'

The vodyanoy broke the surface alongside the ship and they saw the flat, algae-covered head, the bulging fishy eyes and the conical teeth in its great maw. The monster struck the side furiously, once, twice, making the whole ship shudder. When the crew came running up with boathooks it fled and dived, only to emerge with a splash beyond the stern a moment later, right by the rudder blade. Which it caught in its teeth and shook until it creaked.

'It'll break the rudder!' Pudlorak bellowed, trying to stab the monster with a boathook. 'It'll break the rudder! Grab the halyards and raise it! Drive the bastard away from the rudder!'

The vodyanoy chewed and jerked the rudder, oblivious to the cries and jabs of the boathooks. The blade gave way and a chunk of wood was left in the creature's teeth. It had either decided that was enough or the she-fox's spell had lost its force; suffice it to say that it dived and disappeared.

They heard the aguara barking from the bank.

'What next?' yelled Pudlorak, waving his arms. 'What will she do next? Master Witcher!'

'By the Gods . . .' sobbed Kevenard van Vliet. 'Forgive us for not believing . . . Forgive us for killing the little girl! Ye Gods, save us!'

They suddenly felt a breeze on their faces. The pennant on the *Prophet* – previously hanging pitifully – fluttered and the boom creaked.

'It's opening out!' Fysh shouted from the bow. 'Over there, over there! A broad water, there's no doubt it's the river! Sail over there, skipper! Over there!'

The river channel was indeed beginning to widen and something looking like broad water stretched beyond the green wall of reeds.

‘We did it!’ called Cobbin. ‘Ha! We’ve won! We’ve escaped from the swamp!’

‘By the mark one,’ yelled the leadsman. ‘By the mark o-o-one.’

‘Haul her over!’ roared Pudlorak, shoving the helmsman away and carrying out his own order. ‘Shallooows!’

The *Prophet Lebioda*’s prow turned towards the offshoot bristling with pneumatophores.

‘Where are you going?’ Fysh bellowed. ‘What are you doing? Sail for the broad water. Over there! Over there!’

‘We can’t. There’s a shallow there. We’ll get stuck! We’ll sail to the broad water along an offshoot, it’s deeper here.’

They heard the aguara bark again. But didn’t see her.

Addario Bach tugged Geralt’s sleeve.

Petru Cobbin emerged from the companionway of the afterpeak, dragging Parlaghy – who could barely stay on his feet – by the collar. A sailor followed him carrying the girl, wrapped in a cloak. The other four deckhands stood steadfastly beside them, facing the Witcher. They were holding battleaxes, tridents and iron hooks.

‘You can’t stop us, good sir,’ rasped the tallest of them. ‘We want to live. The time has come to act.’

‘Leave the child,’ drawled Geralt. ‘Let the merchant go, Cobbin.’

‘No, sir.’ The sailor shook his head. ‘We’ll toss the body and the merchant overboard; that’ll stop the beast. Then we’ll get away.’

‘And don’t you lot interfere,’ wheezed another. ‘We’ve nothing against you, but don’t stand in our way. Because you’ll get hurt.’

Kevenard van Vliet curled up by the side and sobbed, turning his head away. Pudlorak also looked away resignedly and pursed his lips. He clearly wouldn’t react to his own crew’s mutiny.

‘Yes, that’s right,’ said Petru Cobbin, shoving Parlaghy. ‘Toss the merchant and the dead vixen overboard, that’s our only chance of escape. Out of the way, Witcher! Go on, boys! Into the boat with them!’

‘What boat?’ asked Addario Bach calmly. ‘Do you mean that one, perhaps?’

Javil Fysh, hunched over the oars of a boat, was rowing, heading for the broad water, already quite far from the *Prophet*. He was rowing hard; the oar blades were splashing water and strewing water weed around.

'Fysh!' yelled Cobbin. 'You bastard! You fucking whoreson!'

Fysh turned around and raised his middle finger at them. Then took up the oars again.

But he didn't get far.

In full view of the *Prophet*'s crew the boat suddenly shot up in a jet of water and they saw the toothy jaws of a gigantic crocodile, its tail thrashing. Fysh flew overboard and began to swim – screaming all the while – towards the bank, where cypress roots bristled in the shallows. The crocodile set off in pursuit, but the palisade of pneumatophores impeded its progress. Fysh swam to the bank and flopped down chest-first on a boulder lying there. But it wasn't a boulder.

An enormous lizard-like turtle opened its jaws and seized Fysh by his upper arm. He howled, struggled, kicked, flinging mud around. The crocodile broke the surface and caught him by the leg. Fysh screamed.

For a moment, it wasn't clear which of the two reptiles would catch Fysh – the turtle or the crocodile. But finally, both of them got something. An arm with a white, club-shaped bone sticking out of bloody pulp was left in the turtle's jaws. The crocodile took the rest of Fysh's body. A large red patch floated on the surface of the murky water.

Geralt took advantage of the crew's stupefaction. He snatched the dead girl from the deckhand and retreated towards the bow. Addario Bach stood beside him, armed with a boathook.

Neither Cobbin nor any of the sailors tried to oppose him. On the contrary, they all ran hastily to the stern. Hastily. Not to say in a panic. Their faces suddenly took on a deathly pallor. Kevenard van Vliet, huddled by the side, hid his head between his knees and covered it with his arms.

Geralt turned around.

Whether Pudlorak hadn't been paying attention or the rudder – damaged by the vodyanoy – wasn't working, suffice it to say that the cutter had sailed right under some hanging boughs and was

caught among fallen tree trunks. The aguara took advantage of it. She leaped down onto the prow, nimbly, lightly and noiselessly. In her vulpine form. Previously he'd seen her against the sky, when she had seemed black, pitch-black. She wasn't. Her fur was dark and her brush ended in a snow-white blotch, but grey prevailed in her colouring, particularly on her head, which was more typical of a corsac fox than a silver one.

She metamorphosed, growing larger and transforming into a tall woman. With a fox's head. Pointed ears and an elongated muzzle. Rows of fangs flashed when she opened her jaws.

Geralt knelt down, placed the little girl's body gently on the deck and retreated. The aguara howled piercingly, snapped her toothy jaws and stepped towards him. Parlaghy screamed, waving his arms in panic, tore himself away from Cobbin's grasp and jumped overboard. He sank at once.

Van Vliet was weeping. Cobbin and the deckhands, still pale, gathered around Pudlorak. Pudlorak removed his cap.

The medallion around the Witcher's neck twitched powerfully, vibrated and made its presence felt. The aguara kneeled over the girl, making strange noises, neither growling nor hissing. She suddenly raised her head and bared her fangs. She snarled softly and a fire flared up in her eyes. Geralt didn't move.

'We are to blame,' he said. 'Something truly ill has happened. But may no worse things occur. I cannot allow you to harm these men. I shall not allow it.'

The vixen stood up, lifting the little girl. She swept her gaze over them all. And finally looked at Geralt.

'You stood in my way,' she barked, clearly, slowly enunciating each word. 'In their defence.'

He didn't answer.

'I am taking my daughter,' she finished. 'That is more important than your lives. But it was you who stood in their defence, O White-Haired One. Thus, I shall come looking for you. One day. When you have forgotten. And will be least expecting it.'

She hopped nimbly onto the bulwark and then onto a fallen trunk. And disappeared into the undergrowth.

In the silence that fell only van Vliet's sobbing could be heard.

The wind dropped and it became muggy. The *Prophet Lebioda*,

pushed by the current, freed itself from the boughs and drifted down the middle of the offshoot. Pudlorak wiped his eyes and forehead with his cap.

The leadsman cried. Cobbin cried. And then the others added their voices.

The thatched roofs of cottages could suddenly be seen beyond the thicket of reeds and wild rice. They saw nets drying on poles. A yellow strip of sandy beach. A jetty. And further away, beyond the trees on the headland, the wide river beneath a blue sky.

'The river! The river! At last!'

They all shouted. The deckhands, Petru Cobbin and van Vliet. Only Geralt and Addario Bach didn't join in the yelling.

Pudlorak, pushing on the wheel, also said nothing.

'What are you doing?' yelled Cobbin. 'Where are you going? Head for the river! Over there! For the river!'

'Not a chance,' said the captain, and there was despair and resignation in his voice. 'We're becalmed, the ship barely responds to the wheel and the current grows stronger. We're drifting, it's pushing us, carrying us into the offshoot again. Back into the swamp.'

'No!' Cobbin swore. And leaped overboard. And swam towards the beach.

All the sailors followed his example. Geralt was unable to stop any of them. Addario Bach roughly shoved down van Vliet, who was preparing to jump.

'Blue sky,' he said. 'A golden, sandy beach. The river. It's too beautiful to be true. Meaning it isn't.'

And suddenly the image shimmered. Suddenly, where a moment earlier there had been fishing cottages, a golden beach and the river beyond the headland, the Witcher for a brief moment saw a spider's web of tillandsia trailing right down to the water from the boughs of decaying trees. Swampy banks, cypresses bristling with pneumatophores. Bubbles rising up from the murky depths. A sea of water plants. An endless labyrinth of branches.

For a second, he saw what the aguara's final illusion had been hiding.

The men in the water began to suddenly scream and thrash

around. And disappear below the surface, one by one.

Petru Cobbin came up for air, choking and screaming, covered entirely in writhing, striped leeches, as fat as eels. Then he sank below the water and didn't come up again.

'Geralt!'

Addario Bach used the boathook to pull the small boat, which had survived the encounter with the crocodile and had now drifted to the side of the ship. The dwarf jumped in and Geralt passed him the still stupefied van Vliet.

'Captain.'

Pudlorak waved his cap at them.

'No, Master Witcher! I shall not abandon my ship. I'll guide her into port, whatever happens! And if not, I'll go down to the bottom with her! Farewell!'

The *Prophet Lebioda* drifted calmly and majestically, gliding into an offshoot and vanishing from sight.

Addario Bach spat on his hands, hunched forward and pulled on the oars. The boat sped over the water.

'Where to?'

'To the broad water, beyond the shallows. The river's there. I'm certain. We'll join the shipping channel and come across a ship. And if not, we'll row this boat all the way to Novigrad.'

'Pudlorak . . . ?'

'He'll cope. If it's his destiny.'

Kevenard van Vliet wept. Addario rowed.

The sky had grown dark. They heard the distant rumble of thunder.

'A storm's coming,' said the dwarf. 'We'll get bloody soaked.'

Geralt snorted. And then began to laugh. Heartily and sincerely. And infectiously. Because a moment later they were both laughing.

Addario rowed with powerful, even strokes. The boat skipped over the water like an arrow.

'You row as though you've been doing it all your life,' said Geralt, wiping his eyes, wet with tears. 'I thought dwarves didn't

know how to sail or swim . . .'

'You're succumbing to stereotypes.'

INTERLUDE

Four days later

The auction house of the brothers Borsody was located in a small square off the Main Street, which was indeed Novigrad's main road, and connected the town square with the temple of Eternal Fire. At the beginning of the brothers' career, when they traded horses and sheep, they had only been able to afford a shack beyond the town walls. Forty-two years after founding their auction house they now occupied an impressive, three-storey building in the most elegant quarter of the city. It had remained in the family's possession, but the objects at auction were now exclusively precious stones, chiefly diamonds, and works of art, antiques and collectors' items. The auctions took place once a quarter, always on a Friday.

That day the auction room was full to bursting. *There are a good hundred people*, thought Antea Derris.

The buzz and murmur quietened down. The auctioneer, Abner de Navarette, took his place behind the podium.

As usual, de Navarette looked splendid in a black velvet jerkin and waistcoat with golden brocade. Princes could have envied him his noble looks and physiognomy, and aristocrats his bearing and manners. It was an open secret that Abner de Navarette really *was* an aristocrat, banished from his family and disinherited for drunkenness, profligacy and debauchery. Had it not been for the Borsody family, Abner de Navarette would have lived by begging. But the Borsodys needed an auctioneer with aristocratic looks. And none of the other candidates could equal Abner de Navarette in that regard.

'Good evening, ladies and gentlemen,' he said in a voice as velvety as his jacket. 'Welcome to the Borsodys' Auction House for the quarterly auction of art treasures and antiques. The collection under the hammer today, which you became acquainted with in our gallery, is unique and comes entirely from private owners.

'The vast majority of you, I note, are regular guests and clients, familiar with the rules of our House and the regulations that apply during auctions. Everybody here was given on entry a

brochure containing the regulations. I thus presume that you are all informed regarding the rules and aware of the consequences of breaking them. Let us then begin without delay.

'Lot number one: a nephrite group figure, depicting a nymph . . . hmm . . . with three fauns . . . It was made, according to our experts, by gnomes, dated as being a hundred years old. Starting price: two hundred crowns. I see two hundred and fifty. Going once. Going twice. Going three times. Sold to the gentleman with number thirty-six.'

Two clerks perched at neighbouring desks diligently wrote down the results of the sales.

'Lot number two: *Aen N'og Mab Taedh'morc*, a collection of elven tales and poems. Richly illustrated. Mint condition. Starting price: five hundred crowns. Five hundred and fifty, to Merchant Hofmeier. Councillor Drofuss, six hundred. Mr Hofmeier, six hundred and fifty. No more bids? Sold for six hundred and fifty crowns to Mr Hofmeier of Hirundum.

'Lot number three: an ivory device, of a . . . hmm . . . curved and elongated shape . . . hmm . . . probably used for massage. Foreign provenance, age unknown. Starting price: a hundred crowns. To my left, a hundred and fifty. Two hundred, the lady in the mask with number forty-three. Two hundred and fifty, the lady in the veil with number eight. Do I hear three hundred? Three hundred, to the wife of apothecary Vorsterkranz. Three hundred and fifty! Going for the last time. Sold for three hundred and fifty crowns to the lady with number forty-three.

'Lot number four: *Antidotarius magnus*, a unique medical treatise, published by Castell Graupian University at the beginning of the academy's existence. Starting price: eight hundred crowns. I see eight hundred and fifty. Doctor Ohnesorg, Nine hundred. One thousand, the Honourable Marti Sodergren. Any more bids? Sold for one thousand crowns to the Honourable Sodergren.

'Lot number five: *Liber de naturis bestiarum*, a rare edition, bound in beechwood boards, ornately illustrated . . .

'Lot number six: *Girl with a Kitten*, portrait *en trois quarts,* oil on canvas, the Cintran school. Starting price . . .

'Lot number seven: a bell with a handle, brass, dwarven work, the age of the item is difficult to ascertain, but it is without doubt antique. There is an engraving on the rim in dwarven runes,

reading: “Why are you ringing it, you twat?” Starting price . . .

‘Lot number eight: oils and tempera on canvas, artist unknown. A masterpiece. Please observe the rare use of colour, the play of pigments and the dynamics of the light. The semi-dark mood and the splendid colours of a majestically rendered sylvan landscape. And please note the main figure in the work’s central position: a stag in its rutting ground, in atmospheric chiaroscuro. Starting price . . .

‘Lot number nine: *Ymago mundi*, also known as *Mundus novus*. An extremely rare book, only one copy in the possession of the University of Oxenfurt and a few in private hands. Bound in cordovan. Excellent condition. Starting price: one thousand five hundred crowns. One thousand six hundred, the Honourable Vimme Vivaldi. One thousand six hundred and fifty, the Reverend Prochaska. One thousand seven hundred, the lady at the back of the room. One thousand eight hundred, Master Vivaldi. One thousand eight hundred and fifty, the Reverend Prochaska. One thousand nine hundred, Mr Vivaldi. Bravo, Reverend Prochaska, two thousand crowns. Two thousand one hundred, Mr Vivaldi. Do I hear two thousand two hundred?’

‘That book is godless, it contains a heretical message! It ought to be burned! I want to buy it to burn it! Two thousand two hundred crowns!’

‘Two thousand five hundred!’ snorted Vimme Vivaldi, stroking a well-groomed white beard. ‘Can you top that, you devout arsonist?’

‘It’s a scandal! Mammon is triumphing over probity! Pagan dwarves are treated better than people! I shall complain to the authorities!’

‘Sold for two thousand five hundred crowns to Mr Vivaldi,’ Abner de Navarette announced calmly. ‘However, I remind the Reverend Prochaska about the rules and regulations of the Borsody Auction House.’

‘I’m leaving.’

‘Farewell. Please forgive the disturbance. It can happen that the uniqueness and wealth of the Borsody Auction House’s portfolio calls forth strong emotions. Let us continue. Lot number ten: an absolute curio, an exceptional find, two witcher swords. The House has decided not to offer them separately, but as a set, in honour of

the witcher whom they served years ago. The first sword, made of steel from a meteorite. The blade was forged and sharpened in Mahakam, there are authentic dwarven punched patterns confirmed by our experts.

'The other sword is silver. There are runic signs and glyphs, confirming its originality, on the cross guard and along the entire length of the blade. Starting price: one thousand crowns for the set. The gentleman with number seventeen, one thousand and fifty. Any more bids? Do I hear one thousand one hundred? For such rare items?'

'Shit, not much money,' muttered Nikefor Muus, court clerk, who was sitting in the back row, by turns nervously clenching his ink-stained fingers into a fist and pulling his fingers through his thinning hair. 'I knew it wasn't worth bothering—'

Antea Derris shut him up with a hiss.

'Count Horvath, one thousand one hundred. The gentleman with number seventeen, one thousand two hundred. The Honourable Nino Cianfanelli, one thousand five hundred. The gentleman in the mask, one thousand six hundred. The gentleman with number seventeen, one thousand seven hundred. Count Horvath, one thousand eight hundred. The gentleman in the mask, two thousand. The Honourable Master Cianfanelli, two thousand one hundred. The gentleman in the mask, two thousand two hundred. Any more bids? The Honourable Master Cianfanelli, two thousand five hundred . . . The gentleman with number seventeen . . .'

The gentleman with number seventeen was suddenly seized under the armpits by two burly thugs who had entered the room unnoticed.

'Jerosa Fuerte, known as Needle,' drawled a third thug, tapping the arrested man in the chest with a club. 'A hired killer, with a warrant issued for his apprehension. You are under arrest. Take him away.'

'Three thousand!' yelled Jerosa Fuerte, known as Needle, waving the sign with the number seventeen that he was still holding. 'Three . . . thousand . . .'

'I'm sorry,' said Abner de Navarette coldly. 'It's the rules. A bidder's offer is cancelled on the event of his arrest. The current bid is two thousand five hundred, offered by the Honourable Master

Cianfanelli. Do I hear a higher bid? Count Horvath, two thousand six hundred. The gentleman in the mask, two thousand seven hundred. The Honourable Master Cianfanelli, three thousand. Going once, going twice . . .'

'Four thousand.'

'Oh. The Honourable Molnar Giancardi. Bravo. Four thousand crowns. Do I hear four thousand five hundred?'

'I wanted them for my son,' snapped Nino Cianfanelli. 'And you have only daughters, Molnar. What do you want with those swords? Ah well, have it your own way. I yield.'

'Sold,' declared de Navarette, 'to the Honourable Master Molnar Giancardi for four thousand crowns. Let us go on, noble ladies and gentlemen. Lot number eleven: a cloak of monkey fur . . .'

Nikefor Muus, joyful and grinning like a weasel in a chicken coop, slapped Antea Derris on the back. Hard. Only the last remnants of her will prevented Antea from punching him in the mouth.

'We're leaving,' she hissed.

'And the money?'

'After the auction is over and the formalities have been completed. That will take some time.'

Ignoring the grumbling of Nikefor Muus, Antea walked towards the door. She was aware of somebody observing her and glanced surreptitiously. A woman. With black hair. Attired in black and white. With an obsidian star hanging in her cleavage.

She felt a shiver.

*

Antea had been right. The formalities did take some time. They could only go to the bank two days later. It was a branch of one of the dwarven banks, smelling – like all the others – of money, wax and mahogany panelling.

'The sum to be paid is three thousand three hundred and sixty-six crowns,' declared the clerk. 'After subtracting the bank's charges

of one per cent.'

'The Borsodys: fifteen, the bank: one,' growled Nikefor Muus. 'They'd take a cut from everything! Daylight robbery! Hand over the cash!'

'One moment.' Antea stopped him. 'First, let's sort out our affairs, yours and mine. I'm also due a commission. Of four hundred crowns.'

'Hold on, hold on!' yelled Muus, attracting the gaze of other clerks and customers. 'What four hundred? I've barely got three thousand and a few pennies from the Borsodys . . .'

'According to the contract I'm owed ten per cent of the sale price. The costs are your affair. And they apply only to you.'

'What are you—?'

Antea Derris looked at him. That was enough. There wasn't much resemblance between Antea and her father. But Antea could glare just like he did. Just like Pyral Pratt. Muus cringed beneath her gaze.

'Please make out a cheque for four hundred crowns from the sum to be paid,' she instructed the clerk. 'I know the bank takes a commission, I accept that.'

'And my dough in cash!' The court scribe pointed to the large leather satchel he was lugging. 'I'll take it home and hide it away safely! No thieving banks are going to fleece me for a commission!'

'It's a considerable sum,' said the clerk, standing up. 'Please wait here.'

As he left the counter the clerk opened the door leading to the rear for a moment, but Antea could have sworn that for a second she saw a black-haired woman dressed in black and white.

She felt a shiver.

*

'Thank you, Molnar,' said Yennefer. 'I won't forget this favour.'

'What are you thanking me for?' smiled Molnar Giancardi. 'What have I done, what service have I rendered? That I bought a certain lot at auction? Paying for it with money from your private

account? And perhaps that I turned away when you cast that spell a moment ago? I turned away, because I was watching that agent from the window as she walked away, gracefully swaying this and that. She's a dame to my taste, I don't deny it, although I'm not fond of human females. Will your spell . . . cause her problems too —?'

'No,' interrupted the sorceress. 'Nothing will happen to her. She took a cheque, not gold.'

'Indeed. You will take away the Witcher's swords at once, I presume. After all, to him they mean—'

'—everything.' Yennefer completed his sentence. 'He's bound to them by destiny. I know, I know, indeed. He told me. And I've begun to believe it. No, Molnar, I won't take the swords today. They can remain in the safe deposit. I'll soon send an authorised person to collect them. I leave Novigrad this very day.'

'As do I. I'm riding to Tretogor, I have to inspect the branch there. Then I'm going home to Gors Velen.'

'Well, thank you once again. Farewell, O dwarf.'

'Farewell, O sorceress.'

INTERLUDE

Precisely one hundred hours after the gold was taken from the Giancardis' bank in Novigrad

'You're banned from entry,' said the doorman Tarp. 'And well aware of that. Move away from the steps.'

'Ever seen this, peasant?' Nikefor Muus shook and jingled a fat pouch. 'Ever seen so much gold at one time? Out of my way, a nobleman is coming through! A wealthy lord! Stand aside, churl!'

'Let him in, Tarp.' Febus Ravenga emerged from inside the osteria. 'I don't want any disturbance here; the customers are growing anxious. And you, beware. You've cheated me once, there won't be a second time. You'd better have the means to pay this time, Muus.'

'*Mr* Muus!' The scribe shoved Tarp aside. '*Mr!* Beware how you address me, innkeeper!

'Wine,' he cried, lounging back in a chair. 'The dearest you have!'

'Our dearest costs sixty crowns . . .' the maître d'hôtel stated gravely.

'I can afford it! Give me a whole jug and pronto!'

'Be quiet,' Ravenga admonished him. 'Be quiet, Muus.'

'Don't silence me, mountebank! Trickster! Upstart! Who are you to silence me? A gilded sign, but with muck still on your boots. And shit will always be shit! Take a look here! Ever seen so much gold at one time? Well?'

Nikefor Muus reached into the pouch, pulled out a handful of gold coins and tossed them contemptuously on the table.

The coins landed with a splash, melting into a brown gunk. A ghastly stench of excrement spread around.

The customers of the Natura Rerum osteria leaped to their feet and dashed for the exit, choking and covering their noses with napkins. The maître d'hôtel bent over and retched. There was a

scream and a curse. Febus Ravenga didn't even twitch. He stood like a statue, arms crossed on his chest.

Muus, dumbfounded, shook his head, goggled and rubbed his eyes, staring at the stinking pile of shit on the tablecloth. He finally roused himself and reached into the pouch. And pulled out a handful of soft gunk.

'You're right, Muus,' said Febus Ravenga in an icy voice. 'Shit will always be shit. Into the courtyard with him.'

The court scribe didn't even put up any resistance as he was hauled away, too bewildered by what had happened. Tarp dragged him to the outhouse. At a sign from Ravenga, two servants removed the wooden cover of the latrine. Muus became animated at the sight and began to yell, struggle and kick. It didn't help much. Tarp hauled him to the earth closet and threw him down the opening. The young man tumbled into the sloppy excrement. But he didn't go under. He spread out his arms and legs and held his head up, keeping himself on the surface of the muck with his arms on bunches of straw, rags, sticks and crumpled pages from various learned and pious books.

Febus Ravenga took down from the wall of the granary a wooden pitchfork made from a single forked branch.

'Shit was, is and will remain shit,' he said. 'And always ends up where shit is.'

He pressed down on the pitchfork and submerged Muus. Completely. Muus broke the surface, roaring, coughing and spitting. Ravenga let him cough a little and get his breath back and then submerged him again. This time much deeper.

After repeating the operation several times, he threw down the pitchfork.

'Leave him,' he ordered. 'Let him crawl out by himself.'

'That won't be easy,' adjudged Tarp. 'And it'll take some time.'

'Let it. There's no rush.'

A mon retour (hé! je m'en désespere!)
Tu m'as reçu d'un baiser tout glacé.

Pierre de Ronsard

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Just at that moment, the Novigradian schooner *Pandora Parvi*, a beautiful ship indeed, was sailing to its mooring place under full sail. *Beautiful and swift*, thought Geralt, descending the gangway onto the busy wharf. He had seen the schooner in Novigrad, asked around and knew it had set sail from there two whole days after the galley *Stinta*, on which he had sailed. In spite of that, he had essentially reached Kerack at the same time. *Perhaps I ought to have waited and boarded the schooner*, he thought. *Two days more in Novigrad. Who knows, perhaps I would have acquired some more information*?

Vain digressions, he decided. Perhaps, who knows, maybe. What has happened has happened, nothing can change it now. And there's no sense going on about it.

With a glance, he bade farewell to the schooner, the lighthouse, the sea and the horizon, darkening with storm clouds. Then he set off for the town at a brisk pace.

*

Just at that moment, two porters were coming out carrying a sedan chair, a dainty construction with delicate lilac curtains. It had to be Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday. On those days Lytta Neyd saw patients: usually wealthy, upper-class ladies, who arrived in sedan chairs like that.

The doorman let him in without a word. Just as well. Geralt wasn't in the best of moods and would certainly have retaliated with a word. Or even two or three.

The patio was deserted and the water in the fountain burbled softly. There was a carafe and some cups on a small malachite table. Without further ado, Geralt poured himself a cup.

When he raised his head, he saw Mozaïk. In a white coat and apron. Pale. With her hair slicked down.

'It's you,' she said. 'You're back.'

‘It certainly is,’ he confirmed dryly. ‘I most certainly am. And this wine is most certainly a little sour.’

‘*Such* a pleasure seeing you again.’

‘Coral? Is she here? And if so, where?’

‘I saw her between the thighs of a patient a moment ago,’ she shrugged. ‘She’s most certainly still there.’

‘You indeed have no choice, Mozaïk,’ he responded calmly, looking her in the eyes. ‘You’ll have to become a sorceress. In sooth, you have a great predisposition for it and the makings of one. Your caustic wit wouldn’t be appreciated in a weaving manufactory. Nor yet in a bawdy house.’

‘I’m learning and growing.’ She withstood his gaze. ‘I don’t cry myself to sleep any longer. I’ve done all my crying. I’m over that stage.’

‘No, no you’re not, you’re deluding yourself. There’s still a lot ahead of you. And sarcasm won’t protect you from it. Especially as it’s forced, and a pale imitation. But enough of that, it’s not my job to give you lessons in life. I asked where Coral was.’

‘Here. Greetings.’

The sorceress emerged from behind a curtain like a ghost. Like Mozaïk, she was wearing a white doctor’s coat, and her red hair was pinned up and hidden by a linen cap which in ordinary circumstances he would have thought ridiculous. But the circumstances weren’t ordinary and laughter would have been out of place. He needed a few seconds to understand that.

She walked over and kissed him on the cheek without a word. Her lips were cold. And she had dark circles under her eyes.

She smelled of medicine. And the fluid she used as disinfectant. It was a nasty, repulsive, morbid scent. A scent full of fear.

‘I’ll see you tomorrow,’ she forestalled him. ‘Tomorrow I’ll tell you everything.’

‘Tomorrow.’

She looked at him and it was a faraway look, from beyond the chasm of time and events between them. He needed a few seconds to understand how deep that chasm was and how remote were the events separating them.

‘Maybe the day after tomorrow would be better. Go to town. Meet that poet, he’s been worried about you. But now go, please. I have to see a patient.’

After she had gone, he glanced at Mozaïk. Probably meaningfully enough for her not to delay with an explanation.

‘We had a birth this morning,’ she said, and her voice was a little different. ‘A difficult one. She decided to use forceps. And everything that could have gone badly did.’

‘I understand.’

‘I doubt it.’

‘Goodbye, Mozaïk.’

‘You were away for a long time.’ She raised her head. ‘Much longer than she had expected. At Rissberg they didn’t know anything, or at least pretended not to. Something happened, didn’t it?’

‘Yes, it did.’

‘I understand.’

‘I doubt it.’

*

Dandelion impressed with his intelligence. By stating something so obvious that Geralt was still unable to completely adjust himself to it. Or completely accept it.

‘It’s the end, isn’t it? Gone with the wind? Of course, she and the sorcerers needed you, you’ve done the job, now you can go. And know what? I’m glad it’s happening now. You had to finish that bizarre affair some time, and the longer it went on the more dangerous the consequences were potentially becoming. If you want to know my opinion, you should also be glad it’s over and that it went so smoothly. You should then dress your countenance in a joyful smile, not a saturnine and gloomy grimace which, believe me, doesn’t suit you at all. With it, you look quite simply like a man with a serious hangover, who to cap it all has got food poisoning and doesn’t remember when he broke a tooth and on what, or how he got the semen stains on his britches.

‘Or perhaps your melancholy results from something else?’ continued the bard, completely undaunted by the Witcher’s lack of reaction. ‘If only from the fact that you were thrown out on your ear when you were planning a finale in your own, inimitable style? The one with the flight at dawn and flowers on the bedside table? Ha, ha, being in love is like being at war, my friend, and your beloved behaved like an expert strategist. She acted pre-emptively, with a preventative strike. She must have read Marshal Pelligram’s *The History of Warfare*. Pelligram cites many examples of victories won using a similar stratagem.’

Geralt still didn’t react. It was apparent that Dandelion didn’t expect a reaction. He finished his beer and gestured to the innkeeper’s wife to bring another.

‘Taking the above into consideration,’ he continued, twisting the pegs of his lute, ‘I’m generally in favour of sex on the first date. In the future, I recommend it to you in every respect. It eliminates the necessity of any further rendezvous with the same person, which can be wearisome and time-consuming. While we’re on the subject, that lady lawyer you recommended turned out indeed to be worth the bother. You wouldn’t believe—’

‘I would,’ the Witcher spat, interrupting him quite bluntly. ‘I can believe it without hearing an account, so you can give it a miss.’

‘Indeed,’ the bard noted. ‘Dejected, distressed and consumed by care, owing to which you’re tetchy and brusque. It’s not just the woman, it seems to me. There’s something else. I know it, dammit. And see it. Did you fail in Novigrad? Didn’t you get your swords back?’

Geralt sighed, although he had promised himself he wouldn’t.

‘No, I didn’t. I was too late. There were complications, and various things took place. We were caught by a storm, then our boat began to ship water . . . And then a certain glove-maker was taken seriously ill . . . Ah, I won’t bore you with the details. In brief, I didn’t make it in time. When I reached Novigrad the auction was over. They gave me short shrift at the Borsodys. The auctions are shrouded in commercial confidentiality, protecting both the sellers and the buyers. The company doesn’t issue any information to outsiders, blah, blah, blah, farewell, sir. I didn’t find anything out. I don’t know whether the swords were sold, and if so, who purchased them. I don’t even know if the thief put the swords up for auction at

all. For he might have ignored Pratt's advice; another opportunity might have occurred. I don't know anything.'

'Too bad.' Dandelion shook his head. 'It's a streak of unfortunate incidents. Cousin Ferrant's investigation is at a standstill, it seems to me. Cousin Ferrant, while we're on the subject, asks about you endlessly. Where you are, whether I have any tidings from you, when you're returning, whether you'll make it to the royal nuptials in time, whether you've forgotten your promise to Prince Egmund. Naturally, I haven't said a word about your endeavours or the auction. But the holiday of Lughnasadh, I remind you, is getting closer. Only ten days remain.'

'I know. But perhaps something will happen in the meantime. Something lucky, let's say? After the streak of unfortunate incidents, we could do with a change.'

'I don't deny it. But if—'

'I'll think it over and make a decision.' Geralt didn't let the bard finish. 'Nothing in principle binds me to appear at the royal nuptials as his bodyguard: Egmund and the instigator didn't recover my swords, and that was the condition. But I absolutely don't rule out fulfilling the ducal wish. Material considerations – if nothing else – argue for it. The prince boasted he wouldn't skimp on a penny. And everything suggests that I'll be needing new swords, bespoke ones. And that will cost a great deal. What can I say? Let's go and eat. And drink.'

'To the Natura in Ravenga?'

'Not today. Today I feel like simple, natural, uncomplicated and honest things. If you know what I mean.'

'Of course, I do,' said Dandelion, standing up. 'Let's go down to the sea, to Palmyra. I know a place there. They serve herrings, vodka and soup made from a fish called the bighead carp. Don't laugh! That really is its name!'

'They can call themselves whatever they want. Let's go.'

*

The bridge over the Adalatte was blocked, for at that very moment a column of laden wagons and a troop of horsemen pulling riderless horses were passing over it. Geralt and Dandelion had to wait and

step out of the way.

A rider on a bay mare brought up the rear of the cavalcade. The mare tossed her head and greeted Geralt with a long-drawn-out neigh.

'Roach!'

'Greetings, Witcher,' said the horseman, removing his hood to reveal his face. 'I was just coming to visit you. Although I hadn't expected we'd bump into each other so soon.'

'Greetings, Pinety.'

Pinety dismounted. Geralt noticed he was armed. It was quite strange, since mages almost never bore arms. A sword in a richly decorated scabbard was hanging from the sorcerer's brass-studded belt. There was also a dagger, solid and broad.

He took Roach's reins from the sorcerer and stroked the mare's nostrils and mane. Pinety took off his gloves and stuck them into his belt.

'Please forgive me, Master Dandelion,' he said, 'but I'd like to be alone with Geralt. What I must say to him is meant for his ears only.'

'Geralt has no secrets before me,' Dandelion said, puffing himself up.

'I know. I learned many details of his private life from your ballads.'

'But—'

'Dandelion,' the Witcher interrupted. 'Take a walk.'

'Thank you,' he said when they were alone. 'Thank you for bringing me my horse, Pinety.'

'I observed that you were attached to her,' replied the sorcerer. 'So, when I found her in Pinetops—'

'You were in Pinetops?'

'We were. Constable Torquil summoned us.'

'Did you see—?'

'We did.' Pinety cut him off curtly. 'We saw everything. I don't understand, Witcher. I don't understand. Why didn't you hack him to death when you could? On the spot? You didn't act too

prudently, if I may say so.'

I know, thought Geralt to himself. *I know, how well I know. I turned out to be too stupid to take advantage of the chance fate had given me. For what harm would there have been in that, one more corpse in the statistics? What does that mean to a hired killer? So what if it sickened me to be your tool? I'm always somebody's tool, after all. I ought to have gritted my teeth and done what had to be done.*

'This is sure to astonish you,' said Pinety, looking him in the eyes, 'but we immediately came to help, Harlan and I. We guessed you were in need of assistance. We caught Degerlund the following day when he was tearing apart some random gang.'

You caught him, the Witcher thought to himself. *And broke his neck without thinking twice? Since you're cleverer than me, you didn't repeat my mistake? Like hell you didn't. If it had been like that you wouldn't be wearing a face like that now, Guincamp.*

'We aren't murderers,' stammered the sorcerer, blushing. 'We hauled him off to Rissberg. And caused a mild commotion . . . Everybody was against us. Ortolan, astonishingly, behaved cautiously, and we'd actually expected the worst from him. But Biruta Icarti, Pockmarked Axel, Sandoval, even Zangenis, who had previously been on our side . . . We had to listen to a lengthy lecture about the solidarity of the fellowship, about fraternity, about loyalty. We learned that only utter good-for-nothings send hired killers after confraters, that you have to fall very low to hire a witcher to go after a comrade. For low reasons. Out of envy for our comrade's talent and prestige; jealousy over his scientific achievements and successes.'

Citing the incidents in the Hills and the forty-four corpses achieved nothing, the Witcher thought to himself. *Unless you count shrugs of the shoulders. And probably a lengthy lecture about science and the need to make sacrifices. About the end justifying the means.*

'Degerlund,' Pinety continued, 'was hauled before the commission and dealt a severe reprimand. For practicing goetia, for the people killed by the demon. He was haughty, clearly counting on an intervention by Ortolan. But Ortolan had somehow forgotten about him, having devoted himself utterly to a fresh new passion: developing a formula for an extremely effective and universal manure, meant to revolutionise agriculture. Left to fend for himself, Degerlund struck a different tone. Tearful and pathetic. He played the victim. A victim in equal measure of his own ambition and

magical talent, owing to which he evoked a demon so powerful it was uncontrollable. He swore to abandon the practice of goetia, that he would never touch it again. That he would utterly devote himself to research into perfecting the human species, into transhumanism, speciation, introgression and genetic modification.'

And they lent credence to him, the Witcher thought to himself.

'They lent credence to him. Ortolan, who suddenly appeared before the commission stinking of manure, influenced them. He denominated Degerlund a "dear youth" who had admittedly committed grievous miscalculations, but who is infallible? He didn't doubt that the youth would calibrate himself and that he would vouch for it. He asked for the commission to temper its ire, to show compassion and not excoriate the youth. He finally promulgated Degerlund his heir and successor, fully transferring his private laboratory in the Citadel to him. He himself, he declared, didn't need a laboratory, for he had resolved to toil and take exercise under the open sky, on vegetable patches and flower beds. This plan appealed to Biruta, Pockmarked Axel and the rest. The Citadel, bearing in mind its inaccessibility, could successfully be considered a place of correction. Degerlund had ensnared himself. He found himself under house arrest.'

And the affair was swept under the carpet, the Witcher thought to himself.

'I suspect that consideration for you and your reputation had an influence on it,' said Pinety, looking at him keenly.

Geralt raised his eyebrows.

'Your witcher code,' continued the sorcerer, 'reportedly forbids the killing of people. But it is said about you that you don't treat the code with due reverence. That this and that has occurred, that several people have departed this life thanks to you. Biruta and the others got cold feet, fearing that you'd return to Rissberg and finish the job, and that they were in line for a beating too. But the Citadel is a fully secure refuge, a former gnomish mountain fortress converted into a laboratory and currently under magical protection. No one can get into the Citadel, there is no possibility. Degerlund is thus not only isolated but also safe.'

Rissberg is also safe, the Witcher thought to himself. *Safe from scandals and embarrassment. With Degerlund in isolation there's no scandal. No one will ever know that the crafty bastard and careerist tricked and led up the garden path the sorcerers of Rissberg, who believe*

themselves and declare themselves to be the elite of the magical fraternity. Or know that a degenerate psychopath took advantage of the naivety and stupidity of that elite and managed without any hindrance to kill almost four dozen people.

'Degerlund will be under supervision and observation in the Citadel,' the sorcerer said, looking him in the eye the whole time. 'He won't call forth any demon.'

There never was a demon. And you, Pinety, know that only too well.

'The Citadel,' said the sorcerer, looking away and observing the ships at anchor, 'is built into the rock of the Mount Cremora massif, at the foot of which lies Rissberg. An attempt to storm it would be tantamount to suicide. Not only owing to the magical protection. Do you remember what you told us back then? About that possessed person whom you once killed? In case of absolute necessity, protecting one good at the cost of another, precluding the lawlessness of a forbidden deed in the process. Well, you must understand that the circumstances are now quite different. In isolation, Degerlund doesn't represent a genuine or direct threat. Were you to lay a finger on him, you would be committing a forbidden and lawless deed. Were you to try to kill him, you would go to court accused of attempted murder. Some of our people, I happen to know, hope you will nonetheless try. And end up on the scaffold. So, I advise you: let it go. Forget about Degerlund. Leave it to run its course.

'You say nothing.' Pinety stated a fact. 'You're keeping your comments to yourself.'

'Because there's nothing to say. I'm only curious about one thing. You and Tzara. Will you remain at Rissberg?'

Pinety laughed. Dryly and hollowly.

'Both Harlan and I were asked to tender our resignation, at our own request, by virtue of our state of health. We left Rissberg and we'll never return there. Harlan is going to Poviss to serve King Rhyd. And I'm inclined to continue travelling. In the Empire of Nilfgaard, I hear, they treat mages functionally and without undue respect. But they pay them well. And while we're on the subject of Nilfgaard . . . I almost forgot. I have a farewell gift for you, Witcher.'

He undid his baldric, wrapped it around the scabbard and

handed the sword to Geralt.

'It's for you,' he said before the Witcher could speak. 'I received it on my sixteenth birthday. From my father, who couldn't get over the fact that I'd decided to study magic. He hoped the gift would influence me and that as the owner of such a weapon I would feel obliged to continue the family tradition and choose a military career. Why, I disappointed my father. In everything. I didn't like hunting, I preferred angling. I didn't marry the only daughter of his closest friend. I didn't become a military man, and the sword gathered dust in a cupboard. I have no need of it. It will serve you better.'

'But . . . Pinety . . .'

'Take it, don't make a fuss. I know your swords went missing and you're in need.'

Geralt grasped the lizard-skin hilt and drew the blade halfway out of the scabbard. One inch above the cross guard, he saw a punch in the shape of the sun in its glory with sixteen rays, alternating straight and wavy, symbolising heraldically the light and heat of the sun. A beautifully executed inscription in stylised lettering – a famous trademark – began two inches beyond the sun.

'A blade from Viroleda.' The Witcher stated a fact. 'This time authentic.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Nothing, nothing. I'm admiring it. And I still don't know if I can accept it . . .'

'You can. In principle, you already have received it, since you're holding it. Hell's bells, don't make a fuss, I said. I'm giving you the sword because I like you. So that you'll realise not every sorcerer has it in for you. Anyway, fishing rods are more use to me. The rivers are beautiful and crystal clear in Nilfgaard, there's plenty of trout and salmon in them.'

'Thank you. Pinety?'

'Yes?'

'Are you giving me the sword purely because of liking me?'

'Why, because I like you, indeed.' The sorcerer lowered his voice. 'But perhaps not only. What does it bother me what happens here and what purposes that sword will serve? I'm leaving these parts, never to return. You see that splendid galleon lying at

anchor? It's *Euryale*, its home port is Baccalá. I sail the day after tomorrow.'

'You arrived a little early.'

'Yes . . .' said the mage, stammering slightly. 'I wanted to say goodbye . . . to someone.'

'Good luck. Thanks for the sword. And for the horse, thanks again. Farewell, Pinety.'

'Farewell.' The sorcerer shook Geralt's extended hand without thinking. 'Farewell, Witcher.'

*

He found Dandelion – where else? – in the portside tavern, slurping fish soup from a bowl.

'I'm leaving,' he announced briefly. 'Right away.'

'Right away?' Dandelion froze with the spoon halfway to his mouth. 'Right now? I thought—'

'It doesn't matter what you thought. I ride immediately. Reassure your cousin, the instigator. I'll be back for the royal nuptials.'

'What's that?'

'What does it look like?'

'A sword, naturally. Where did you get it? From the sorcerer, was it? And the one I gave you? Where's that?'

'It got lost. Return to the upper town, Dandelion.'

'What about Coral?'

'What *about* Coral?'

'What do I say if she asks . . .'

'She won't. She won't have time. She'll be saying farewell to somebody.'

INTERLUDE

CONFIDENTIAL

Illustrissimus et Reverendissimus

Magnus Magister Narses de la Roche

The Head of the Chapter of the Gift and the Art

Novigrad

Datum ex Castello Rissberg,

die 15 mens. Jul. anno 1245 post Resurrectionem

Re:

Master of the Arts

Sorel Albert Amador Degerlund

Honoratissime Grandmaster,

Rumours about the incidents which occurred on the western borders of Temeria, in the summer of *anno currente*, have doubtless reached the ears of the Chapter. The result of the said incidents, presumably, is that around forty – it is impossible to state precisely – persons, mainly unschooled forestry labourers, lost their lives. These incidents are associated – regrettably – with the person of Master Sorel Albert Amador Degerlund, a member of the research team at the Rissberg Complex.

The research team of the Rissberg Complex is united in sympathy with the families of the victims of the incidents, although the victims – who stand very low in the social hierarchy, abusing alcohol and leading immoral lives – were probably not in legalised unions.

We wish to remind the Chapter that Master Degerlund, a pupil and acolyte of Grandmaster Ortolan, is an outstanding scientist, a specialist in the field of genetics, boasting immense, simply incalculable accomplishments in transhumanism, introgression and

speciation. The research that Master Degerlund is conducting may turn out to be pivotal for the development and evolution of the human race. As is known, the human race is no match for the non-human races in terms of many physical, psychological and psychomagical traits. Master Degerlund's experiments, based on the hybridisation and combination of the gene pool, are intended – in the beginning – to equalise the human race with non-human races, while in the long term – by the application of speciation – to permit humans to dominate non-humans and subdue them utterly. It is probably unnecessary to explain what cardinal significance this matter has. It would be inadvisable for some trifling incidents to impede or stop the above-mentioned scientific studies.

As far as Master Degerlund himself is concerned, the research team of the Rissberg Complex takes full responsibility for his medical care. Master Degerlund was previously diagnosed with narcissistic tendencies, absence of empathy and slight emotional disturbances. During the time preceding the perpetration of the acts he is accused of, the condition intensified until symptoms of bipolar disorder occurred. It may be stated that at the time the acts he is accused of were committed Master Degerlund was not in control of his emotional reactions and his ability to differentiate between good and evil was impaired. It may be assumed that Degerlund was *non compos mentis*, *eo ipso* was temporarily insane, hence he cannot take criminal responsibility for the acts ascribed to him, since *impune est admittendum quod per furorem alicuius accidit*.

Master Degerlund has been placed *ad interim* in a secret locality where he is being treated and is continuing his research.

Since we consider the matter closed, we wish to draw the Chapter's attention to Constable Torquil, who is conducting the investigation into the matter of the Temerian incidents. Constable Torquil, a subordinate of the bailiff in Gors Velen, otherwise known as a diligent functionary and staunch defender of law, is exhibiting excessive zeal as regards the incidents in the above-mentioned settlements and is following – from our point of view – a decidedly inappropriate trail. His superiors ought to be persuaded to temper his enthusiasm. And were that not to be effective it would be worth investigating the personal files of the constable, his wife, parents, grandparents, children and other members of his family, paying special attention to his private life, past, criminal record, material affairs and sexual preferences. We suggest contacting the law firm of Codringher and Fenn, whose services, if I may remind the

Chapter, were taken advantage of three years ago with the aim of discrediting and ridiculing the witnesses in the case known as the ‘corn affair’.

Item, we would like to draw the Chapter’s attention to the fact that unfortunately the witcher called Geralt of Rivia has become embroiled in the matter in question. He had direct access to the incidents in the settlements, and we also have reason to suppose that he connects those events with Master Degerlund. The said witcher ought also to be silenced, should he begin to delve too deeply into the matter. We would like to point out that the asocial attitude, nihilism, emotional instability and chaotic personality of the aforementioned witcher may mean that a stark warning may prove to be *non sufficit* and extreme measures will turn out to be necessary. The witcher is under permanent surveillance and we are prepared to apply such measures if, naturally, the Chapter approves and orders it.

In hopes that the above explanation will turn out to be sufficient for the Chapter to close the matter, *bene valere optamus* and we remain yours sincerely

on behalf of the Rissberg Complex research team

semper fidelis vestrarum bona amica

Biruta Anna Marquette Icarti *manu propria*

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

‘Just in time,’ said Frans Torquil morosely. ‘You made it on time, Witcher, right on time. The spectacle’s about to begin.’

He lay on his back on a bed, as pale as a whitewashed wall, his hair wet with sweat and plastered to his forehead. He was wearing nothing but a coarse linen shirt that at once reminded Geralt of a winding sheet. His left thigh was swathed down to the knee in a blood-soaked bandage.

A table had been put in the centre of the room and covered in a sheet. A squat individual in a black jerkin was setting out tools on the table, one after the other, in turn. Knives. Forceps. Chisels. Saws.

‘I regret but one thing,’ said Torquil, grinding his teeth. ‘That I didn’t catch the whoresons. It was the gods’ will, it wasn’t written for me . . . And now it won’t come to pass.’

‘What happened?’

‘The sodding same as in Yew Trees, Rogovizna and Pinetops. Except it wasn’t like the others, but at the very edge of the forest. And not in a clearing, but on the highway. They’d surprised some travellers. They killed three and abducted two bairns. As luck would have it, I was nearby with my men. We gave chase at once, soon had them in sight. Two great bruisers as big as oxen and one misshapen hunchback. And that hunchback shot me with a crossbow.’

The constable gritted his teeth and waved a hand at his bandaged thigh.

‘I ordered my men to leave me and follow them. They disobeyed, the curs. And as a result, they made off. And me? So what if they saved me? When they’re cutting my leg off now? I’d rather have fucking pegged it there, but seen them ’uns kicking their legs on the scaffold before my eyes clouded over. The wretches didn’t obey my orders. Now they’re sitting there, hangdog.’

To a man, the constable’s subordinates were indeed sitting shamefacedly on a bench by the wall. They were accompanied by a

wrinkled old woman with a garland on her head that didn't match her grey hair at all, who looked completely out of place.

'We can begin,' said the man in the black jerkin. 'Put the patient on the table and strap him down tightly. All outsiders to leave the chamber.'

'They can stay,' growled Torquil. 'I want to know they're watching. I'll be too ashamed to scream.'

'One moment,' Geralt said, straightening up. 'Who decided that amputation is inevitable?'

'I did,' said the man in black, also drawing himself up to his full height, but having to lift his head up high to look Geralt in the face. 'I'm Messer Luppi, physician to the bailiff in Gors Velen, specially sent for. An examination has confirmed that the wound is infected. The leg has to go, there's no hope for it.'

'How much do you charge for this procedure?'

'Twenty crowns.'

'Here's thirty,' said Geralt, digging three ten-crown coins from a pouch. 'Take your instruments, pack up and return to the bailiff. Should he ask, say the patient is improving.'

'But . . . I must protest . . .'

'Get packed and return. Which of those words don't you understand? And you, nana, to me. Unwind the bandage.'

'He forbade me from touching the patient,' she said, nodding at the court physician. 'Says I'm a quack and a witch. Threatened to inform on me.'

'Ignore him. Indeed, he's just leaving.'

The old woman, whom Geralt at once recognised as a herbalist, did as she was told. She unwound the bandage with great care, but it was enough to make Torquil shake his head, hiss and groan.

'Geralt . . .' he groaned. 'What are you playing at? The physician said there's no hope . . . Better to lose a leg than my life.'

'Bullshit. It's not better at all. And now shut up.'

The wound looked hideous. But Geralt had seen worse.

He took a box from the pouch containing elixirs. Messer Luppi, now packed, looked on, shaking his head.

‘Those decocts are fit for nothing,’ he pronounced. ‘Those quack tricks and that bogus magic is fit for nothing. It’s nothing but charlatanism. As a physician, I must protest—’

Geralt turned around and stared. The physician exited. In a hurry. Tripping over the doorstop.

‘Four men to me,’ said the Witcher, uncorking a vial. ‘Hold him fast. Clench your teeth, Frans.’

The elixir foamed copiously as it was poured over the wound. The constable groaned heart-rendingly. Geralt waited a while and then poured on another elixir. That one also foamed, and hissed and smoked as well. Torquil screamed, tossed his head around, tensed up, rolled his eyes and fainted.

The old woman took a canteen from her bundle, scooped out a handful of green ointment, smeared it thickly on a piece of folded linen and applied it to the wound.

‘Knitbone,’ guessed Geralt. ‘A poultice of knitbone, arnica and marigold. Good, nana, very good. Goatweed and oak bark would also come in use—’

‘’ark at ’im,’ interrupted the old woman, without raising her head from the constable’s leg. ‘Trying to teach me herbalism. I was healing people with herbs when you were still puking your porridge over your wet nurse, laddie. And you, lummoxes, away with you, for you’re blocking out the light. And you stink dreadfully. You ought to change your footwraps. From time to time. Out with you, hear me?’

‘His leg will have to be immobilised. Set in long splints—’

‘Don’t instruct me, I said. And get you gone as well. Why are you still here? What are you waiting for? For thanks that you nobly gave up your magical witcher medicaments? For a promise that he won’t forget it till his dying day?’

‘I want to ask him something.’

‘Promise me, Geralt, that you’ll catch them,’ said Frans Torquil, suddenly quite lucid. ‘That you won’t let them off—’

‘I’ll give him a sleeping draught and something for the fever, because he’s raving. And you, witcher, get out. Wait in the yard.’

He didn’t have to wait long. The old woman came out, hitched up her dress and straightened her crooked garland. She sat beside him on the step. And rubbed one foot against the other. She had

extremely small feet.

‘He’s sleeping,’ she announced. ‘And will probably live, if nothing evil sets in, touch wood. The bone will knit. You saved his pin with them witcher charms. He’ll always be lame and he’ll never mount a horse again, I dare say, but two legs are better than one, hee, hee.’

She reached into her bosom, beneath her embroidered sheepskin vest, making the air smell even more strongly of herbs. She drew out a wooden casket and opened it. After a moment’s hesitation, she proffered it to Geralt.

‘Want a snort?’

‘No thank you. I don’t use fisstech.’

‘But I . . .’ said the herbalist, sniffing up the drug, first into one, then the other nostril. ‘But I do, from time to time. Sharpens up the mind like no one’s bloody business. Increases longevity. And improves the looks. Just look at me.’

He did.

‘Thanking you for the witcher medicaments for Frans,’ she said, wiping a watering eye and sniffing. ‘I won’t forget it. I know you jealously guard those decocts of yours. And you gave them to me, without a second thought. Even though you may run short when you’re next in need. Aren’t you afraid?’

‘I am.’

She turned her head to show her profile. She must indeed have been a beautiful woman once, a long time ago.

‘And now.’ She turned to face him. ‘Speak. You meant to ask Frans something?’

‘Never mind. He’s sleeping and it’s time I was off.’

‘Speak.’

‘Mount Cremora.’

‘You should have said. What do you want to know about that mountain?’

*

The cottage stood quite far outside the village, hard by the wall of the forest which began just beyond a fence surrounding an orchard full of small trees laden with apples. The rest had all the hallmarks of a typical homestead: a barn, a shed, a hen house, several beehives, a vegetable patch and a muck heap. A thin trail of white, pleasant-smelling smoke was wafting from the chimney.

The guinea fowl scurrying around by the wattle fencing noticed him first, raising the alarm with a hellish screeching. Some children playing in the farmyard dashed towards the cottage. A woman appeared in the doorway. Tall, fair-haired and wearing an apron over a coarse linen frock. He rode closer and dismounted.

'Greetings,' he said. 'Is the man of the house at home?'

The children – all of them little girls – clung to their mother's skirts and apron. The woman looked at the Witcher and any search for friendliness in those eyes would have been in vain. No wonder. She caught a good sight of the sword hilt over his shoulder. Of the medallion on his neck. And of the silver studs on his gloves which the Witcher was by no means hiding. Rather, he was flaunting them.

'The man of the house,' he repeated. 'I mean Otto Dussart. I want to talk to him about something.'

'What?'

'It's private. Is he at home?'

She stared at him in silence, slightly tilting her head. She had rustic looks and he guessed she might be aged anything between twenty-five and forty-five. A more precise assessment – as with the majority of village women – was impossible.

'Is he at home?'

'No.'

'Then I'll wait until he returns,' he said, tossing the mare's reins over a pole.

'You might have to wait a while.'

'I'll hold out somehow. Although in truth I'd prefer to wait inside than by the fence.'

The woman eyed him up and down for a moment. Him and his medallion.

'Accept our invitation, guest,' she said finally. 'Step inside.'

‘Gladly,’ he answered, using the customary formula. ‘I won’t transgress the rules of hospitality.’

‘You won’t,’ she repeated in a slow, drawling voice. ‘Yet you wear a sword.’

‘Such is my profession.’

‘Swords injure. And kill.’

‘So does life. Does the invitation still apply?’

‘Please enter.’

One entered – typically for such homesteads – through a gloomy, cluttered passage. The main chamber turned out to be quite spacious, light and clean, with only the walls near the range and chimney bearing sooty streaks. Otherwise, the walls were painted freshly white and decorated with gaily embroidered wall hangings. Various household utensils, bunches of herbs, plaits of garlic and strings of capsicums enlivened the walls. A woven curtain separated the chamber from the larder. It smelt of cooking. Cabbage, to be precise.

‘Please be seated.’

The housewife remained standing, crumpling her apron in her hands. The children crouched by the stove on a low bench.

The medallion on Geralt’s neck was vibrating. Powerfully and constantly. It fluttered under his shirt like a captured bird.

‘You ought to have left the sword in the passage,’ the woman said, walking over to the range, ‘It’s indecent to sit down to table with a weapon. Only brigands do so. Be you a brigand—?’

‘You know who I am,’ he cut her off. ‘And the sword stays where it is. To act as a reminder.’

‘Of what?’

‘That hasty actions have perilous consequences.’

‘There’s no weapons here, so—’

‘Yes, yes,’ he interrupted bluntly. ‘Let’s not kid ourselves, missus. A peasant’s cottage and farmyard is an arsenal; many have died from hoes, not to mention flails and pitchforks. I heard that someone was killed with the plunger from a butter churn. You can do harm with anything if you want to. Or have to. And while we’re on the subject, leave that pot of boiling water alone. And move

away from the stove.'

'I meant nothing,' the woman said quickly, evidently lying. 'And it's not boiling water, it's borscht. I meant to offer you some—'

'No, thank you. I'm not hungry. So don't touch the pot and move away from the stove. Sit down by the children. And we'll wait nicely for the man of the house.'

They sat in a silence broken only by the buzzing of flies. The medallion twitched.

'A pan of cabbage in the oven is almost ready,' said the woman, interrupting the awkward silence. 'I must take it out and stir it, or it'll burn.'

'Her.' Geralt pointed to the smallest of the girls. 'She can do it.'

The girl stood up slowly, glaring at him from under a flaxen fringe. She took hold of a long-handled fork and bent over towards the stove door. And suddenly launched herself at Geralt like a she-cat. She aimed to pin him by his neck to the wall with the fork, but he dodged, jerked the fork handle, and knocked her over. She began to metamorphosise before even hitting the floor.

The woman and the other two girls had already managed to transform. Three wolves – a grey she-wolf and two cubs – bounded towards the Witcher, with bloodshot eyes and bared fangs. They bounded apart, quite like wolves, attacking from all sides. He dodged, shoved the bench at the she-wolf, fending the cubs away with blows of his fists in his silver-studded gloves. They howled and flattened themselves against the floor, baring their fangs. The she-wolf howled savagely and leaped again.

'No! Edwina! No!'

She fell on him, pressing him to the wall. But now in human form. The wolf-girls immediately fled and hunkered down by the stove. The woman remained, crouching before him, staring with embarrassed eyes. He didn't know if she was ashamed because of attacking him, or because the attack had failed.

'Edwina! What is the meaning of this?' bellowed a bearded man of impressive height, arms akimbo. 'What are you doing?'

'It's a witcher!' the woman snorted, still on her knees. 'A brigand with a sword! He came for you! The murderer! He reeks of blood!'

'Silence, woman. I know him. Forgive her, Master Geralt.

Everything in order? Forgive her. She didn't know . . . She thought that since you're a witcher—'

He broke off and looked nervously. The woman and the little girls were gathered by the stove. Geralt could have sworn he heard a soft growling.

'It's all right,' he said. 'I bear no ill will. But you showed up just in time. Not a moment too soon.'

'I know,' said the bearded man, shuddering perceptibly. 'Sit you down, sir, sit down at table . . . Edwina! Bring beer!'

'No. Outside, Dussart. For a word.'

In the middle of the farmyard sat a grey cat that fled in a trice at the sight of the Witcher and hid in the nettles.

'I don't wish to upset your wife or frighten your children,' Geralt announced. 'And what's more, I have a matter I'd prefer to talk about in private. It concerns a certain favour.'

'Whatever you want, sir,' said the bearded man. 'Just say it. I'll fulfil your every wish, if it's in my power. I am indebted to you, greatly indebted. Thanks to you I walk alive through this world. Because you spared me then. I owe you—'

'Not me. Yourself. Because even in lupine form you remained a man and never harmed anybody.'

'I never harmed anybody, 'tis true. And how did I benefit? My neighbours, having become suspicious, brought a witcher down on me at once. Though paupers, they scrimped and saved in order to hire you.'

'I thought about giving them back their money,' admitted Geralt. 'But it might have aroused suspicion. I gave them my witcher word that I'd removed the werewolf spell from you and had completely healed you of lycanthropy, that you are now as normal as the next man. Such a feat has to cost. If people pay for something they believe in it: whatever is paid for becomes real and legal. The more expensive, the better.'

'Recalling that day sends shivers down my spine,' said Dussart, paling under his tan. 'I almost died of fear when I saw you with that silver blade. I thought my last hour had come. There's no end of stories. About witcher-murderers relishing blood and torture. You, it turned out, are a decent fellow. And a good one.'

'Let's not exaggerate. But you followed my advice and moved

out of Guaamez.'

'I had to,' Dussart said gloomily. 'The people of Guaamez believed in theory that I was free of the spell, but you were right, a former werewolf doesn't have it easy either. It was as you said: what you used to be means more to people than what you are. I was compelled to move out, and roam through strange surroundings where no one knew me. I wandered and wandered . . . Until I finally ended up here. And met Edwina.'

'It rarely happens for two therianthropes to form a couple,' said Geralt, shaking his head. 'It's even more seldom for children to be born to such couples. You're a lucky man, Dussart.'

'If only you knew,' grinned the werewolf. 'My children are as pretty as a picture, they're growing up into beautiful maidens. And Edwina and I were made for each other. I wish to be with her to the end of my days.'

'She knew me as a witcher at once. And was prepared to defend herself. She meant to throw boiling borscht over me, would you believe? She must also have heard her fill of werewolf tales about bloodthirsty witchers relishing torture.'

'Forgive her, Master Geralt. And we shall soon savour that borscht. Edwina makes delicious borscht.'

'It might be better if I don't impose,' said the Witcher, shaking his head. 'I don't want to scare the children, much less worry your wife. To her I'm still a brigand with a sword, it'd be hard to expect her to take to me at once. She said I reek of blood. Metaphorically, I understand.'

'Not really. No offence, Master Witcher, but you stink to high heaven of it.'

'I haven't had any contact with blood for—'

'—for about two weeks, I'd say.' The werewolf finished his sentence. 'It's clotted blood, dead blood, you touched someone who was bleeding. There's also earlier blood, over a month old. Cold blood. Reptile blood. You've also bled. Living blood, from a wound.'

'I'm full of admiration.'

'Us werewolves,' said Dussart, standing up proudly, 'have a slightly more sensitive sense of smell than you humans.'

'I know,' smiled Geralt. 'I know that the werewolf sense of smell is a veritable wonder of nature. Which is why I've come to ask

you for a favour.’

*

‘Shrews,’ said Dussart, sniffing. ‘Shrews. And voles. Lots of voles. Dung. Lots of dung. Mainly marten. And weasel. Nothing else.’

The Witcher sighed and then spat. He didn’t conceal his disappointment. It was the fourth cave where Dussart hadn’t smelt anything apart from rodents and the predators that hunted them. And an abundance of both the former and latter’s dung.

They moved on to the next opening gaping in the rock wall. Pebbles shifted under their feet and rolled down the scree. It was steep, they proceeded with difficulty and Geralt was beginning to feel weary. Dussart either turned into a wolf or remained in human form depending on the terrain.

‘A she-bear,’ he said, looking into the next cave and sniffing. ‘With young. She was there but she’s not any more. There are marmots. Shrews. Bats. Lots of bats. Stoat. Marten. Wolverine. Lots of dung.’

The next cavern.

‘A female polecat. She’s on heat. There’s also a wolverine . . . No, two. A pair of wolverines.

‘An underground spring, the water’s slightly sulphurous. Gremlins, a whole flock, probably ten of them. Some sort of amphibians, probably salamanders . . . Bats . . .’

An immense eagle flew down from a rocky ledge located somewhere overhead and circled above, crying out repeatedly. The werewolf raised his head and glanced at the mountain peaks. And the dark clouds gliding out from behind them.

‘There’s a storm coming. What a summer, when there’s almost not a day without a storm . . . What shall we do, Master Geralt? Another hole?’

‘Another hole.’

In order to reach the next one, they had to pass under a waterfall cascading down from a cliff; not very large, but sufficient to wet them through. The moss-covered rocks were as slippery as soap. Dussart metamorphosed into a wolf to continue. Geralt, after

slipping dangerously several times, forced himself onward, cursed and overcame a difficult section on all fours. *Lucky Dandelion's not here*, he thought, *he'd have turned it into a ballad.* The lycanthrope in front in wolfish form with a witcher behind him on all fours. People would have had a ball.

'A large hole, Master Witcher,' said Dussart, sniffing. 'Broad and deep. There are mountain trolls there. Five or six hefty trolls. And bats. Loads of bat dung.'

'We'll go on. To the next one.'

'Trolls . . . The same trolls as before. The caves are connected.'

'A bear. A cub. It was there, but it's gone. Not long since.'

'Marmots. Bats. Vampyrodes.'

The werewolf leaped back from the next cave as though he'd been stung.

'A gorgon,' he whispered. 'There's a huge gorgon deep in the cave. It's sleeping. There's nothing else apart from it.'

'I'm not surprised,' the Witcher muttered. 'Let's go away. Silently. Because it's liable to awaken . . .'

They walked away, looking back anxiously. They approached the next cave, fortunately located away from the gorgon's lair, slowly, aware that it wouldn't do any harm to be cautious. It didn't do any harm, but turned out to be unnecessary. The next few caves didn't hide anything in their depths other than bats, marmots, mice, voles and shrews. And thick layers of dung.

Geralt was weary and resigned. Dussart clearly was too. But he kept his chin up, you had to grant him that, and didn't betray any discouragement by word or gesture. But the Witcher didn't have any illusions. The werewolf had his doubts about the operation's chances of success. In keeping with what Geralt had once heard and what the old herbalist had confirmed, the steep, eastern cliff of Mount Cremora was riddled with holes, penetrated by countless caves. And indeed, they found countless caves. But Dussart clearly didn't believe it was possible to sniff out and find the right one, which was an underground passage leading inside the rocky complex of the Citadel.

To make matters worse there was a flash of lightning. And a clap of thunder. It began to rain. Geralt had a good mind to spit, swear coarsely and declare the enterprise over. But he overcame the

feeling.

‘Let’s go on, Dussart. Next hole.’

‘As you wish, Master Geralt.’

And suddenly, quite like in a cheap novel, a turning point in the action occurred by the next opening gaping in the rock.

‘Bats,’ announced the werewolf, sniffing. ‘Bats and a . . . cat.’

‘A lynx? A wild cat?’

‘A cat,’ said Dussart, standing up. ‘An ordinary domestic cat.’

*

Otto Dussart looked at the small bottles of elixirs with curiosity and watched the Witcher drinking them. He observed the changes taking place in Geralt’s appearance, and his eyes widened in wonder and fear.

‘Don’t make me enter that cave with you,’ he said. ‘No offence, but I’m not going. The fear of what might be there makes my hair stand on end.’

‘It never occurred to me to ask you to. Go home, Dussart, to your wife and children. You’ve done me a favour, you’ve done what I asked of you, so I can’t demand any more.’

‘I’ll wait,’ protested the werewolf. ‘I’ll wait until you emerge.’

‘I don’t know when I’ll be coming out,’ said Geralt, adjusting the sword on his back. ‘Or if I’ll come out at all.’

‘Don’t say that. I’ll wait . . . I’ll wait until dusk.’

*

The cave bottom was carpeted in a dense coat of bat guano. The bats themselves – pot-bellied flittermice – were hanging in whole clusters on the cave ceiling, wriggling and squeaking drowsily. At first, the ceiling was high above Geralt’s head and he could walk along the level bottom tolerably quickly and comfortably. The comfort soon ended, however – first he had to stoop, then stoop lower and lower, and finally nothing remained but to move along

on his hands and knees. And ultimately crawl.

There was a moment when he stopped, determined to turn back, when the cramped conditions represented a grave risk of getting stuck. But he could hear the whoosh of water and feel on his face a current of cold air. Aware of the risk, he forced his way through a crack and sighed in relief as it began to open out. All of a sudden, the corridor turned into a chute down which he slid straight into the channel of an underground stream, gushing out from under a rock and disappearing under another. Somewhere above was a weak light, emanating from the same place as cold gusts of air.

The pool the stream vanished into appeared to be totally under water, and the Witcher wasn't keen on the idea of swimming through, although he suspected it was a sump. He chose a route upstream, against the fast-flowing current, along a ramp leading upwards. Before emerging from the ramp into a great chamber, he was completely drenched and covered in silt from the lime deposits.

The chamber was huge, covered all over with majestic dripstones, draperies, stalagmites, stalactites and stalagnates. The stream flowed along the bottom in a deeply hollowed out meander. There was also a gentle glow of light and a weak draught. There was a faint odour. The Witcher's sense of smell couldn't compete with the werewolf's, but he also smelled what the werewolf had earlier – the faint odour of cat urine.

He stopped for a moment and looked around. The draught pointed to the exit, an opening like a palace portal flanked by pillars of mighty stalagmites. Right alongside he saw a hollow full of fine sand. That hollow was what smelt of cat. He saw numerous feline pawprints in the sand.

He slung his sword – which he'd had to remove in the cramped space of the fissure – across his back. And passed between the stalagmites.

The corridor leading gently upwards had a high ceiling and was dry. There were large rocks on the bottom but it was possible to walk. He set off. Until his way was blocked by a door. Robust and typical of a castle.

Until that moment, he hadn't been at all certain if he was following the right track, had no certainty that he had entered the right cave. The door seemed to confirm his choice.

There was a small opening in the door just above the threshold which had quite recently been carved out. A passage for the cat. He pushed the door – it didn't budge. But the Witcher's amulet quivered slightly. The door was magical, protected by a spell. The weak vibration of the medallion suggested, however, that it wasn't a powerful spell. He brought his face close to the door.

'Friend.'

The door opened noiselessly on oiled hinges. As he had accurately guessed, it had been equipped with standard weak magical protection and a basic password, as no one – fortunately for him – had felt like installing anything more sophisticated. It was intended to separate the castle from the cave complex and deter any creatures incapable of using even simple magic.

The natural cave ceased beyond the door – which he wedged open with a stone. A corridor carved out of the rock with pickaxes extended before him.

In spite of all the evidence, he still wasn't certain. Until the moment he saw light in front of him. The flickering light of a brand or a cresset. And a moment later heard some very familiar laughter. Cackling.

'Buueh-hhhrrr-eeeehhh-bueeeeh!'

The light and cackling, it turned out, were coming from a large room, illuminated by a torch stuck into an iron basket. Trunks, boxes and barrels were piled up against the walls. Bue and Bang were sitting at one of the crates using barrels as seats. They were playing dice. Bang was cackling, clearly having thrown a higher number.

There was a demijohn of moonshine on the crate. And beside it some kind of snack.

A roast human leg.

The Witcher drew his sword.

'Hello, boys.'

Bue and Bang stared at him open-mouthed for some time. Then they roared and leaped to their feet, knocking over the barrels and snatching up their weapons. Bue a scythe, and Bang a broad scimitar. And charged the Witcher.

They took him by surprise, although he hadn't expected it to be an easy fight. But he hadn't expected the misshapen giants to

move so fast.

Bue swung his scythe low and had it not been for a jump Geralt would have lost both legs. He barely dodged Bang's blow, the scimitar striking sparks from the rock wall.

The Witcher was able to cope with fast opponents. And large ones too. Fast or slow, large or small, they all had places sensitive to pain.

And they had no idea how fast a witcher could be after drinking his elixirs.

Bue howled, lacerated on the elbow, and Bang, cut on the knee, howled even louder. The Witcher deceived Bue with a swift spin, jumped over the scythe blade and cut him in the ear with the very tip of his blade. Bue roared, shaking his head, swung the scythe and attacked. Geralt arranged his fingers and struck him with the Aard Sign. Assaulted by the spell, Bue flopped onto his backside on the floor and his teeth rang audibly.

Bang took a great swing with the scimitar. Geralt nimbly ducked under the blade, slashing the giant's other knee in passing, spun around and leaped at Bue, who was struggling to stand up, cutting him across the eyes. Bue managed to pull his head back, however, and was caught on the brow ridge; blood instantly blinded the ogrotroll. Bue yelled and leaped up, attacking Geralt blindly. Geralt dodged away, Bue lurched towards Bang and collided with him. Bang shoved him away and charged the Witcher, roaring furiously, to aim a fierce backhand blow at him. Geralt avoided the blade with a fast feint and a half-turn and cut the ogrotroll twice, on both elbows. Bang howled, but didn't release the scimitar, and took another swing, slashing broadly and chaotically. Geralt dodged, spinning beyond the blade's range. His manoeuvre carried him behind Bang's back and he had to take advantage of a chance like that. He turned his sword around and cut from below, vertically, right between Bang's buttocks. The ogrotroll seized himself by the backside, howled, squealed, hobbled, bent his knees and pissed himself.

Bue, blinded, swung his scythe. And struck. But not the Witcher, who had spun away in a pirouette. He struck his comrade, who was still holding himself by the buttocks. And hacked his head from his shoulders. Air escaped from the severed windpipe with a loud hiss, blood burst from the artery like lava erupting from a volcano, high, right up to the ceiling.

Bang stood, gushing blood, like a headless statue in a fountain, held up by his huge, flat feet. But he finally tipped over and fell like a log.

Bue wiped the blood from his eyes. He roared like a buffalo when it finally dawned on him what had happened. He stamped his feet and swung his scythe. He whirled around on the spot, looking for the Witcher. He didn't find him. Because the Witcher was behind him. On being cut in the armpit he dropped the scythe, attacking Geralt with his bare hands, but the blood had blinded him again and he careered into the wall. Geralt was upon him and slashed.

Bue obviously didn't know an artery had been severed. And that he ought to have died long ago. He roared and spun around on the spot, waving his arms about. Until his knees crumpled beneath him and he dropped down in a pool of blood. Now kneeling, he roared and carried on swinging, but quieter and quieter and more drowsily. In order to end it, Geralt went in close and thrust his sword under Bue's sternum. That was a mistake.

The ogrotroll groaned and grabbed the blade, cross guard and the Witcher's hand. His eyes were already misting over, but he didn't relax his grip. Geralt put a boot against his chest, braced himself and tugged. Bue didn't let go even though blood was spurting from his hand.

'You stupid whoreson,' drawled Pastor, entering the cavern and aiming at the Witcher with his double-limbed lathe arbalest. 'You've come here to die. You're done for, devil's spawn. Hold him, Bue!'

Geralt tugged. Bue groaned, but didn't let go. The hunchback grinned and released the trigger. Geralt crouched to evade the heavy bolt and felt the fletching brush against his side before it slammed into the wall. Bue released the sword and – lying on his stomach – caught the Witcher by the legs and held him fast. Pastor croaked in triumph and raised the crossbow.

But didn't manage to fire.

An enormous wolf hurtled into the cavern like a grey missile. It struck Pastor in the legs from behind in the wolfish style, tearing his cruciate ligaments and popliteal artery. The hunchback yelled and fell over. The bowstring of the released arbalest clanged and Bue rasped. The bolt had struck him right in the ear and entered up to the fletching. And the bolt protruded from his other ear.

Pastor howled. The wolf opened its terrible jaws and seized him by the head. The howling turned into wheezing.

Geralt pushed away the finally dead ogrotroll from his legs.

Dussart, now in human form, stood up over Pastor's corpse and wiped his lips and chin.

'After forty-two years of being a werewolf,' he said, meeting the Witcher's gaze, 'it was about time I finally bit someone to death.'

*

'I had to come,' Dussart said, explaining his actions. 'I knew, Master Geralt, that I had to warn you.'

'About them?' Geralt wiped his blade and pointed to the lifeless bodies.

'Not only.'

The Witcher entered the room the werewolf was pointing at. And stepped back involuntarily.

The stone floor was black with congealed blood. A black-rimmed hole gaped in the centre of the room. A pile of bodies was heaped up beside it. Naked and mutilated, cut up, quartered, occasionally with the skin flayed off them. It was difficult to estimate how many there were.

The sound of bones being crunched and cracked rose up very audibly from deep in the hole.

'I wasn't able to smell it before,' mumbled Dussart, in a voice full of disgust. 'I only smelled it when you opened the door down there at the bottom. Let's flee from here, master. Far from this charnel house.'

'I still have something to sort out here. But you go. I thank you very much for coming to help.'

'Don't thank me. I owed you a debt. I'm glad I was able to pay it back.'

*

A spiral staircase led upwards, winding up a cylindrical shaft carved into the rock. It was difficult to estimate precisely, but Geralt roughly calculated that had it been a staircase in a typical tower, he would have climbed to the first – or possibly the second – storey. He had counted sixty-two steps when a door finally barred his way.

Like the one down in the cave, that door also had a passage carved in it for a cat. Unlike the heavy doors in the cave it wasn't magical and yielded easily after the handle had been pushed down.

The room he entered had no windows and was dimly lit. Beneath the ceiling hung several magical globes, but only one was active. The room stank acridly of chemicals and every possible kind of monstrosity. A quick glance revealed what it contained. Specimen jars, demijohns and flagons on shelves, retorts, glass spheres and tubes, steel instruments and tools – unmistakably a laboratory, in other words.

Large specimen jars were standing in a row on a bookshelf by the entrance. The nearest one was full of human eyeballs, floating in a yellow liquid like mirabelle plums in compote. In another jar, there was a tiny homunculus, no larger than two fists held together. In a third . . .

A human head was floating in the third jar. Geralt might not have recognised the features, which were distorted by cuts, swelling and discolouration, barely visible through the cloudy liquid and thick glass. But the head was quite bald. Only one sorcerer shaved his head.

Harlan Tzara – it transpired – had never made it to Poviss.

Things were suspended in other jars: various blue and pale horrors. But there were no more heads.

There was a table in the middle of the room. A steel, purpose-built table with a gutter.

A naked corpse was lying on the table. A diminutive one. The remains of a child. A fair-haired little girl.

The remains had been slit open with a cut in the shape of a letter 'Y'. The internal organs, removed, had been arranged on both sides of the body, evenly, neatly and orderly. It looked just like an engraving from an anatomical atlas. All that was missing were plate numbers: fig. 1, fig. 2 and so on.

He caught sight of movement out of the corner of his eye. A large black cat flashed by close to the wall, glanced at him, hissed and fled through the open door. Geralt set off after him.

‘Mester . . .’

He stopped. And turned around.

In the corner stood a low cage, resembling a chicken coop. He saw thin fingers clenching the iron bars. And then two eyes.

‘Mester . . . Help me . . .’

It was a little boy, no more than ten years old. Cowering and trembling.

‘Help me . . .’

‘Sssh, be quiet. You’re in no danger now, but hold on a little longer. I’ll be back soon to get you.’

‘Mester! Don’t go!’

‘Be quiet, I said.’

First there was a library with dust that made his nose tingle. Then something like a drawing room. And then a bedchamber. A huge bed with a black canopy on ebony columns.

He heard a rustle. And turned around.

Sorel Degerlund was standing in the doorway. Coiffured, in a mantle embroidered with gold stars. A smallish, quite grey creature armed with a Zerrikanian sabre was standing beside him.

‘I have a specimen jar full of formalin prepared,’ said the sorcerer. ‘For your head, you abomination. Kill him, Beta!’

The creature, an incredibly fast grey apparition, an agile and noiseless grey rat, had already attacked with a whistle and a flash of the sabre before Degerlund had finished his sentence and while he was still delighting in his own voice. Geralt avoided two blows, delivered diagonally in classic style. The first time he felt the movement of air pushed by a blade by his ear, and the second a brush on his sleeve. He parried the third blow, and for a moment they crossed swords. He saw the face of the grey creature, its large yellow eyes with vertical pupils, narrow slits instead of a nose and pointed ears. The creature had no mouth at all.

They parted. The creature turned around nimbly, attacked at once, with an ethereal, dancing step, once again diagonally. Once

again predictably. It was inhumanly energetic, incredibly agile, hellishly swift. But stupid.

It had no idea how fast a witcher could be after drinking his elixirs.

Geralt allowed it only one blow, which he outmanoeuvred. Then he attacked with a trained sequence of movements he had practised a hundred times. He encircled the grey creature with a fast half-turn, executed a deceptive feint and slashed it across the collarbone. The blood hadn't even had time to spurt when he slashed it under the arm. And jumped aside, ready for more. But no more was needed.

It turned out that the creature did have a mouth. It opened in the grey face like a wound, splitting widely from ear to ear, although no more than half an inch. But the creature didn't utter a word or a sound. It fell onto its knees and then its side. For a moment it twitched, moving its limbs like a dog dreaming. And died. In silence.

It was then that Degerlund committed an error. Rather than fleeing, he raised both hands and began to bark out a spell, in a furious voice full of rage and hatred. Flames whirled around his hands, forming a fiery globe. It looked a little like candyfloss being made. It even smelled similar.

Degerlund didn't manage to create a complete globe. He had no idea how fast a witcher could be after drinking his elixirs.

Geralt was upon him and cut across the globe and the sorcerer's hands. There was a roar like a furnace being ignited, and sparks flew. Degerlund yelled, releasing the flaming globe from his bloodied hands. The globe went out, filling the chamber with the smell of burning caramel.

Geralt dropped his sword. He slapped Degerlund hard in the face with his open palm. The sorcerer screamed, cowered and turned his back on him. The Witcher seized him, caught him by a buckle and clasped his neck in his forearm. Degerlund yelled and began to kick out.

'You cannot!' he wailed. 'You cannot kill me! It is forbidden . . . I am . . . I am a human being!'

Geralt tightened his forearm around his neck. Not too tightly at first.

‘It wasn’t me!’ wailed the sorcerer. ‘It was Ortolan! Ortolan forced me! He forced me! And Biruta Icarti knew about everything! She did! Biruta! That medallion was her idea! She made me do it!’

The Witcher tightened his grip.

‘Heeeeelp! Somebody heeelp meeee!’

Geralt tightened his grip.

‘Somebody . . . Heeelp . . . Noooo . . .’

Degerlund wheezed, saliva dripping copiously from his mouth. Geralt turned his head away. And tightened his grip.

Degerlund lost consciousness and went limp. Tighter. The hyoid bone cracked. Tighter. His larynx gave way. Tighter. Even tighter.

The cervical vertebrae cracked and dislocated.

Geralt held Degerlund up a moment longer. Then he jerked the sorcerer’s head hard sideways, to be quite certain. Then he let him go. The sorcerer slid down onto the floor, softly, like a silk cloth.

The Witcher wiped the saliva from his sleeve on a curtain. The large black cat appeared from nowhere. It rubbed itself against Degerlund’s body. Licked his motionless hand. Meowed and cried mournfully. It lay down beside the corpse, cuddling up against its side. And looked at the Witcher with its wide-open golden eyes.

‘I had to,’ said the Witcher. ‘It was necessary. If anyone, you ought to understand.’

The cat narrowed its eyes. To indicate it did.

For God’s sake let us sit upon the ground

And tell sad stories of the death of kings;

How some have been depos’d, some slain in war,

Some haunted by the ghosts they have depos’d;

Some poison’d by their wives, some sleeping kill’d;

All murder’d.

William Shakespeare,

Richard II

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The weather on the day of the royal wedding had been wonderful from early morning, the blue sky over Kerack not sullied by even a single cloud. It had been very warm since the morning, but the hot weather was tempered by a sea breeze.

There had been a commotion in the upper town from the early morning. The streets and squares had been thoroughly swept, the house fronts decorated with ribbons and garlands, and pennants put on flagpoles. Since the morning, a line of suppliers had streamed along the road leading to the royal palace. Laden wagons and carts passed empty ones on their way back, and porters, craftsmen, merchants, messengers and couriers ran up the hill. Some time after, the road had teemed with sedan chairs carrying wedding guests to the palace. *My nuptials are no laughing matter*, King Belohun was heard to have said, *my nuptials will become lodged in people's memory and talked about through the whole wide world.* On the order of the king, the celebrations were thus meant to begin in the morning and last long into the night. The guests would be facing quite unprecedented attractions throughout the whole day. Kerack was a tiny kingdom and actually fairly insignificant, hence Geralt doubted whether the world was particularly bothered about Belohun's nuptials, even though he had decided to hold balls the entire week and God knows what attractions he had come up with, and there was no chance the people living more than a hundred miles away could have heard of the event. But to Belohun – as was universally known – the city of Kerack was the centre of the world and the world was the small region surrounding Kerack.

Geralt and Dandelion were both dressed as elegantly as they could manage, and the Witcher had even purchased for the celebrations a brand new calfskin jacket, for which he had paid well over the odds. As for Dandelion, he had announced from the beginning that he would scorn the royal nuptials and take no part in them. For he had been added to the guest list as a relative of the royal instigator and not as the world-famous poet and bard. And he had not been invited to perform. Dandelion regarded that as a slight and took umbrage. As was customary with him his resentment didn't last long, no more than half a day.

Flagpoles were erected along the entire road winding up the hillside to the palace and on them hung yellow pennants with the coat of arms of Kerack, a blue dolphin *naiant* with red fins and tail, languidly fluttering in the breeze.

Dandelion's kinsman, Ferrant de Lettenhove, assisted by several royal guardsmen wearing livery with the heraldic dolphin – in other words blue and red – was waiting for them outside the entrance to the palace complex. The instigator greeted Dandelion and called over a page who was charged with assisting the poet and escorting him to the place of the party.

'And I would ask you, M'lord Geralt, to come with me.'

They walked through the grounds along a side avenue, passing an area obviously used for utilities, from where they could hear the clank of pots and kitchen utensils, as well as the vile insults the chefs were dishing out to the kitchen porters. On top of that, however, was the pleasant and appetising smell of food. Geralt knew the menu and knew what the guests would be served during the wedding party. A few days before, he and Dandelion had visited the Natura Rerum osteria. Febus Ravenga – not concealing his pride – had boasted that he and several other restaurateurs were organising the feast and composing a list of dishes, for the preparation of which only the most distinguished of local chefs would be hired. *Sautéed oysters, sea urchins, prawns and crabs will be served for breakfast*, he had said. *For a mid-morning snack there will be meat jellies and various pasties, smoked and marinated salmon, duck in aspic, sheep and goats cheese. For luncheon there will be* ad libitum *meat or fish broth, on top of that meat or fish patties, tripe with liver meatballs, grilled monkfish glazed with honey and sea perch with saffron and cloves.*

Afterwards, Ravenga intoned, modulating his breathing like a trained orator, *will be served cuts of roast meat in white sauce with capers, eggs and mustard, swans' knees in honey, capons draped in fatback, partridges and quince conserve, roast pigeon and mutton liver pie with barley groats. Salads and diverse vegetables. Then caramels, nougats, stuffed cakes, roast chestnuts, preserves and marmalades. Wine from Toussaint, naturally, will be served continuously and without pause.*

Ravenga described it so vividly it was mouth-watering. Geralt doubted, however, that he would manage to taste anything from the extensive menu. He was by no means a guest at the nuptials. He

was in a worse situation than the pages, who could always pluck some morsels from the dishes or at least stick a finger in the creams, sauces or forcemeats as they hurried by.

The main location of the celebrations was the palace grounds, once the temple orchard, with modifications and extensions by the kings of Kerack, mainly in the form of colonnades, bowers and temples of contemplation. Today, many colourful pavilions had been additionally erected among the trees and buildings, and sheets of canvas stretched over poles offered shelter from the heat of the day. A small crowd of guests had already gathered. There weren't meant to be too many; some two hundred in total. It was rumoured that the king himself had drawn up the list and only a select circle – *la crème de la crème* itself – would be receiving invitations. For Belohun, it turned out, his close and distant relatives constituted the larger part of the elite. Aside from them, the local high society, key administrative officials, and the wealthiest local and foreign businessmen and diplomats – meaning spies from neighbouring countries posing as commercial attachés – had also been invited. The list was completed by quite a large group of sycophants, grovellers and pre-eminent arse-kissers.

Prince Egmund was waiting outside one of the side entrances to the palace, dressed in a short black jacket with rich silver and gold embroidery. He was accompanied by a few young men. They all had long, curled hair and were wearing padded doublets and tight hose with terribly fashionable and excessively large codpieces. Geralt didn't like the look of them. Not just because of the mocking glances they were shooting at his apparel. They reminded him too much of Sorel Degerlund.

At the sight of the instigator and the Witcher, the prince immediately dismissed his entourage. Only one individual remained. He had short hair and wore normal trousers. In spite of that, Geralt didn't like the look of him either. He had strange eyes. And an unprepossessing look.

Geralt bowed before the prince. The prince didn't return the bow, naturally.

'Hand over your sword,' he said to Geralt right after his greeting. 'You may not parade around with a weapon. Don't fret, although you won't see your sword it will be close at hand the whole time. I've issued orders. Should anything occur, the sword will immediately be returned to you. Captain Ropp here will take

charge of that.'

'And what's the likelihood of anything happening?'

'Were there no chance or little chance, would I be bothering you?' Egmund examined the scabbard and blade. 'Oh! A sword from Viroleda! Not a sword, but a work of art. I know, for I once had a similar one. My half-brother, Viraxas, stole it from me. When my father banished him, he appropriated a great deal of things that didn't belong to him before leaving. No doubt as souvenirs.'

Ferrant de Lettenhove cleared his throat. Geralt recalled Dandelion's words. It was forbidden to utter the name of the banished first-born son at court. But Egmund was clearly ignoring the prohibitions.

'A work of art,' repeated the prince, still examining the sword. 'Without asking how you came by it, I congratulate you on the acquisition. For I can't believe the stolen ones were any better than this.'

'That's a matter of taste and preference. I'd prefer to recover the stolen ones. Your Royal Highness and my Lord Instigator vouched that you would find the thief. It was, I take the liberty of recalling, the condition on which I undertook the task of protecting the king. The condition has clearly not been met.'

'It clearly hasn't,' Egmund admitted coldly, handing the sword to Captain Ropp, the man with the malevolent gaze. 'I thus feel obliged to compensate you for it. Instead of the three hundred crowns I had planned to pay you for your services, you will receive five hundred. I also add that the investigation regarding your swords is ongoing and you may yet recover them. Ferrant allegedly has a suspect. Haven't you?'

'The investigation explicitly indicated the person of Nikefor Muus, a municipal and judicial clerk,' Ferrant de Lettenhove announced dryly. 'He has fled, but his recapture is imminent.'

'I trust so.' The prince snorted. 'It can't be such a feat to catch an ink-stained petty clerk. Who, in addition, must have acquired piles from sitting at a desk, which hinder escape, both on foot and horseback. How did he manage to escape at all?'

'We are dealing with a very volatile person.' The instigator cleared his throat. 'And probably a madman. Before he vanished, he caused a revolting scene in Ravenga's restaurant, concerning, forgive me, human faeces . . . The restaurant had to be closed for

some time, because . . . I shall spare you the gory details. The stolen swords were not discovered during a search carried out at Muus's lodgings, but instead . . . Forgive me . . . A leather satchel, filled to the brim with—'

'Enough, enough, I can guess what.' Egmund grimaced. 'Yes, that indeed says a great deal about the individual's psychological state. Your swords, Witcher, have probably been lost, then. Even if Ferrant captures him he won't learn anything from a madman. It's not even worth torturing men like him, they only talk gibberish on the rack. And now forgive me, duty calls.'

Ferrant de Lettenhove escorted Geralt towards the main entrance to the palace grounds. Shortly after, they found themselves in a stone-slabbed courtyard where seneschals were greeting the guests as they arrived, and guardsmen and pages were escorting them further into the grounds.

'What may I expect?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'What may I expect today? What part of that didn't you understand?'

'Prince Xander has boasted in front of witnesses that he will be crowned king tomorrow,' said the instigator in a low voice. 'But it isn't the first time he's said that and he's always been in his cups when he has.'

'Is he capable of carrying out a coup?'

'Not especially. But he has a camarilla, confidants and favourites. They are more capable.'

'How much proof is there in the rumour that Belohun will today announce as his successor the son his betrothed is carrying?'

'Quite some.'

'And Egmund, who's losing his chances for the throne, lo and behold, is hiring a witcher to guard and protect his father. What commendable filial love.'

'Don't digress. You took on the task. Now execute it.'

'I did and I shall. Although it's extremely vague. I don't know who, if anything happens, will be pitted against me. But I probably ought to know who will support me if anything happens.'

'If such a need arises, the sword, as the prince promised, will

be given to you by Captain Ropp. He will also back you up. I shall help, as far as I'm able. Because I wish you well.'

'Since when?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'We've never spoken face to face. Dandelion has always been with us and I didn't want to bring up the subject with him there. The detailed documentation about my alleged frauds. How did Egmund come by it? Who forged it? Not him, of course. You did, Ferrant.'

'I had nothing to do with it. I assure you—'

'You're a rotten liar for a guardian of the law. It's a mystery how you landed your position.'

Ferrant de Lettenhove pursed his lips.

'I had to,' he said. 'I was carrying out orders.'

The Witcher looked long and hard at him.

'You wouldn't believe how many times I've heard similar words,' he finally said. 'But it's comforting to think it was usually from the mouths of men who were about to hang.'

*

Lytta Neyd was among the guests. He spotted her easily. Because she looked eye-catching.

The bodice of her vivid green *crêpe de chine* gown with its plunging neckline was decorated with embroidery in the form of a stylised butterfly sparkling with tiny sequins. It was edged with frills. Frilly dresses on women older than ten usually evoked ironic sympathy in the Witcher, while on Lytta's dress they harmonised with the rest of it with more than attractive results.

The sorceress's neck was adorned with a necklace of polished emeralds. None smaller than an almond. And one considerably larger.

Her red hair was like a forest fire.

Mozaïk was standing at Lytta's side. In a black and astonishingly bold dress of silk and chiffon, quite transparent on the

shoulders and sleeves. The girl's neck and cleavage were veiled in something like a fancifully draped chiffon ruff which, in combination with the long black sleeves, gave her figure an aura of flamboyance and mystery.

They were both wearing four-inch heels. Lytta's were made of iguana skin and Mozaïk's of patent leather.

Geralt hesitated to approach for a moment. But only a moment.

'Greetings,' Lytta she said guardedly. 'What a pleasant surprise, it's lovely to see you. Mozaïk, you won, the white slippers are yours.'

'A wager,' he guessed. 'What did it concern?'

'You. I thought we wouldn't see you again and wagered that you wouldn't show up. Mozaïk took the bet, because she thought differently.'

Lytta gave him a deep, jade-green glance, clearly waiting for a response. For a word. For anything. Geralt remained silent.

'Greetings, fair ladies!' said Dandelion, springing up from nowhere, a veritable *deus ex machina*. 'My respects, I bow before your beauty. Madame Neyd, Miss Mozaïk. Forgive the absence of flowers.'

'We forgive you. What of the arts?'

'All that you'd expect: everything and nothing,' said Dandelion, snatching two goblets of wine from a passing page and handing them to the women. 'The party's somewhat dull, isn't it? But the wine's good. Est Est, forty a pint. The red's not bad, either, I've tried it. Just don't drink the hippocras, they don't know how to spice it. And there's no end of guests, have you seen? As usual in high society, the race is back-to-front, it's *à rebours*; whoever arrives last wins and claims the laurels. And will have a splendid entrance. I think we're observing the finish right now. The owner of a chain of lumber mills and wife are crossing the finishing line, losing out in the process to the harbourmaster and wife who are just behind. Who in turn are losing out to a dandy I don't know . . .'

'That's the head of the Koviran commercial mission. And wife,' explained Coral. 'I wonder whose.'

'Pyral Pratt, that old villain, will make it into the leading pack. With a pretty good-looking partner . . . Bloody hell!'

‘What’s the matter?’

‘The woman beside Pratt . . .’ Dandelion choked. ‘Is . . . is Etna Asider . . . The little widow who sold me the sword . . .’

‘Is that how she introduced herself?’ snorted Lytta. ‘Etna Asider? A cheap anagram. She’s Antea Derris. Pratt’s eldest daughter. And no little widow, for she’s never married. Rumour has it she isn’t fond of men.’

‘Pratt’s daughter? Impossible! I’ve visited him—’

‘But you didn’t meet her there,’ the sorceress cut him off. ‘Nothing strange. Antea doesn’t get on very well with her family, she doesn’t even use her surname, but an alias made up of two given names. She only contacts her father regarding her business affairs, which as a matter of fact are booming. But I’m surprised to see them here together.’

‘They must have their reasons,’ the Witcher observed astutely.

‘I dread to think what. Officially, Antea is a commercial agent, but her favourite sports are swindles, fraud and rackets. Poet, I have a favour to ask. You’re worldly-wise, but Mozaïk isn’t. Lead her among the guests and introduce her to anyone worth knowing. And point out any who aren’t.’

Assuring Coral that her wish was his command, Dandelion proffered Mozaïk his arm. They were left alone.

‘Come,’ Lytta interrupted the lengthening silence. ‘Let’s take a walk. Up that little hill over there.’

A view of the city, Palmyra, the harbour and the sea, spread out from high up on the hill, from the temple of contemplation. Lytta shielded her eyes with a hand.

‘What’s that sailing into harbour? And dropping anchor? A three-masted frigate of curious construction. Under black sails, ha, it’s quite remarkable—’

‘Forget the frigates. Dandelion and Mozaïk having been sent away, we’re alone and out of the way.’

‘And you’re wondering why.’ She turned around. ‘Waiting for me to tell you something. You’re waiting for the questions I shall ask you. But perhaps I only want to tell you the latest gossip? From the wizarding community? Oh, no, never fear, it’s not about Yennefer. It’s about Rissberg, a place you know well, after all. Plenty of changes have taken place there . . . But I fail to see the

glint of curiosity in your eyes. Shall I go on?'

'By all means, do.'

'It began when Ortolan died.'

'Ortolan's dead?'

'He passed away almost a week ago. According to the official version he was lethally poisoned by the fertiliser he was working on. But rumour has it that it was a stroke caused by the news of the sudden death of one of his favourites, who died as a result of an unsuccessful and highly suspicious experiment. I'm talking about a certain Degerlund. Does that name ring a bell? Did you meet him when you were at the castle?'

'I may have. I met many sorcerers. They weren't all memorable.'

'Ortolan apparently blamed the entire council at Rissberg for his favourite's death, became enraged and suffered a stroke. He was really very old and had suffered from high blood pressure. His addiction to fisstech was an open secret, and fisstech and high blood pressure are a potent mixture. But there must have been something fishy, because significant staffing changes have taken place at Rissberg. Even before Ortolan's death there had been conflicts. Algernon Guincamp, more commonly known as Pinety, was forced to resign, among others. You remember him, I'm certain. Because if anyone was memorable there, he was.'

'Indeed.'

'Ortolan's death—' Coral glared at him keenly '—provoked a swift response from the Chapter, who had much earlier been aware of some worrying tidings concerning the antics of the deceased and his favourite. Interestingly – and increasingly typically in our times – a tiny pebble triggered the landslide. An insignificant commoner, an over-zealous shire-reeve or constable. He forced his superior – the bailiff from Gors Velen – to take action. The bailiff took the accusations higher up and thus, rung by rung, the affair reached the royal council and thence the Chapter. To keep things brief: people were accused of negligence. Biruta Icarti had to leave the board. She went back to lecture at Aretuza. Pockmarked Axel and Sandoval left. Zangenis kept his job, gaining the Chapter's pardon by informing on the others and shifting all the blame onto them. What do you say to that? Do you have anything to say?'

'What can I say? It's your business. And your scandals.'

‘Scandals that erupted at Rissberg soon after your visit.’

‘You overrate me, Coral. And my influence.’

‘I never overrate anything. And seldom underrate.’

‘Mozaïk and Dandelion will be back any moment,’ he said, looking her in the eyes. ‘And after all, you didn’t bring me here without a reason. Will you tell me what this is about?’

She withstood his gaze.

‘You know very well what this is about,’ she replied. ‘So don’t offend my intelligence by lowering your own. You haven’t come to see me in over a month. No, don’t think I desire mawkish melodrama or pathetic sentimental gestures. I don’t expect anything more from the relationship that’s finishing than a pleasant memory.’

‘It seems to me you used the word “relationship”? Its semantic capacity is indeed astounding.’

‘Nothing but a pleasant memory,’ she said, ignoring his comment and holding his gaze. ‘I don’t know what it’s like for you, but as far as I’m concerned, I’ll be frank, things aren’t that good. It would, I think, be worth making some serious efforts to that end. I don’t think much would be necessary. Why, something small but nice, a nice final note, something to leave a pleasant memory. Could you manage something like that? Would you like to visit me?’

He didn’t manage to answer. The bell in the belfry began to toll deafeningly, striking ten times. Then trumpets sounded a loud, brassy and slightly cacophonous fanfare. The crowd of guests was parted by blue and red guardsmen forming a double file. The marshal of the court appeared beneath the portico in the entrance to the palace wearing a gold chain around his neck and holding a staff as a big as a fence post. Behind him strode heralds and behind the heralds, seneschals. And behind the seneschals, wearing a sable calpac and holding a sceptre, marched Belohun, King of Kerack, in bony and wiry person. At his side walked a willowy young blonde in a veil, who could only have been the royal betrothed, and in the very near future his wife and queen. The blonde was wearing a snow-white dress and was bedecked in diamonds, perhaps rather too lavishly, in a rather nouveau-riche and rather tasteless style. Like the king, she bore on her shoulders an ermine cloak which was held by pages.

The royal family followed on behind the royal couple, at least

a dozen paces behind the pages holding the train, which spoke volumes about their status. Egmund was there, naturally, and beside him a man as fair-skinned as an albino, who could only have been his brother Xander. Beyond the brothers walked the rest of the relatives: several men, several women, and a few teenaged boys and girls, evidently the king's legitimate and illegitimate offspring.

Amid the bowing male and low-curtsying female guests, the royal procession reached its destination, which was a raised platform somewhat resembling a scaffold. Two thrones had been placed on the platform, which was roofed over by a canopy and covered at the sides by tapestries. The king and the bride sat down on the thrones. The rest of the family had to stand.

The trumpets assaulted the ears a second time with their brassy braying. The marshal of the court – brandishing his arms like a conductor in front of an orchestra – encouraged the guests to shout, cheer and toast the duo. The guests and courtiers tried to outdo each other by showering the soon-to-be-wed couple from all sides with wishes for eternal good health, happiness, success, long, longer and even longer lives. King Belohun maintained his haughty and huffy expression, and only demonstrated his pleasure with the good wishes, compliments and praises being sung to him and his bride-to-be by subtle twitches of his sceptre.

The marshal of the court silenced the guests and gave a long speech, smoothly shifting from grandiloquence to bombast and back again. Geralt devoted all his attention to watching the crowd, hence he only listened with half an ear. King Belohun – the marshal of the court proclaimed to all and sundry – was genuinely glad that so many people had come, was overjoyed to welcome everybody on such an auspicious occasion and wished them precisely the same as they wished him. The wedding ceremony would be taking place in the afternoon, and until then the guests were invited to eat, drink and be merry and avail themselves of the numerous attractions planned for the event.

The braying of the trumpets proclaimed the end of the official part. The royal procession began to leave the gardens. Among the guests, Geralt had managed to observe several small groups behaving quite suspiciously. One group in particular bothered him, because they hadn't bowed to the procession as low as the others and were attempting to shove their way towards the palace gate. He drifted towards the double file of soldiers in blue and red. Lytta walked beside him.

Belohun strode with his eyes fixed straight ahead. The bride-to-be was looking around, occasionally nodding at the guests greeting her. A gust of wind raised her veil for a moment. Geralt saw her large blue eyes. He saw those eyes suddenly find Lytta Neyd amid the throng. And saw the eyes light up with hatred. Pure, unadulterated, distilled hatred.

It lasted a second and then the trumpets resounded, the procession passed and the guardsmen marched on. The suspiciously behaving little group had, as it turned out, only been aiming at the table laden with wine and *hors d'oeuvres*, which they besieged and stripped ahead of the other guests. Performances began on makeshift stages dotted here and there: musicians played fiddles, lyres, pipes and recorders, and choirs sang. Jugglers took turns with tumblers, strongmen made way for acrobats, and tightrope walkers were replaced by scantily clad dancers with tambourines. People became merrier and merrier. The ladies' cheeks began to glow, the gentlemen's foreheads to glisten with sweat, and the speech of both the former and the latter became very loud. And somewhat incoherent.

Lytta pulled him beyond a pavilion. They surprised a couple that had concealed themselves there for explicitly sexual purposes. The sorceress wasn't bothered and paid almost no attention to them.

'I don't know what's afoot,' she said. 'And I don't know why you're here, though I can guess. But keep your eyes open and anything you do, do with prudence. The royal betrothed is none other than Ildiko Breckl.

'I won't ask you if you know her. I saw that look.'

'Ildiko Breckl,' Coral repeated. 'That's her name. She was turfed out of Aretuza in the third year. For petty theft. She's done well for herself, as you can see. She didn't become a sorceress, but she'll be a queen in a few hours. The cherry on the tart, dammit? She's only meant to be seventeen. The old fool. Ildiko is a good twenty-five.'

'And appears not to like you.'

'The feeling's mutual. She's a born schemer, trouble always follows her around. But that's not all. The frigate that sailed into the harbour under black sails? I know what she is, I've heard about her. She's *Acherontia*. And is extremely infamous. Wherever she appears something happens.'

‘What, for example?’

‘She has a crew of mercenaries who can allegedly be hired to do anything. And what do you hire mercenaries for? Bricklaying?’

‘I have to go. Forgive me, Coral.’

‘Whatever occurs,’ she said slowly, looking him in the eyes, ‘whatever happens, I can’t be embroiled in it.’

‘Never fear. I don’t mean to ask for your help.’

‘You misunderstood me.’

‘No doubt. Forgive me, Coral.’

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Just beyond the ivy-grown colonnade he bumped into Mozaïk coming the other way. Astonishingly calm and cool among the heat, hubbub and commotion.

‘Where’s Dandelion? Did he leave you?’

‘He did,’ she sighed. ‘But excused himself politely and also asked me to apologise to you. He was invited to perform in private. In the palace chambers, for the queen and her ladies-in-waiting. He couldn’t refuse.’

‘Who asked him?’

‘A man with a soldierly look. And a strange expression in his eyes.’

‘I have to go. Forgive me, Mozaïk.’

A small crowd had gathered beyond the pavilion, which was decorated with colourful ribbons. Food was being served: pasties, salmon and duck in aspic. Geralt cleared a path for himself, looking out for Captain Ropp or Ferrant de Lettenhove. Instead he ran straight into Febus Ravenga. The restaurateur resembled an aristocrat. He was dressed in a brocade doublet, while his head was adorned with a hat bearing a plume of ostrich feathers. He was accompanied by Pyral Pratt’s daughter, chic and elegant in a black male outfit.

‘Oh, Geralt,’ said Ravenga, looking pleased. ‘Antea, let me introduce you: Geralt of Rivia, the famous witcher. Geralt, this is

Madam Antea Derris, commercial agent. Have a glass of wine with us . . .'

'Forgive me but I'm in a hurry,' he apologised. 'I'm aware of Madam Antea, although I haven't met her personally. In your shoes, I wouldn't buy anything from her, Febus.'

The portico over the palace entrance had been decorated by some scholarly linguist with a banner reading CRESCITE ET MULTIPLICAMINI. And Geralt was stopped by crossed halberd shafts.

'No entry.'

'I have to see the royal instigator urgently.'

'No entry.' The commander of the guard emerged from behind the halberdiers. He was holding a half-pike in his left hand. He aimed the dirty index finger of his right hand straight at Geralt's nose. 'No entry, do you understand, sire?'

'If you don't take that finger away from my face, I'll break it in several places. Ah, precisely, that's much better. And now take me to the instigator.'

'Whenever you happen upon guards there's always a row,' said Ferrant de Lettenhove from behind the Witcher. He must have followed Geralt. 'It's a grave character flaw. And may have disagreeable consequences.'

'I don't like it when anybody bars my way.'

'But that's what guards and sentries are for, after all. They wouldn't be necessary if there was free entry everywhere. Let him through.'

'We have orders from the king himself.' The commander of the guard frowned. 'We're to admit no one without being searched!'

'Then search him.'

The search was thorough and the guardsmen took it seriously. They searched him thoroughly, not limiting themselves to a cursory pat. They didn't find anything, Geralt hadn't taken the dagger he usually carried stuck down his boot to the wedding.

'Happy?' asked the instigator, looking down at the commander. 'Now step aside and let us through.'

'May Your Excellency forgive me,' the commander drawled. 'The king's order was unequivocal. It applied to everyone.'

‘Whatever next? Don’t forget yourself, lad! Do you know who stands before you?’

‘Everyone is to be searched,’ said the commander, nodding towards the guardsmen. ‘The order was clear. Please don’t make problems, Your Excellency. For us . . . or for yourself.’

‘What’s happening today?’

‘Regarding that, please see my superiors. They ordered me to search everybody.’

The instigator swore under his breath and yielded to the search. He didn’t even have a penknife.

‘I’d like to know what this is all about,’ he said when they were finally walking along the corridor. ‘I’m seriously perturbed. Seriously perturbed, Witcher.’

‘Did you see Dandelion? He was apparently summoned to the palace to sing.’

‘I know nothing of that.’

‘But did you know that the *Acherontia* has sailed into harbour? Does that name mean anything to you?’

‘A great deal. And my anxiety grows. By the minute. Let’s make haste!’

Guardsmen armed with partisans were moving around the vestibule – once the temple cloisters – and blue and red uniforms also flitted through the cloisters. The clatter of boots and raised voices reached them from the corridor.

‘I say!’ said the instigator, beckoning at a passing soldier. ‘Sergeant! What’s going on here?’

‘Forgive me, Your Excellency . . . I’m hurrying with orders . . .’

‘Stand still, I say! What’s going on? I demand an explanation! Is something the matter? Where is Prince Egmund?’

‘Mr Ferrant de Lettenhove.’

King Belohun himself stood in a doorway, beneath standards bearing the blue dolphin, accompanied by four sturdy toughs in leather jerkins. He had disposed of his royal trappings, so he didn’t look like a king. He looked like a peasant whose cow had just calved and given birth to a gorgeous specimen.

‘Mr Ferrant de Lettenhove.’ Joy at the calf could also be heard

in the king's voice. 'The royal instigator. I mean, *my* instigator. Or perhaps not mine. Perhaps my son's. You appear, although I haven't summoned you. In principle, being here at this moment was your professional duty, but I didn't summon you. *Let Ferrant*, I thought to myself, *let Ferrant eat, drink, pick up a bit of skirt and shag her in the bower. I won't summon him, I don't want him here.* Do you know why I didn't want you? Because I wasn't certain who you serve. Whom do you serve, Ferrant?'

'I serve Your Majesty,' replied the instigator, bowing low. 'And I'm utterly devoted to Your Majesty.'

'Did you all hear that?' asked the king, looking around theatrically. 'Ferrant is devoted to me! Very well, Ferrant, very well. I expected an answer like that, O royal instigator. You may remain, you'll come in useful. I shall at once charge you with a task befitting an instigator . . . I say! And this one? Who is it? Just a minute! Could it be that witcher who engages in swindles? Whom the sorceress fingered?'

'He turned out to be innocent, the sorceress was misled. He had been informed upon—'

'The innocent are not informed upon.'

'It was a decision of the court. The case was closed owing to lack of evidence.'

'But there was a case, meaning there was a stink. Decisions of the court and its verdicts derive from the imaginations and caprices of court officers, while the stink issues from the very nub of the case. That's all I wish to say, I won't waste time on lectures about jurisprudence. On the day of my marriage I can show magnanimity, not order him locked up, but get that witcher out of my sight at once. And may he never darken my door again!'

'Your Majesty . . . I am perturbed . . . *Acherontia* has allegedly sailed into port. In this situation safety considerations dictate the need for protection . . . The Witcher could . . .'

'Could what? Shield me with his own bosom? Paralyse the assassins with a witcher spell? For did Egmund, my loving son, charge him with such a task? To protect his father and ensure his safety? Step this way, Ferrant. Why, and you bloody come too, Witcher. I'll show you something. You'll see how one takes care of one's own safety and guarantees oneself protection. Have a good look. Listen. Perhaps you'll learn something. And find something

out. About yourselves. Come on, follow me!'

They set off, urged by the king and surrounded by the bruisers in leather jerkins. They entered a large room where a throne stood on a dais beneath a plafond decorated with waves and sea monsters. Belohun seated himself on the throne. Opposite, beneath a fresco portraying a stylised map of the world, the king's sons sat on a bench, guarded by other bruisers. The princes of Kerack. The coal-black-haired Egmund and the albino-blonde Xander.

Belohun sat back comfortably on his throne. He looked down on his sons with the air of a victorious commander before whom kneel his enemies, crushed in battle, begging for mercy. However, the victors on the paintings Geralt had seen usually wore expressions of gravity, dignity, nobility and magnamity for the vanquished. One would have searched in vain for that on Belohun's face. It was painted with nothing but scathing derision.

'My court jester fell ill yesterday,' spoke the king. 'He came down with the shits. *What bad luck*, I thought, *there'll be no jokes, no japes, no fun and games.* I was wrong. It's funny. So funny, it's side-splitting. For you, you two, my sons, are hilarious. Pathetic, but hilarious. In the coming years, I guarantee, lying in bed with my little wife, after amorous capers and frolics, whenever we recall you and this day, we shall laugh until we weep. For there's nothing funnier than a fool.'

Xander, it was readily apparent, was afraid. His eyes were sweeping over the chamber and he was sweating profusely. Egmund, on the contrary, didn't evince any fear. He looked his father straight in the eyes and returned the derision as his father spoke on.

'Folk wisdom declares: hope for the best, expect the worst. So, I was prepared for the worst. For could there be anything worse than betrayal by one's own sons? I placed agents among your most trusted comrades. Your accomplices betrayed you immediately, as soon as I put the screws on them. Your factotums and favourites are right now fleeing the city.

'Yes, my sons. You thought me deaf and blind? Old, senile and decrepit? You thought I couldn't see that you both craved the throne and crown? That you desired them like a swine desires truffles? A swine that sniffs out a truffle loses its head. From desire, lust, urges and untamed appetite. The swine goes insane, squeals, burrows, paying no heed, as long as it can get hold of the truffles.

You need to whack it severely with a stick to drive it away. And you, my sons, turned out to be just such swine. You sniffed out a mushroom and went berserk with lust and cravings. But you'll receive shit – and no truffles. Though you *will* taste a thrashing. You acted against me, my sons, you violated my authority and person. The health of people who act against me usually deteriorates violently. It's a fact confirmed by medical science.

'The frigate *Acherontia* has dropped anchor in the harbour. It sailed here on my orders, it was I who commissioned the captain. The court will convene tomorrow morning and the verdict will be reached before noon. And at noon the two of you will be aboard the ship. They'll only allow you to disembark once the frigate passes the lighthouse at Peixe de Mar. Which means in practical terms that your new place of abode will be Nazair. Ebbing. Maecht. Or Nilfgaard. Or the very end of the world and the gates of hell, if it's your will to travel there. For you shall never return to these parts. Ever. If you want your heads to remain on your shoulders.'

'You mean to banish us?' howled Xander. 'As you banished Viraxas? Will you also forbid our names from being mentioned at court?'

'I banished Viraxas in wrath and without a judgement. Which doesn't mean I wouldn't have him beheaded should he dare to return. The tribunal will sentence you to exile. Legally and bindingly.'

'Are you so sure of that? We shall see! We shall see what the court has to say about such lawlessness!'

'The court knows what verdict I expect and that's the one it will pronounce. Unanimously.'

'Like hell it'll be unanimous! The courts are independent in this country.'

'The courts may be. But the judges aren't. You're a fool, Xander. Your mother was as thick as two short planks and you take after her. You certainly didn't concoct the murder plot yourself, one of your favourites planned it all. But actually, I'm glad you did, I'll gleefully rid myself of you. It's different with Egmund, yes, Egmund is cunning. The Witcher, hired by the caring son to protect his father, ah, how shrewdly you kept that a secret, so that everybody found out. And then the contact poison. A wily thing, poison like that, my food and drink is tasted, but who would have thought of the handle of the poker from the fireplace in the royal bedchamber?

The poker I use and don't let anybody touch? Cunning, my son, cunning. Pity that your poisoner betrayed you, but that's the way it is, traitors betray traitors. Why do you say nothing, Egmund? Do you have nothing to say?'

Egmund's eyes were cold and still showed no traces of fear. *He isn't at all daunted by the prospect of banishment*, thought Geralt. *He isn't thinking about banishment or going into exile, isn't thinking about Acherontia, isn't thinking about Peixe de Mar. So what* is *he thinking about*?

'Nothing to say, son?' repeated the King.

'Only one thing,' Egmund said through pursed lips. 'From the folk wisdom you're so fond of. "There's no fool like an old fool". Remember my words, father dear. When the time comes.'

'Take them away, lock them up and guard them,' ordered Belohun. 'That's your job, Ferrant, the job of the instigator. And now call the tailor in here, the marshal of the court and the notary, everyone else – out. And you, Witcher . . . You've learned something today, haven't you? Have you learned something about yourself? Namely, that you're a naive chump? If you've understood that then there'll be some benefit from your visit today. A visit which has just finished. Hi, over there, two men to me. Escort this witcher to the gate and eject him from it. Making sure first that he hasn't swiped any of the silverware!'

*

Captain Ropp barred their way in the corridor outside the throne room. Accompanied by two individuals with similar eyes, movements and bearing. Geralt would have wagered that all three of them had once served in the same unit. He suddenly understood. He suddenly realised he knew what was about to happen, how things would develop. Thus, it came as no surprise to him when Ropp announced he was taking control of the escort and ordered the guardsmen away. The Witcher knew the captain would order him to follow. As he had expected, the other two men were close behind.

He had a foreboding about who he would find in the chamber they were about to enter.

Dandelion was as white as a sheet and clearly terrified. But probably unharmed. He was sitting on a chair with a high backrest. Behind the chair stood a skinny character with hair combed and plaited into a queue. The character was holding a misericorde with a long, narrow, four-sided blade. The blade was pressed against the poet's neck, below his jaw, slanting upwards.

'No funny business,' warned Ropp. 'No funny business, witcher. One false move, even one twitch, and Mr Samsa will stick the minstrel like a hog. He won't hesitate.'

Geralt knew that Mr Samsa wouldn't hesitate. Because Mr Samsa's eyes were even nastier than Ropp's. They were eyes with a very specific expression. People with eyes like that could occasionally be come across in morgues and anatomy laboratories. They weren't employed there by any means to support themselves, but to have the opportunity to indulge their dark predilections.

Geralt now understood why Prince Egmund had been so calm. Why he had been looking ahead fearlessly. And into his father's eyes.

'We ask you to be obedient,' said Ropp. 'If you're obedient, you'll both get out alive.

'Do what we ask and we'll release you and the poetaster,' the captain continued to lie. 'If you're obstructive we'll kill you both.'

'You're making a mistake, Ropp.'

'Mr Samsa will remain here with the minstrel,' said Ropp, unconcerned by the warning. 'We – I mean you and I – will go to the royal chambers. There'll be a guard. I have your sword, as you see. I'll give it back to you and you'll deal with the sentries. And the reinforcements that the guards will summon before you kill them all. On hearing the din, the chamber man will spirit the king away through a secret exit, and Messrs Richter and Tverdoruk will be waiting there. They will change the succession of the throne and the history of the local monarchy.'

'You're making a mistake, Ropp.'

'Now,' said the captain, moving in very close. 'Now you will confirm that you've understood the task and will execute it. Should you not, before I count to ten under my breath, Mr Samsa will rupture the minstrel's right eardrum and I shall carry on counting. If the desired result does not ensue, Mr Samsa stabs the other ear. And will then gouge out the poet's eye. And so on, to the bitter end,

which is a jab to the brain. I'm starting to count, Witcher.'

'Don't listen to him, Geralt!' Dandelion somehow managed to make a sound from his constricted throat. 'They won't dare to touch me! I'm famous!'

'He doesn't seem to be taking us seriously. Mr Samsa, the right ear.'

'Stop! No!'

'That's better,' nodded Ropp. 'Much better, Witcher. Confirm that you've understood the task. And that you'll execute it.'

'First, move that dagger away from the poet's ear.'

'Ha,' snorted Mr Samsa, lifting the misericorde high over his head. 'Is that better?'

'Better.'

Geralt's left hand caught Ropp by the wrist and his right seized the hilt of his sword. He pulled the captain towards him with a powerful tug and headbutted him in the face with all his strength. There was a crunching sound. The Witcher jerked the sword from the scabbard before Ropp fell and with one fluid movement coming out of a short spin hacked off Samsa's raised hand. Samsa yelled and dropped to his knees. Richter and Tverdoruk, daggers drawn, fell on the Witcher, who spun among them. In passing, he slit open Richter's neck and blood spurted right up to the chandelier on the ceiling. Tverdoruk attacked, leaping in knifeman's feints, but he tripped on Ropp's inert body, losing his balance for a moment. Geralt didn't let him recover. With a rapid lunge, he slashed him from below in the groin and a second time from above in the carotid artery. Tverdoruk fell over and curled up in a ball.

Mr Samsa took him by surprise. Although lacking his right hand, although gushing blood from the stump, he found the misericorde on the floor with his left hand. And aimed it at Dandelion. The poet screamed, yet demonstrated presence of mind. He fell from his chair and put it between himself and the assailant. Geralt didn't let Mr Samsa do anything else. Blood once again splashed the ceiling, the chandelier and the candle-ends stuck into it.

Dandelion got up from his knees, rested his forehead against the wall, then vomited extremely copiously and splattering the floor.

Ferrant de Lettenhove rushed into the chamber with several guardsmen.

‘What’s going on? What happened? Julian! Are you in one piece? Julian!’

Dandelion raised a hand, signalling that he would answer in a moment, because he didn’t have time right then. And vomited again.

The instigator ordered the guardsmen to leave and closed the door behind them. He looked at the bodies, cautiously, so as not to tread in the spilt blood and making certain that the blood dripping from the chandelier didn’t stain his doublet.

‘Samsa, Tverdoruk, Richter,’ he said, listing them. ‘And Master Captain Ropp. Prince Egmund’s confidants.’

‘They carried out their orders,’ said the Witcher, shrugging, looking down at his sword. ‘Like you, they obeyed their orders. And you didn’t know anything about it. Confirm that, Ferrant.’

‘I didn’t know anything about it,’ the instigator confirmed hastily and stepped back, leaning against the wall. ‘I swear! You can’t possibly suspect . . . You don’t think . . .’

‘If I did you’d be dead. I believe you. You wouldn’t have risked Dandelion’s life, after all.’

‘The king must be informed. I’m afraid that for Prince Egmund it may mean amendments and appendices to the indictment. Ropp is alive, I think. He’ll testify . . .’

‘I doubt he’ll be in a fit state.’

The instigator examined the captain, who was lying, stretched out in a pool of urine, salivating copiously and trembling incessantly.

‘What’s wrong with him?’

‘Shards of nasal bones in the brain. And probably several splinters in his eyeballs.’

‘You struck him too hard.’

‘That was my intention,’ said Geralt, wiping the sword blade with a napkin taken from the table. ‘Dandelion, how are you? Everything in order? Can you stand?’

‘I’m good, I’m good,’ gibbered Dandelion. ‘I’m feeling better.

Much better . . .'

'You don't look like someone who's feeling better.'

'Dammit, I've barely escaped with my life!' said the poet, getting to his feet and holding on to a bureau. 'For fuck's sake, I've never been so afraid . . . I felt like the insides were falling out of my arse. And that everything would drop out of me, teeth included. But when I saw you I knew you'd save me. I mean, I didn't, but I was counting strongly on it . . . How much sodding blood there is . . . How it stinks in here! I think I'm going to puke again . . .'

'We're going to the king,' said Ferrant de Lettenhove. 'Give me your sword, Witcher . . . And clean it a little. You stay here, Julian —'

'Fuck that. I'm not staying here for a moment. I prefer sticking close to Geralt.'

*

The entrance to the royal antechambers was being guarded by sentries who, however, recognised the instigator and let him through. But getting into the actual chambers was not so straightforward. A herald, two seneschals and their entourage, consisting of four bruisers, turned out to be an insurmountable obstacle.

'The king is being fitted for his wedding outfit,' the herald pronounced. 'He made it clear he is not to be disturbed.'

'We have an important matter requiring urgent attention!'

'The king made it categorically clear he is not to be disturbed. While Master Witcher had, as I recall, orders to leave the palace. What, then, is he still doing here?'

'I'll explain that to the king. Admit us!'

Ferrant pushed the herald away and shoved the seneschal. Geralt followed him. But they were still only able to reach the chamber's threshold, stuck behind several courtiers gathered there. Their further progress was thwarted by bruisers in leather jerkins who pushed them against the wall on the order of the herald. They were pretty rough, but Geralt followed the instigator's example and gave up any resistance.

The king was standing on a low stool. A tailor with pins in his mouth was adjusting the royal breeches. Beside the king stood the marshal of the court and somebody dressed in black, probably the notary.

'Right after the wedding ceremony,' said Belohun, 'I shall announce that my successor will be the son who my little wedded wife will bear me today. That measure ought to assure me her favour and submission, hee, hee. It will also give me a little time and peace. About twenty years will pass before the pup reaches an age when he'll start scheming.

'But if I so wish I shall call it all off and designate somebody quite different as my successor.' The king grimaced and winked at the marshal of the court. 'After all, it is a morganatic marriage and issue from such unions don't inherit titles, do they? And who's capable of predicting how long I'll stand her? For are there no other prettier and younger wenches in the world? It'll be necessary to draw up the appropriate documents, a prenuptial agreement or something. Hope for the best, expect the worst, hee, hee, hee.'

The chamber man handed the king a tray piled up with jewels.

'Take it away.' Belohun grimaced. 'I won't be bedecking myself with trinkets like some fop or arriviste. I'll only put this on. It's a gift from my betrothed. Small, but tasteful. A medallion with the crest of my country, it behoves me to wear such a coat of arms. They are her words: the country's crest on my chest, the country's good in my heart.'

Some time passed before Geralt, standing pressed against the wall, put two and two together.

The cat, patting the medallion with its paw. The golden medallion on a chain. The blue enamel, the dolphin. *D'or, dauphin naiant d'azur, lorré, peantré, oreillé, barbé et crêté de gueules*.

It was too late to react. He didn't even manage to cry out or give a warning. He saw the golden chain suddenly contract and tighten around the king's neck like a garrotte. Belohun flushed and opened his mouth, but was incapable of taking a breath or screaming. He grabbed his neck with both hands, struggling to tear the medallion off or at least jam his fingers under the chain. He couldn't, as the chain had cut deeply into his flesh. The king fell from the stool, and danced, bumping into the tailor. The tailor staggered and choked; he'd probably swallowed his pins. He fell against the notary and they both went over. Meanwhile, Belohun

turned blue, eyes goggling, tumbled onto the floor, kicked out with his legs a few times and tensed up. And stopped moving.

'Help! The king has collapsed!'

'The physician!' called the marshal of the court. 'Summon the physician!'

'Ye Gods! What has happened? What's happened to the king?'

'The physician! Quickly!'

Ferrant de Lettenhove put his hands to his brow. His face wore a strange expression. The expression of a man who was slowly beginning to understand.

The king was laid down on a chaise longue. The physician took a long time examining him. Although close by, Geralt wasn't allowed through, couldn't watch. In spite of that, he knew that the chain had already loosened before the physician came running.

'Apoplexy,' the physician pronounced, straightening up. 'Brought on by airlessness. Bad vapours entered the body and poisoned the humours. The unceasing storms raising the heat of the blood are to blame. Science is powerless, I can do nothing. Our good and gracious king is dead. He has departed this life.'

The marshal of the court gave a cry, burying his face in his hands. The herald seized his beret in both hands. A courtier sobbed. Others knelt down.

The corridor and vestibule abruptly resounded with the echo of heavy steps. In the doorway appeared a giant, a fellow measuring a good seven feet tall. In the uniform of a guardsman, but a senior one. The giant was accompanied by men in headscarves and earrings.

'Gentlemen, you are to proceed to the throne room. At once,' said the giant amid the silence.

'What throne room?' retorted the marshal of the court, irritably. 'And why? Do you realise, Lord de Santis, what has just happened? What misfortune has occurred? You don't understand—'

'To the throne room. By order of the king.'

'The king is dead!'

'Long live the king. To the throne room, please. Everybody. At once.'

About a dozen men were gathered in the throne room, beneath the maritime plafond with the tritons, mermaids and hippocampi. Some were wearing colourful scarves, some sailor's caps with ribbons. They were all weather-beaten and had earrings.

Mercenaries. It wasn't difficult to guess. The crew of the frigate *Acherontia*.

A dark-haired, dark-eyed man with a prominent nose was sitting on the throne on a dais. He was also weather-beaten. But he didn't have an earring.

Beside him sat Ildiko Breckl on an extra chair, still in her snow-white gown and still bedecked in diamonds. The – until recently – royal fiancée and betrothed was staring at the dark-haired man with an expression of adoration. For some time, Geralt had been wondering how events would proceed and guessing at their causes, had been connecting facts and putting two and two together. Now, though, at that moment someone with even very limited intellect would have seen and understood that Ildiko Breckl and the dark-haired man knew each other. And very well, at that. And had for quite some time.

'Prince Viraxas, Prince of Kerack, a moment ago still the heir to the throne and crown, now the King of Kerack, the rightful ruler of the country,' announced the giant, de Santis, in a booming baritone.

The marshal of the court was the first to bow and then go down on one knee. After him, the herald paid homage. The seneschals, bowing low, followed suit. The last person to bow was Ferrant de Lettenhove.

'Your Royal Highness.'

'"Your Highness" will do for the moment,' corrected Viraxas. 'I shall be entitled to style myself in full after the coronation. Which, indeed, we shall not delay. The sooner, the better. Am I right, marshal?'

It was very quiet. The stomach of one of the courtiers could be heard rumbling.

'My late lamented father is dead,' said Viraxas. 'He has joined his revered forebears. Both of my younger brothers, unsurprisingly, have been accused of treason. The trial will be conducted in keeping with the dead king's will, both brothers will turn out to be guilty and will leave Kerack forever on the strength of the court's

verdict. Aboard the frigate *Acherontia*, hired by me . . . and my powerful friends and patrons. The dead king, I happen to know, didn't leave a valid will and testament or any official directives regarding the succession. I would have respected the king's will had there been any such directives. But there are none. By right of inheritance, the crown thus belongs to me. Does anyone of the people gathered here wish to oppose that?'

No one among the people gathered there did. Everybody present was sufficiently endowed with good sense and the instinct of self-preservation.

'So please begin the preparations for the coronation. May the people within whose jurisdiction it falls busy themselves with it. The coronation will be combined with my nuptials. For I have decided to revive the ancient custom of the kings of Kerack, a law enacted centuries ago. Which declares that if the groom dies before his wedding, the fiancée will wed his closest unmarried relative.'

Ildiko Breckl – as was clear from her radiant expression – was prepared to submit to the ancient custom that very minute. Others of those present remained quiet, undoubtedly trying to recall who had enacted the law, when and on what occasion. And how that custom could have been enacted centuries ago, since the kingdom of Kerack had existed for less than a hundred years. But the brows of the courtiers wrinkled with mental effort then quickly became smooth. Unanimously, they came to the correct conclusion. That although the coronation hadn't taken place yet, and although he was only His Highness, Viraxas was already essentially king, and the king is always right.

'Get out of here, Witcher,' whispered Ferrant de Lettenhove, pushing Geralt's sword into his hand. 'Take Julian away. Vanish, both of you. You haven't seen anything, haven't heard anything. Let no one link you with all this.'

'I realise—' Viraxas swept his gaze over the assembled company '—and understand that for some of you gathered here the situation may seem astonishing. That for some of you the changes are occurring too unexpectedly and without warning, and events are moving too fast. Nor can I rule out that for some of the assembled company things are not happening as they intended and the state of affairs is not to their liking. Colonel de Santis immediately threw in his lot on the right side and swore loyalty to me. I expect the same from everybody gathered here.

‘Let us begin with the faithful servants of my late lamented father.’ He indicated them with a nod. ‘As well as the executors of the orders of my brother, who made an attempt on my father’s life. We shall start with the royal instigator, Lord Ferrant de Lettenhove.’

The instigator bowed.

‘You will submit to an investigation,’ warned Viraxas. ‘Which will reveal what role you played in the princes’ plot. The plot was a fiasco, which thus qualifies the plotters as inept. I may forgive errors but not ineptitude. Not when it concerns the instigator, the guardian of law. But that will be later, for we shall begin with essential matters. Come closer, Ferrant. We wish you to demonstrate and prove whom you serve. We desire you to pay due homage to us. To kneel at the foot of the throne. And kiss our royal hand.’

The instigator moved obediently towards the dais.

‘Get out of here,’ Ferrant managed to whisper again. ‘Vanish as quickly as you can, Witcher.’

*

The party in the grounds was in full swing.

Lytta Neyd immediately noticed blood on Geralt’s shirtsleeve. Mozaïk also noticed and – unlike Lytta – went pale.

Dandelion grabbed two goblets from the tray of a passing page and downed one after the other in single draughts. He grabbed two more and offered them to the ladies. They declined. Dandelion drank one and gave the other reluctantly to Geralt. Coral stared at the Witcher with narrowed eyes, clearly tense.

‘What’s happening?’

‘You’ll soon find out.’

The bell in the belfry began to toll. It tolled so ominously, so gloomily and so mournfully, that the guests fell silent.

The marshal of the court and the herald stepped onto the scaffold-like platform.

‘Fraught with regret and distress,’ the marshal said into the silence, ‘I must inform you, honourable guests, that King Belohun

the First, our beloved, good and gracious ruler, has suddenly passed away. Struck down by the stern hand of fate, he has departed this life. But the kings of Kerack do not die! The king is dead, long live the king! Long live His Royal Highness, King Viraxas! The firstborn son of the deceased king, the rightful heir to the throne and the crown! King Viraxas the First! Let us proclaim it three times: Long live the king! Long live the king! Long live the king!'

A choir of sycophants, toadies and arse-kissers took up the cry. The marshal of the court quietened them with a gesture.

'King Viraxas is plunged in mourning, as is the entire court. The banquet has been abandoned and the guests are asked to leave the palace and grounds. The king plans his own nuptials soon and then the banquet will be repeated. So as not to waste the vittals, the king has ordered for them to be taken to the city and placed in the town square. The vittals will also be shared with the folk of Palmyra. A time of happiness and prosperity is coming to Kerack!'

'My, my,' announced Coral, straightening her hair. 'There is much truth in the claim that the death of the bridegroom is capable of seriously disrupting a wedding celebration. Belohun was not without his flaws, but there have been worse kings. May he rest in peace and may the earth rest lightly on him. Let's go from here. In any case, it's begun to be boring. And since it's a beautiful day, let's take a walk along the terraces and gaze at the sea. Poet, be so kind as to proffer your arm to my pupil. I'll walk with Geralt. For he has something to tell me, methinks.'

It was still early afternoon. It was hard to believe that so much had happened in such a short time.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

‘Hey! Look!’ Dandelion said suddenly. ‘A rat!’

Geralt didn’t react. He knew the poet and knew he tended to be afraid of any old thing or become enraptured by any old thing and sought out sensation where there was nothing worthy of the name.

‘A rat!’ said Dandelion, not giving up. ‘Oh, another! A third! A fourth! Bloody hell! Geralt, look.’

Geralt sighed and looked.

The foot of the cliff beneath the terrace was teeming with rats. The ground between Palmyra and the hill was alive, moving, undulating and squeaking. Hundreds – perhaps thousands – of rodents were fleeing from the harbour area and river mouth and scurrying uphill, along the palisade, onto the hill and into the trees. Other passers-by also noticed the phenomenon, and cries of amazement and fright rang out on all sides.

‘The rats are fleeing Palmyra and the harbour because they’re frightened!’ pronounced Dandelion. ‘I know what’s happened. A ship full of rat-catchers has probably tied up to the quay.’

No one felt like commenting. Geralt wiped the sweat from his eyelids. The heat was oppressive, and the hot air made breathing difficult. He looked up at the sky, which was clear, quite cloudless.

‘There’s a storm coming,’ Lytta said, articulating what he had thought himself. ‘A tremendous storm. The rats can sense it. And I can too. I can feel it in the air.’

I can too, thought the Witcher.

‘A storm,’ Coral repeated. ‘There’s a storm coming from the sea.’

‘What do you mean a storm?’ Dandelion fanned himself with his bonnet. ‘Not at all! The weather’s as pretty as a picture, the sky’s pristine, without the faintest zephyr. Pity, we could do with a breath of wind in this heat. A sea breeze . . .’

The wind began to blow before he finished his sentence. A faint breeze bore the smell of the sea. It was refreshing, and gave

pleasant relief. And quickly intensified. Pennants on masts – not long before hanging limply and pitifully – moved and fluttered.

The sky over the horizon grew dark. The wind increased. The faint soughing became a swoosh, the swoosh a whistle.

The pennants on the masts fluttered and flapped violently. Weathervanes on roofs and towers creaked, tin chimney pots grated and clanged. Shutters banged. Clouds of dust swirled up.

Dandelion seized his bonnet in both hands at the last moment, preventing it from being blown away.

Mozaïk caught her dress, a sudden gust lifting up the chiffon almost to her hips. Before she could bring the billowing material under control, Geralt had an enjoyable view of her legs. She saw him looking. And held his gaze.

'A storm . . .' Coral had to turn away in order to speak. The wind was blowing so hard it drowned out her words. 'A storm! There's a storm coming!'

'Ye gods!' cried Dandelion, who didn't believe in any. 'Ye gods! What's happening? Is it the end of the world?'

The sky darkened quickly. And the horizon went from deep blue to black.

The wind grew stronger, whistling hellishly.

The sea was rough in the anchorage beyond the headland, the waves were crashing against the breakwater, white foam was splashing. The crashing of the waves intensified. It became as dark as night.

There was a commotion among the ships lying at anchor. Several – including the post clipper *Echo* and the Novigradian schooner *Pandora Parvi* – hurriedly hoisted their sails, ready to make for open sea. The rest of the ships dropped theirs and remained at anchor. Geralt remembered some of them, he had observed them from the terrace of Coral's villa. *Alke*, a cog from Cidaris. *Fuchsia*, he couldn't recall where it was from. And galleons: *Pride of Cintra* under a flag with a blue cross. The three-master *Vertigo* from Lan Exeter. The Redanian *Albatross*: a hundred and twenty feet from prow to stern. And several others. Including the frigate *Acherontia* under black sails.

The wind wasn't whistling now. It was howling. Geralt saw the first thatched roof from the Palmyra district fly up and disintegrate

in mid-air. A second followed soon after. A third. And a fourth. And the wind was growing ever stronger. The flapping of pennants became a constant clatter, shutters banged, tiles and gutters hailed down, chimneys tumbled, flowerpots smashed on the cobbles. The bell in the belfry, set in motion by the gale, began to toll with an intermittent, anxious, ominous sound.

And the gale blew, blew more and more strongly. And drove bigger and bigger waves towards the shore. The crashing of the waves intensified, becoming louder and louder. It soon stopped being just a crash. It was a monotonous and dull booming, like the thudding of some infernal machine. The waves grew, rollers topped by white foam crashed onto the shore. The ground was trembling beneath people's feet. The gale howled.

Echo and *Pandora Parvi* were unable to flee. They returned to the harbour and dropped anchor.

The awestruck and terrified cries of the people gathered on terraces sounded louder and louder. Outstretched arms pointed at the sea.

The sea was one great wave. A colossal wall of water. Apparently rising to the height of the galleons' masts.

Coral grabbed the Witcher by the arm. She said something, or rather tried to speak, but the gale gagged her effectively.

'—way! Geralt! We have to get away from here!'

The wave descended on the harbour. People were screaming. The pier splintered and disintegrated under the weight of the mass of water, posts and planks went flying. The dock collapsed, cranes broke and fell over. A boat and launches moored by the wharf flew into the air like children's toys, like boats made of bark launched in the gutter by street urchins. The cottages and shacks near the beach were simply washed away without leaving a trace. The wave burst into the river mouth, immediately turning it into some diabolical whirlpool. Crowds of people were fleeing from Palmyra, now under water, most of them running towards the upper city and the guardhouse. They survived. Others chose the riverbank as their escape route. Geralt saw them engulfed by the water.

'Another wave!' yelled Dandelion. 'Another wave!'

It was true, there was another. And then a third. A fourth. A fifth. And a sixth. Walls of water rolled into the harbour and the port.

The waves struck the ships at anchor with immense force, and they thrashed about frantically. Geralt saw men falling from the decks.

Ships with their prows turned to windward fought bravely. For some time. They lost their masts, one after the next. Then the waves began to wash over them. They were engulfed by the foam and then re-emerged, were engulfed and re-emerged.

The first not to reappear was the post clipper *Echo*. It quite simply vanished. A moment later the same fate befell *Fuchsia*; the galley simply disintegrated. The taut anchor chain tore out the hull of *Alke* and the cog disappeared into the abyss in a flash. The prow and fo'c'sle of *Albatross* broke off under the pressure and the remains of the ship sank to the bottom like a stone. *Vertigo*'s anchor was wrenched off, the galleon danced on the crest of a wave, was spun around and shattered against the breakwater.

Acherontia, *Pride of Cintra*, *Pandora Parvi* and two galleons Geralt didn't recognise raised their anchors and the waves bore them to the shore. This strategy was only seemingly an act of suicidal desperation. The captains had to choose between certain destruction in the bay and the risky manoeuvre of sailing into the river mouth.

The unknown galleons had no chance. Neither of them managed to align itself correctly. Both were smashed against the wharf.

Pride of Cintra and *Acherontia* lost their manoeuvrability too. They lurched into each other and became entangled, the waves tossing them onto the wharf and rending them to shreds. The water carried away the wreckage.

Pandora Parvi danced and leaped on the waves like a dolphin. But she held her course, borne straight into the mouth of the Adalatte which was roiling like a cauldron. Geralt heard the cries of people cheering the captain on.

Coral yelled, pointing.

A seventh wave was coming.

Geralt had estimated the previous ones – which were level with the ships' masts – at about five or six fathoms or thirty to forty feet. The wave which was approaching now, obliterating the sky, was twice as high.

The people fleeing Palmyra, crowded by the guardhouse, began to scream. The gale knocked them down, hurled them to the ground and pinned them to the stockade.

The wave crashed down on Palmyra. And simply pulverised it, washed it off the face of the earth. The water reached the palisade in an instant, engulfing the people crowded there. The mass of timber being carried by the sea dropped onto the palisade, breaking the piles. The guardhouse collapsed and floated away.

The relentless watery battering ram struck the precipice. The hill shook so hard that Dandelion and Mozaïk fell down and Geralt only kept his balance with great difficulty.

'We must fly!' screamed Coral, hanging on to the balustrade. 'Geralt! Let's get out of here! More waves are coming!'

A wave crashed over them, swamping them. The people on the terrace who hadn't fled earlier did now. They fled screaming, higher, ever higher, up the hill, towards the royal palace. A few stayed. Geralt recognised Ravenga and Antea Derris among them.

People screamed and pointed. To their left the waves were washing away the cliff beneath the villa district. The first villa crumpled like a house of cards and slid down the slope, straight into the maelstrom. Then a second, a third and a fourth.

'The city is disintegrating!' wailed Dandelion. 'It's falling apart!'

Lytta Neyd raised her arms. Chanted a spell. And vanished.

Mozaïk clutched Geralt's arm. Dandelion yelled.

The water was right beneath them, below the terrace. And there were people in the water. Others were lowering poles and boathooks to them, ropes were being thrown and they were being pulled out. Not far from them, a powerfully built man dived into the whirlpool and swam to rescue a drowning woman.

Mozaïk screamed.

She saw a fragment from the roof of a cottage floating past. With some children clinging to it. Three children. Geralt unslung his sword from his back.

'Hold it, Dandelion!'

Geralt threw off his jacket. And dived into the water.

It wasn't normal swimming and his normal swimming skills

were fit for nothing. The waves tossed him upwards, downwards and sideways, pummelled him with the beams, planks and furniture spinning in the whirlpool. The mass of timber bearing down on him threatened to crush him to a pulp. When he finally swam over and caught hold of the roof he was already severely battered. The roof bucked and whirled in the waves like a spinning top. The children were bawling at various pitches.

Three, he thought. *No way will I manage to carry all three of them.*

He felt a shoulder alongside his.

'Two!' Antea Derris spat water and seized one of the children. 'Take two!'

It wasn't so simple. He peeled a little boy off and pinned him under one arm. A little girl was clinging to the rafters in such desperation that it took Geralt a long time to pry open her fingers. The waves, swamping and covering them, helped. The half-drowned little girl released the roof timbers and Geralt shoved her beneath his other arm. And then all three of them began to go under. The children gurgled and struggled. Geralt fought.

He had no idea how, but he swam up to the surface. A wave tossed him against the wall of the terrace, knocking the wind out of him. He didn't release the children. The people above shouted, tried to help, reaching down with anything they could seize hold of. But to no avail. The whirlpool snatched them and carried them away. The Witcher slammed into somebody. It was Antea Derris with the little girl in her arms. She was putting up a fight, but he saw she was exhausted. She was struggling to hold her head and that of the child above water.

A splash alongside and faltering breathing. It was Mozaïk. She tore one of the children from Geralt's arms and swam off. Geralt saw her being struck by a beam carried by the waves. She screamed but kept hold of the child.

The waves flung them against the wall of the terrace again. This time the people above were prepared, they'd even brought a ladder and were hanging from it with outstretched arms. They lifted up the children. The Witcher saw Dandelion grab Mozaïk and drag her onto the terrace.

Antea Derris looked at him. She had beautiful eyes. She smiled.

They were struck by the mass of timber – heavy stakes from the palisade – being carried on the wave.

One of them jabbed Antea Derris and crushed her against the terrace. She coughed up blood. A lot of blood. Then her head lolled on her chest and she vanished beneath the waves.

Geralt was hit by two stakes, one in the shoulder, the other in the hip. The impact paralysed him, totally numbing him in an instant. He choked on water and began to sink.

Someone seized him in a painful, iron grip and snatched him upwards, towards the surface and the light. He groped around and felt a powerful bicep as hard as rock. The strongman was pumping with his legs, forging through the water like a triton, shoving away the wood floating around and the drowned corpses spinning in the turmoil. Geralt came up right by the terrace. Shouts and cheers from above. Arms reaching out.

A moment later the Witcher was lying in a pool of water, coughing, spluttering and retching onto the terrace. Dandelion knelt beside him, as white as a sheet. Mozaïk was on his other side. Also pale-faced. But with trembling hands. Geralt sat up with difficulty.

‘Antea?’

Dandelion shook his head and looked away. Mozaïk lowered her head onto her lap. He saw the sobbing shaking her shoulders.

His rescuer was sitting beside him. The strongman. Or to be more precise, strongwoman. The untidy bristles on the shaven head. The belly like pork shoulder covered in netting. The shoulders like a wrestler’s. The calves like a discus thrower’s.

‘I owe you my life.’

‘Don’t be soft . . .’ said the commandant of the guardhouse, waving a dismissive arm. ‘Think nothing of it. And anyway, you’re an arse, and me and the girls are pissed off with you about that rumpus. So you’d better steer clear of us, or you’ll get a good hiding. Is that clear?’

‘Indeed.’

‘But I have to admit,’ said the commandant, hawking noisily and shaking water from an ear. ‘You’re a courageous arse. A courageous arse, Geralt of Rivia.’

‘What about you?’ What’s your name?’

‘Violetta,’ said the commandant and suddenly turned gloomy. ‘What about her? That one . . .’

‘Antea Derris.’

‘Antea Derris,’ she repeated, grimacing. ‘Pity.’

‘Pity.’

More people came to the terrace, it became crowded. The danger had passed, the sky had brightened up, the gale had stopped blowing, the pennants were hanging limp. The sea was calm, the water had receded. Leaving devastation and disarray. And corpses which the crabs were already scuttling over.

Geralt stood up with difficulty. Every movement and every breath returned as a throbbing pain in his side. His knee was aching intensely. Both his shirtsleeves had been torn off, he couldn’t recall exactly when he had lost them. The skin on his left elbow, right shoulder and probably his shoulder blade had been rubbed raw. He was bleeding from numerous shallow cuts. All in all, nothing serious, nothing he needed to worry about.

The sun had broken through the clouds, the sunlight glistened on the calming sea. The roof of the lighthouse at the end of the headland was sparkling. It was built of white and red brick, a relic of elven times. A relic that had endured many storms like that. And would endure many more, it would seem.

The schooner *Pandora Parvi*, having overcome the river mouth, which was now calm although still densely encumbered with flotsam, sailed out to anchor under full canvas as though taking part in a regatta. The crowd cheered.

Geralt helped Mozaïk stand up. Not many of her clothes remained on her, either. Dandelion gave her his cloak to cover herself up. And cleared his throat meaningfully.

Lytta Neyd was standing in front of them. With her medical bag on her shoulder.

‘I came back,’ she said, looking at the Witcher.

‘No, you didn’t,’ he retorted. ‘You left.’

She looked at him. With cold, strange eyes. And soon after fixed her gaze on something very distant, located very far over the Witcher’s right shoulder.

‘So, you want to play it like that,’ she stated coolly. ‘And leave

a memory like that. Well, it's your will, your choice. Although you might have chosen a little less lofty style. Farewell then. I'm going to offer help to the wounded and the needy. You clearly don't need my help. Or me. Mozaïk!'

Mozaïk shook her head. And linked her arm through Geralt's. Coral snorted.

'It's like that, is it? That's what you want? Like that? Well, it's your will. Your choice. Farewell.'

She turned and walked away.

*

Febus Ravenga appeared in the crowd that had begun to gather on the terrace. He must have taken part in the rescue, because his wet clothes were hanging on him in shreds. An attentive factotum approached and handed him his hat. Or rather what remained of it.

'What now?' called a voice in the crowd. 'What now, councillor?'

'What now? What shall we do?'

Ravenga looked at them. For a long time. Then straightened up, wrung out his hat and put it on.

'Bury the dead,' he said. 'Take care of the living. And start rebuilding.'

*

The bell in the belfry tolled. As though it wanted to assert that it had survived. That although much had changed, certain things were unchanging.

'Let's go,' said Geralt, pulling wet seaweed from his collar. 'Dandelion? Where's my sword?'

Dandelion choked, pointing at an empty place at the foot of a wall.

'A moment ago . . . They were here a moment ago! Your sword and your jacket. They've been stolen! The fucking bastards! They've

been stolen! Hey, you there! There was a sword here! Give it back! Come on! Oh, you whoresons! Damn you!'

The Witcher suddenly felt weak. Mozaïk held him up. *I must be in poor shape*, he thought. *I must be in poor shape if a girl has to hold me up.*

'I've had enough of this town,' he said. 'Enough of everything this town is. And represents. Let's get out of here. As soon as possible. And as far away as possible.'

INTERLUDE

Twelve days later.

The fountain splashed very softly, the basin smelled of wet stone. There was a scent of flowers and of the ivy growing up the walls of the patio. And it smelled of the apples in a dish on the marble table top. There were beads of condensation on two goblets of chilled wine.

Two women were seated at the table. Two sorceresses. If, as luck would have it, someone with artistic sensibilities had been in the vicinity, full of painterly imagination and capable of lyrical allegories, that person wouldn't have had any problem portraying the two of them. The flame-haired Lytta Neyd in a vermillion and green gown was like a sunset in September. Yennefer of Vengerberg, black-haired, dressed in a composition of black and white, evoked a December morning.

'Most of the neighbouring villas are lying in rubble at the foot of the cliff,' Yennefer said, breaking the silence. 'But yours is untouched. Not even a single roof tile was lost. You're a lucky woman, Coral. I advise you to consider buying a ticket in the lottery.'

'The priests wouldn't call that luck.' Lytta Neyd smiled. 'They'd say it was protection by the divinities and heavenly forces. The divinities safeguard the just and protect the virtuous. They reward goodness and righteousness.'

'Indeed. Reward. If they want to and happen to be nearby. Your good health, my friend.'

'And yours, my friend. Mozaïk! Fill up Madam Yennefer's goblet. It's empty.

'Regarding the villa, though.' Lytta followed Mozaïk with her eyes. 'It's for sale. I'm selling it, because . . . Because I have to move out. The weather in Kerack has stopped suiting me.'

Yennefer raised an eyebrow. Lytta didn't keep her waiting.

'King Viraxas has begun his reign with truly royal edicts,' she said in a barely audible sneer. '*Primo*, his coronation day has been

declared a state holiday in the Kingdom of Kerack. *Secundo*, an amnesty is being proclaimed . . . for criminals. Political prisoners remain in prison without the right to be visited or conducting correspondence. *Tertio*, customs and port fees are being increased by a hundred per cent. *Quarto*, all non-humans and residents that harm the state's economy and take jobs away from pure-blooded people are to leave Kerack within two weeks. *Quinto*, in Kerack it is forbidden to work any magic without the king's permission and mages are not allowed to possess land or property. Sorcerers living in Kerack must dispose of their property and obtain a licence. Or leave the kingdom.'

'A marvellous demonstration of gratitude.' Yennefer snorted. 'And rumour has it that it was the sorcerers who got Viraxas crowned. That they organised and financed his return. And helped him to seize power.'

'Rumour knows what it's talking about. Viraxas will be paying the Chapter generously, and in order to do that he's raising duty and hopes to confiscate non-humans' property. The edict affects me personally; no other sorcerer has a house in Kerack. It's Ildiko Breckl's revenge. And retribution for the medical help I gave to the local women, which Viraxas' counsellors consider immoral. The Chapter could put pressure on my behalf, but won't. They're not satisfied with the commercial privileges, shares in the shipyard and maritime companies acquired from Viraxas. They're negotiating further ones and have no intention of weakening their position. Thus – now regarded as *persona non grata* – I shall have to emigrate to search for pastures new.'

'Which I nonetheless imagine you will do without undue regret. I'd have thought that under the present government, Kerack wouldn't have a great chance in a competition for the most pleasant place under the sun. You'll sell this villa and buy another. In the mountains in Lyria, for instance. The Lyrian mountains are fashionable now. Plenty of sorcerers have moved there, because it's pretty and the taxes are reasonable.'

'I don't like mountains. I prefer the sea. Never fear, I shall find a safe haven without much difficulty, considering my specialty. Women are everywhere and they all need me. Drink, Yennefer. Your good health.'

'You urge me to drink, but barely moisten your lips yourself. Are you perhaps ill? You don't look very well.'

Lytta sighed theatrically.

‘The last few days have been hard. The palace coup, that dreadful storm, ah . . . On top of that, morning sickness . . . I know, it’ll pass after the first trimester. But that’s not for another two months . . .’

It was possible to discern the buzzing of a wasp circling above an apple in the silence that fell.

‘Ha, ha,’ said Coral, breaking the silence. ‘I was joking. Pity you can’t see your face. I took you in! Ha, ha.’

Yennefer looked upwards at the ivy-covered top of the wall. For a long time.

‘I took you in,’ Lytta continued. ‘And I’ll bet your imagination was working hard at once. Admit it, you immediately linked my delicate condition with . . . Don’t make faces, don’t make faces. The news must have reached you, for rumours spread like ripples on the water. But relax, there isn’t a scrap of truth in them. My chances of getting pregnant are no greater than yours, nothing has changed in that regard. And all that linked me to your Witcher was business. Professional matters. Nothing else.’

‘Ah.’

‘You know what the common folk are like, they love gossip. They see a woman with a man and at once turn it into an affair. The Witcher, I admit, visited me quite often. And indeed, we were seen together in town. But, I repeat, it only concerned business.’

Yennefer put down her goblet, rested her elbows on the table and put her fingertips together, creating a steeple. And looked the red-haired sorceress in the eyes.

‘*Primo*,’ Lytta coughed slightly, but didn’t look down, ‘I’ve never done anything like that to a close friend. *Secundo*, your Witcher wasn’t interested in me at all.’

‘Wasn’t he?’ Yennefer raised her eyebrows. ‘Indeed? How can that be explained?’

‘Perhaps mature women have stopped interesting him? Regardless of their current looks. Perhaps he prefers the genuinely young? Mozaïk! Come here please. Just look, Yennefer. Youth in bloom. And innocence. Until recently.’

‘She?’ said Yennefer, irritated. ‘He with her? With your pupil?’

‘Well, Mozaïk. Come closer. Tell us about your amorous adventure. We’re curious to listen. We love affairs. Stories about unhappy love. The unhappier, the better.’

‘Madame Lytta . . .’ The girl, rather than blushing, paled like a corpse. ‘Please . . . You’ve already punished me for it, after all . . . How many times can I be punished for the same offence. Don’t make me—’

‘Tell us!’

‘Let her be, Coral,’ said Yennefer, waving a hand. ‘Don’t torment her. Furthermore, I’m not at all curious.’

‘I surely don’t believe that,’ said Lytta Neyd, smiling spitefully. ‘But very well, I’ll forgive the girl, indeed I’ve already punished her, forgiven her and allowed her to continue her studies. And her mumbled confessions have stopped entertaining me. To summarise: she became infatuated with the Witcher and ran away with him. And he – once he’d become bored with her – simply abandoned her. She woke up alone one morning. All he left were cooled sheets and not a single trace. He left because he had to. He vanished into thin air. Gone with the wind.’

Although it seemed impossible, Mozaïk paled even more. Her hands trembled.

‘He left some flowers,’ said Yennefer softly. ‘A little nosegay of flowers. Right?’

Mozaïk raised her head. But didn’t answer.

‘Flowers and a letter,’ repeated Yennefer.

Mozaïk said nothing. But the colour slowly began to return to her cheeks.

‘A letter,’ said Lytta Neyd, looking closely at the girl. ‘You didn’t tell me about a letter. You didn’t mention one.’

Mozaïk pursed her lips.

‘So that’s why,’ Lytta finished, apparently calmly. ‘So that’s why you returned, although you could expect a stiff punishment, much stiffer than you consequently received. He ordered you to return. Were it not for that you wouldn’t have.’

Mozaïk didn’t reply. Yennefer also said nothing and twisted a lock of black hair around a finger. She suddenly raised her head and looked the girl in the eyes. And smiled.

‘He ordered you to return to me,’ said Lytta Neyd. ‘He ordered you to return, although he could imagine what might be awaiting you. I must admit I’d have never expected that of him.’

The fountain splashed, the basin smelled of wet stone. There was a scent of flowers and ivy.

‘I find it astonishing,’ Lytta repeated. ‘I’d never have expected it of him.’

‘Because you didn’t know him, Coral,’ Yennefer replied calmly. ‘You didn’t know him at all.’

CHAPTER TWENTY

The stable boy had been given half a crown the evening before and the horses were waiting saddled. Dandelion yawned and scratched the back of his neck.

'Ye gods, Geralt . . . Do we really have to start this early? I mean it's still dark . . .'

'It isn't dark. It's just right. The sun will rise in an hour at the latest.'

'Not for another hour,' said Dandelion, clambering onto the saddle of his gelding. 'So I could have slept another one . . .'

Geralt leaped into the saddle and after a moment's thought handed the stable boy another half-crown.

'It's August,' he said. 'There are some fourteen hours between sunrise to sunset. I'd like to ride as far as possible in that time.'

Dandelion yawned. And only then seemed to see the unsaddled dapple-grey mare standing in the next stall. The mare shook its head as though wanting to attract their attention.

'Just a minute,' the poet wondered. 'And her? Mozaïk?'

'She's not riding any further with us. We're parting.'

'What? I don't understand . . . Would you be so kind as to explain . . .?'

'No I wouldn't. Not now. Let's ride, Dandelion.'

'Do you really know what you're doing? Are you fully aware?'

'No. Not fully. Not another word, I don't want to talk about it. Let's go.'

Dandelion sighed. And spurred on the gelding. He looked back. And sighed again. He was a poet so he could sigh as much as he liked.

The Secret and Whisper inn looked quite pretty against the daybreak, in the misty glow of the dawn. For all the world like a fairy castle, a sylvan temple of secret love drowning in hollyhocks, cloaked in bindweed and ivy. The poet fell into a reverie.

He sighed, yawned, hawked, spat, wrapped himself in his

cloak and spurred on his horse. Owing to those few moments of reflection he fell behind. Geralt was barely visible in the fog.

The Witcher rode hard. And didn't look back.

*

'Here's the wine,' said the innkeeper, putting an earthenware jug on the table. 'Apple wine from Rivia, as requested. My wife asked me to ask you how you're finding the pork.'

'We're finding it among the kasha,' replied Dandelion. 'From time to time. Not as often as we'd like to.'

The tavern they had reached at the end of the day was, as the colourful sign announced, The Wild Boar and Stag. But the sign was the only game offered by the establishment; you wouldn't find it on the menu. The local speciality was kasha with pieces of fatty pork in thick onion sauce. Largely on principle, Dandelion turned his nose up a little at the – in his opinion – excessively plebeian vittals. Geralt didn't complain. You couldn't find much fault with the pork, the sauce was tolerable and the kasha *al dente* – in few roadside inns did the cooks prepare the latter well. They might have done worse, particularly since the choice was limited. Geralt insisted that during the day they cover the greatest distance possible and he hadn't wanted to stop in the inns they had previously passed.

Not only for them, it turned out, did The Wild Boar and Stag turn out to be the end of the last stage of the daily trek. One of the benches against the wall was occupied by travelling merchants. Modern-thinking merchants, who – unlike traditional ones – didn't disdain their servants and didn't consider it dishonourable to sit down to meals with them. The modern thinking and tolerance had their limits, naturally; the merchants occupied one end of the table and the servants the other, so the demarcation line was easy to observe. As it was among the dishes. The servants were eating pork and kasha – the speciality of the local cuisine – and were drinking watery ale. The gentlemen merchants had each received a roast chicken and several flagons of wine.

At the opposite table, beneath a stuffed wild boar's head, dined a couple: a fair-haired girl and an older man. The girl was dressed richly, very solemnly, not like a girl at all. The man looked like a clerk and by no means a high-ranking one. The couple were

dining together, having quite an animated conversation, but it was a recent and fairly accidental acquaintance, which could be concluded unequivocally from the behaviour of the official, who was importunately dancing attendance on the girl in the clear hope of something more, which the girl received with courteous, although clearly ironic reserve.

Four priestesses occupied one of the shorter benches. They were wandering healers, which could easily be seen by the grey gowns and tight hoods covering their hair. The meal they were consuming was – Geralt noticed – more than modest, something like pearl barley without even meat dripping. Priestesses never demanded payment for healing, they treated everyone for nothing and custom dictated that in return for that they be given board and lodging on request. The innkeeper at The Wild Boar and Stag was evidently familiar with the custom, but was clearly rather observing the letter than the spirit of it.

Three local men were lounging on the next bench beneath a stag's antlers, busy with a bottle of rye vodka, clearly not their first. Since they had tolerably satisfied their evening's requirements, they were looking around for entertainment. They found it swiftly, of course. The priestesses were out of luck. Although they were probably accustomed to such things.

There was a single customer at the table in the corner. Shrouded, like the table, in shadow. The customer, Geralt noticed, was neither eating nor drinking. He sat motionless, leaning back against the wall.

The three locals weren't letting up, their taunts and jests directed at the priestesses becoming more and more vulgar and obscene. The priestesses kept stoically calm and didn't pay any attention at all. The fury of the locals was increasing in inverse relation to the level of the rye vodka in the bottle. Geralt began to work more quickly with his spoon. He had decided to give the boozers a hiding and didn't want his kasha to go cold because of it.

'The Witcher Geralt of Rivia.'

A flame suddenly flared up in the gloomy corner.

The lone man sitting at the table raised a hand. Flickering tongues of flame were shooting from his fingers. The man brought his hand closer to a candlestick on the table and lit all three candles one after the other. He let them illuminate him well.

His hair was as grey as ash with snow-white streaks at the temples. A deathly pale face. A hooked nose. And yellow-green eyes with vertical pupils.

The silver medallion around his neck that he had pulled out from his shirt flashed in the candlelight.

The head of a cat baring its fangs.

‘The Witcher Geralt of Rivia,’ repeated the man in the silence that had fallen in the inn. ‘Travelling to Vizima, I presume? For the reward promised by King Foltest? Of two thousand orens? Do I guess right?’

Geralt did not reply. He didn’t even twitch.

‘I won’t ask if you know who I am. Because you probably do.’

‘Few of you remain,’ replied Geralt calmly. ‘Which makes things easier. You’re Brehen. Also known as the Cat of Iello.’

‘Well, I prithee,’ snorted the man with the feline medallion. ‘The famous White Wolf deigns to know my moniker. A veritable honour. Am I also to consider it an honour that you mean to steal the reward from me? Ought I to give you priority, bow to you and apologise? As in a wolf pack, step back from the quarry and wait, wagging my tail until the pack leader has eaten his fill? Until he graciously condescends to leave some scraps?’

Geralt said nothing.

‘I won’t give you the best,’ continued Brehen, known as the Cat of Iello. ‘And I won’t share. You won’t go to Vizima, White Wolf. You won’t snatch the reward from me. Rumour has it that Vesemir has passed sentence on me. You have the opportunity to carry it out. Let’s leave the inn. Out into the yard.’

‘I won’t fight you.’

The man with the cat medallion leaped up from behind the table with a movement so fast it was blurred. A sword snatched up from the table flashed. The man caught one of the priestesses by the hood, dragged her from the bench, threw her down on her knees and put the blade to her throat.

‘You *will* fight with me,’ he said coldly, looking at Geralt. ‘You’ll go out into the courtyard before I count to three. Otherwise the priestess’s blood will bespatter the walls, ceiling and furniture. And then I’ll slit the others’ throats. One after the other. Nobody is to move! Not an inch!’

Silence fell in the inn, a dead silence, an absolute silence. Everybody stopped in their tracks. And stared open-mouthed.

'I won't fight you,' Geralt repeated calmly. 'But if you harm that woman you will die.'

'One of us will die, that's certain. Outside in the yard. But it isn't going to be me. Your famous swords have been stolen, rumour has it. And you've neglected to equip yourself with new ones, I see. Great conceit indeed is needed to go and steal somebody's bounty, not having armed oneself first. Or perhaps the famous White Wolf is so adept he doesn't need steel?'

A chair scraped as it was moved. The fair-haired girl stood up. She picked up a long package from under the table. She placed it in front of Geralt and returned to her place, sitting down beside the clerk.

He knew what it was. Before he had even unfastened the strap or unwrapped the felt.

A sword of siderite steel, total length forty and one half inches, the blade twenty-seven and one quarter inches long. Weight: thirty-seven ounces. The hilt and cross guard simple, but elegant.

The second sword, of a similar length and weight: silver. Partially, of course, for pure silver is too soft to take a good edge. Magical glyphs on the cross guard, runic signs along the entire length of the blade.

Pyral Pratt's expert had been unable to decipher them, demonstrating his poor expertise in so doing. The ancient runes formed an inscription. *Dubhenn haern am glândeal, morc'h am fhean aiesin. My gleam penetrates the darkness, my brightness disperses the gloom.*

Geralt stood up. And drew the steel sword. With a slow and measured movement. He didn't look at Brehen. But at the blade.

'Release the woman,' he said calmly. 'At once. Otherwise you'll perish.'

Brehen's hand twitched and a trickle of blood ran down the priestess's neck. The priestess didn't even groan.

'I'm in need,' hissed the Cat of Iello. 'That bounty must be mine!'

'Release the woman, I said. Otherwise I'll kill you. Not in the yard, but here, on the spot.'

Brehen hunched forward. He was breathing heavily. His eyes shone malevolently and his mouth was hideously contorted. His knuckles – tightened on the hilt – were white. He suddenly released the priestess and shoved her away. The people in the inn shuddered, as though awoken from a nightmare. There were gasps and sighs.

'Winter is coming,' Brehen said with effort. 'And I, unlike some, have nowhere to lodge. Warm, cosy Kaer Morhen is not for me!'

'No,' stated Geralt. 'It is not. And well you know the reason.'

'Kaer Morhen's only for you, the good, righteous and just, is it? Fucking hypocrites. You're just as much murderers as we are, nothing distinguishes you from us!'

'Get out,' said Geralt. 'Leave this place and get on your way.'

Brehen sheathed his sword. He straightened up. As he walked through the chamber his eyes changed. His pupils filled his entire irises.

'It's a lie to say that Vesemir passed sentence on you,' said Geralt as Brehen passed him. 'Witchers don't fight with witchers, they don't cross swords. But if what happened in Iello occurs again, if I hear word of anything like that . . . Then I'll make an exception. I'll find you and kill you. Treat the warning seriously.'

A dull silence reigned in the inn chamber for a good few moments after Brehen had closed the door behind him. Dandelion's sigh of relief seemed quite loud in the silence. Soon after, people began moving again. The local drunks stole out stealthily, not even finishing off the vodka. The merchants remained, although they fell silent and went pale, but they ordered their servants to leave the table, clearly with the task of urgently securing the wagons and the horses, now at risk with such shady company nearby. The priestesses bandaged the cut neck of their companion, thanked Geralt with silent bows and headed off to bed, probably to the barn, since it was doubtful that the innkeeper had offered them beds in a sleeping chamber.

Geralt bowed and gestured over to his table the fair-haired young woman thanks to whom he had recovered his swords. She took advantage of the invitation most readily, abandoning her erstwhile companion, the clerk, quite without regret, leaving him with a sour expression.

‘I am Tiziana Frevi,’ she introduced herself, shaking Geralt’s hand as a man would. ‘Pleased to meet you.’

‘The pleasure’s all mine.’

‘It was a bit hairy, wasn’t it? Evenings in roadside inns can be boring, today it was interesting. At a certain moment, I even began to be afraid. But, it seems to me, wasn’t it just a male competition? A testosterone-fuelled duel? Or mutual comparison of whose is longer? There wasn’t really a threat?’

‘No, there wasn’t,’ he lied. ‘Mainly thanks to the swords I recovered because of you. Thank you for them. But I’m racking my brains trying to figure out how they ended up in your possession.’

‘It was meant to remain a secret,’ she explained freely. ‘I was charged with handing over the swords noiselessly and secretly and then vanishing. But circumstances suddenly changed. I had to give you the swords openly, with upraised visor, so to speak, because the situation demanded it. It would be impolite to decline any explanations now. For which reason, I shall not decline to explain, assuming the responsibility for betraying the secret. I received the swords from Yennefer of Vengerberg. It occurred two weeks ago in Novigrad. I’m a dwimveandra. I met Yennefer by accident, at a master sorceress’s where I was just finishing an apprenticeship. When she learned that I was heading south and my master could vouch for me, Madam Yennefer commissioned me. And gave me a letter of recommendation to a sorceress acquaintance of hers I was planning to do an apprenticeship with.’

‘How . . .’ said Geralt, swallowing. ‘How is she? Yennefer? In good health?’

‘Excellent, I think,’ said Tiziana Frevi, peering at him from under her eyelashes. ‘She’s doing splendidly, she looks enviably well. And to be frank I do envy her.’

Geralt stood up. He went over to the innkeeper, who had almost fainted in fear.

‘You shouldn’t have . . .’ said Tiziana modestly, when a moment later the innkeeper placed a flagon of Est Est, the most expensive white wine from Toussaint, in front of them. And several additional candles stuck into the necks of old bottles.

‘You’re going to too much trouble, really,’ she added, when a moment later some dishes arrived on the table, one with slices of raw, dried ham, another with smoked trout, and a third with a

selection of cheeses. ‘You’re spending too much, Witcher.’

‘It’s a special occasion. And the company is splendid.’

She thanked him with a nod. And a smile. A pretty smile.

On graduating from magic school every sorceress faced a choice. She could stay on at the school as an assistant to the master-preceptresses. She could ask one of the independent sorceress-masters to take her on as a permanent apprentice. Or she could choose the way of the dwimveandra.

The system had been borrowed from the guilds. In many of them an apprentice who had qualified as a journeyman would embark on a trek, during which he would take on casual work in various workshops with various masters, here and there, and finally return after several years to apply to take the final exam and be promoted to master. But there were differences. Forced to travel, journeymen who couldn’t find work were often stared in the face by hunger, and the journey became aimless wandering. One became a dwimveandra through one’s own will and desire, and the Chapter of sorcerers created for the journeymen witches a special endowment fund, which was quite sizeable, from what Geralt heard.

‘That horrifying character was wearing a medallion similar to yours,’ the poet said, joining the conversation. ‘He was one of the Cats, wasn’t he?’

‘He was. I don’t want to talk about it, Dandelion.’

‘The notorious Cats,’ said the poet, addressing the sorceress. ‘Witchers – but failures. Unsuccessful mutations. Madmen, psychopaths and sadists. They nicknamed themselves “Cats”, because they really are like cats: aggressive, cruel, unpredictable and impulsive. And Geralt, as usual, is making light of it in order not to worry us. Because there *was* a threat and a significant one. It’s a miracle it went off without a fight, blood or corpses. There would have been a massacre, like there was in Iello four years ago. I was expecting at any moment—’

‘Geralt asked you not to talk about it,’ interrupted Tiziana Frevi, politely but firmly. ‘Let’s respect that.’

Geralt looked at her affectionately. She seemed pleasant to him. And pretty. Very pretty, even.

Sorceresses, he knew, improved their looks, since the prestige of their profession demanded that they should arouse admiration.

But the beautification was never perfect, something always remained. Tiziana Frevi was no exception. Her forehead, just beneath the hairline, was marked by several barely perceptible scars from the chicken pox that she had probably experienced during childhood before she became immune. The shape of her pretty mouth was slightly marred by a wavy scar above her upper lip. Geralt, yet again, felt anger, anger at his eyesight, his eyes, forcing him to notice such insignificant details, which after all were nothing in view of the fact that Tiziana was sitting at a table with him, drinking Est Est, eating smoked trout and smiling at him. The Witcher had rarely seen or known women whose beauty could be considered flawless, but the chances that one of them might smile at him could be calculated at precisely nil.

'He talked about some reward . . .' said Dandelion, who, when he got onto a subject was difficult to be dislodged from it. 'Do any of you know what it was about? Geralt?'

'I have no idea.'

'But I do,' boasted Tiziana Frevi. 'And I'm astonished you haven't heard, because it was a well-known case. As Foltest, the King of Temeria, offered a reward. For removing a spell from his daughter who had been enchanted. She had been pricked by a spindle and consigned to eternal sleep. The poor thing, so the rumour goes, is lying in a coffin in a castle overrun with hawthorn. According to another rumour the coffin is made of glass and was placed at the top of a glass mountain. According to yet another the princess was turned into a swan. According to still one more into an awful monster, a striga. As a result of a curse, because the princess was the fruit of an incestuous union. Apparently, the rumours are being invented and spread by Vizimir, the King of Redania, who has territorial disputes with Foltest, is seriously at variance with him and will do anything to annoy him.'

'It indeed sounds like fabrication,' judged Geralt. 'Based on a fairy tale or fable. An accursed and transformed princess, the curse as a punishment for incest, a reward for removing a spell. Hackneyed and banal. The person who came up with it didn't make much of an effort.'

'The issue,' the dwimveandra added, 'has a clear political subtext, which is why the Chapter forbade sorcerers from getting involved in it.'

'Whether it's a fairy tale or not, that damned Cat believed it,'

pronounced Dandelion. ‘He was clearly hurrying to that enchanted princess in Vizima to remove the spell and claim the reward promised by King Foltest. He had acquired the suspicion that Geralt was also heading there and wanted to beat him to it.’

‘He was mistaken,’ Geralt responded dryly. ‘I’m not going to Vizima. I don’t intend to stick my fingers in that political cauldron. It’s perfect work for somebody like Brehen who’s in need, as he said himself. I’m not in need. I’ve recovered my swords, so I don’t have to pay out for new ones. I have funds to support myself. Thanks to the sorcerers from Rissberg . . .’

‘The Witcher Geralt of Rivia?’

‘Indeed,’ said Geralt, eyeing up and down the clerk, who was standing alongside looking sulky. ‘Who wants to know?’

‘That is inconsequential,’ said the clerk, putting on airs and pouting, trying hard to make himself look important. ‘What’s consequential is the summons. Which I hereby give you. In front of witnesses. In accordance with the law.’

The clerk handed the Witcher a roll of paper. And then sat down, not failing to cast Tiziana Frevi a contemptuous glance.

Geralt broke the seal and unfurled the roll.

‘“*Datum ex Castello Rissberg, die 20 mens. Jul. anno 1245 post Resurrectionem*,’ he read. ‘To the Magistrates’ Court in Gors Velen. Plaintiff: The Rissberg Complex civil partnership. Defendant: Geralt of Rivia, witcher. Claim: the return of the sum of one thousand Novigradian crowns. We hereby petition, *primo*: a demand to the defendant Geralt of Rivia for the return of the sum of one thousand Novigradian crowns with due interest. *Secundo*, a demand to the defendant for the court costs to the plaintiff according to prescribed norms. *Tertio*: to lend the verdict the status of immediately enforceability. Grounds: the defendant swindled from the Rissberg Complex civil partnership the sum of one thousand Novigradian crowns. Proof: copies of bank orders. The sum constituted an advance fee for a service that the defendant never executed and in ill will never intended to execute . . . Witnesses: Biruta Anna Marquette Icarti, Axel Miguel Esparza, Igo Tarvix Sandoval . . .” The bastards.’

‘I returned your swords to you,’ said Tiziana, lowering her gaze. ‘And at the same time saddled you with problems. That beadle tricked me. He overheard me this morning asking for you at the

ferry port. And then immediately stuck to me like a leech. Now I know why. That summons is all my fault.'

'You'll be needing a lawyer,' stated Dandelion gloomily. 'But I don't recommend the one from Kerack. She only performs well outside the courtroom.'

'I can skip the lawyer. Did you notice the date of the claim? I'll wager the case has already been heard and the verdict read out *in absentia*. And that they've seized my account.'

'I am sorry,' said Tiziana. 'It's my fault. Forgive me.'

'There's nothing to forgive, you aren't to blame for anything. And Rissberg and the courts can go to hell. Master innkeeper! Another flagon of Est Est, if you would.'

*

They were soon the only guests left in the chamber. The innkeeper soon let them know – with an ostentatious yawn – that it was time to finish. Tiziana was first to go to her room and Dandelion followed suit to his soon after.

Geralt didn't go to the bedchamber he was sharing with the poet. Instead of that he knocked very softly at Tiziana Frevi's door. It opened at once.

'I've been waiting,' she murmured, pulling him inside. 'I knew you'd come. And if you hadn't I would have gone looking for you.'

*

She must have put him to sleep magically, otherwise she would certainly have woken him as she was leaving. And she must have left before dawn, while it was still dark. Her scent lingered after her. The delicate perfume of irises and bergamot. And something else. Roses?

A flower lay on the table by his swords. A rose. One of the white roses from the flowerpot standing outside the inn.

*

No one remembered what the place was, who had built it and whom and what it served. The ruins of an ancient edifice, once a large and probably prosperous complex, had survived in the valley beyond the inn. Practically nothing remained of the buildings apart from what was left of the foundations, some overgrown hollows and some stone blocks dotted about. The rest had been demolished and plundered. Building materials were precious, nothing went to waste.

They walked in beneath the ruins of a shattered portal, once an impressive arch, now resembling a gibbet; the impression of which was enhanced by ivy hanging like a severed noose. They walked along a path between the trees. Dead, crippled and misshapen trees, bent over as though by the weight of a curse hanging over the place. The path led towards a garden. Or rather towards something that had once been a garden. Beds of berberis, juniper shrubs, rambling roses, probably once decoratively pruned, were now a disordered and chaotic tangle of branches, prickly climbers and dried stalks. Peeping out of the tangle were the remains of statues and sculptures, mainly full-length. The remains were so vestigial that there was no way of even approximately determining who – or what – the statues had once portrayed. In any case, it wasn't especially important. The statues were the past. They hadn't survived and so they had stopped mattering. All that remained was a ruin and one – it seemed – that would survive a long time, since ruins are eternal.

A ruin. A monument to a devastated world.

'Dandelion.'

'Yes?'

'Lately everything that could have gone wrong has gone wrong. And it seems to me that I've fucked everything up. Whatever I've touched lately I've botched.'

'Do you think so?'

'Yes, I do.'

'It must be so, then. Don't expect a comment. I'm tired of commenting. And now go and feel sorry for yourself in silence, if you would. I'm composing at the moment and your laments are

distracting me.'

Dandelion sat down on a fallen column, pushed his bonnet back on his head, crossed his legs and adjusted the pegs on the lute.

A flickering candle, the fire went out,

A cold wind blew perceptibly . . .

A wind had indeed blown up, suddenly and violently. And Dandelion stopped playing. And sighed loudly.

The Witcher turned around.

She was standing at the entrance to the path, between the cracked plinth of an unrecognisable statue and the tangled thicket of a dead whipple-tree. She was tall and wore a clinging dress. With a head of greyish colouring, more typical of a corsac than a silver fox. Pointed ears and an elongated face.

Geralt didn't move.

'I warned you I would come.' Rows of teeth glistened in the she-fox's mouth. 'One day. Today is that day.'

Geralt didn't move. On his back, he felt the familiar weight of his two swords, a weight he had been missing for a month. Which usually gave him peace and certainty. That day, at that moment, the weight was just a burden.

'I have come . . .' said the aguara, flashing her fangs. 'I don't know why I came myself. In order to say goodbye, perhaps. Perhaps to let her say goodbye to you.'

A slender girl in a tight dress emerged from behind the vixen. Her pale and unnaturally unmoving face was still half human. But probably now more vulpine than human. The changes were occurring quickly.

The Witcher shook his head.

'You cured her . . . You brought her back to life? No, that's impossible. So, she was alive on the ship. Alive. But pretending to be dead.'

The aguara barked loudly. He needed a moment before realising it was laughter. That the vixen was laughing.

'Once we had great powers! Illusions of magical islands, dragons dancing in the sky, visions of a mighty army approaching city walls . . . Once, long ago. Now the world has changed and our

abilities have dwindled . . . And we have grown smaller. There is more vixen in us than aguara. But still, even the smallest, even the youngest she-fox, is capable of deceiving your primitive human senses with an illusion.'

'For the first time in my life,' he said a moment later, 'I'm glad to have been tricked.'

'It's not true that you did everything wrong. And as a reward you may touch my face.'

He cleared his throat, looking at her great pointed teeth.

'Hmm . . .'

'Illusions are what you think about. What you fear. And what you dream of.'

'I beg your pardon?'

The vixen barked softly. And metamorphosed.

Dark, violet eyes, blazing in a pale, triangular face. A tornado of jet-black locks falling onto her shoulders, gleaming, reflecting light like peacock's feathers, curling and rippling with every movement. The mouth, marvellously thin and pale under her lipstick. A black velvet ribbon on her neck, on the ribbon an obsidian star, sparkling and sending thousands of reflections around . . .

Yennefer smiled. And the Witcher touched her cheek.

And then the dead dogwood bloomed.

And afterwards the wind blew and shook the bush. The world vanished behind a veil of tiny white whirling petals.

'Illusion.' He heard the aguara's voice. 'Everything is illusion.'

*

Dandelion stopped singing. But he didn't put down his lute. He was sitting on a chunk of overturned column. Looking up at the sky.

Geralt sat beside him. Weighing up various things. Arranging various things in his head. Or rather trying to. Making plans. In the main, wholly unfeasible. He promised himself various things. Seriously doubting if he was capable of keeping any of the

promises.

‘You know, you never congratulate me on my ballads,’ Dandelion suddenly spoke up. ‘I’ve composed and sung so many of them in your company. But you’ve never said: “That was nice. I’d like you to play that again.” You’ve never said that.’

‘You’re right. I haven’t. Do you want to know why?’

‘Yes?’

‘Because I’ve never wanted to.’

‘Would it be such a sacrifice?’ asked the bard, not giving up. ‘Such a hardship? To say: “Play that again, Dandelion. Play *As Time Passes”.’*

‘Play it again, Dandelion. Play “As Time Passes”.*’*

‘You said that quite without conviction.’

‘So what? You’ll play it anyway.’

‘You’d better believe it.

A flickering candle, the fire went out

A cold wind blew perceptibly

And the days pass

And time passes

In silence and imperceptibly

You’re with me endlessly and endlessly

Something joins us, but not perfectly

For the days pass

For time passes

In silence and imperceptibly

The memory of travelled paths and roads

Remain in us irrevocably

Although the days pass

Although time passes

In silence and imperceptibly

So, my love, one more time

Let’s repeat the chorus triumphantly

So do the days pass
So does time pass
In silence and imperceptibly

Geralt stood up.
‘Time to ride, Dandelion.’
‘Oh, yes? Where to?’
‘Isn’t it all the same?’
‘Yes, by and large. Let’s go.’

EPILOGUE

On the hillock, the remains of buildings shone white, fallen into ruin so long ago they were now completely overgrown. Ivy had enveloped the walls and young trees had grown through the cracked flagstones. It had once been – Nimue could not have known that – a temple, the seat of the priests of some forgotten deity. For Nimue it was just a ruin. A pile of stones. And a signpost. A sign that she was going the right way.

For just beyond the hillock and the ruins the highway forked. One path led west, over a moor. The other one, heading north, vanished into a thick, dense forest. It went deep into the black undergrowth, vanished into gloomy darkness, dissolving into it.

And that was her route. Northwards. Through the infamous Magpie Forest.

Nimue wasn't especially perturbed by the stories they had tried to frighten her with in Ivalo, since during her trek she had coped over and over with similar things. Each place had its own grim folklore, local dangers and horrors, serving to give travellers a scare. Nimue had already been threatened by drowners in lakes, bereginias in streams, wights at crossroads and ghosts in cemeteries. Every second footbridge was supposed to be a troll's lair, every second brake of crooked willows a striga's haunt. Nimue finally became accustomed to it and the commonplace horrors ceased to be fearful. But there was no way of mastering the strange anxiety that spread through her before she entered a dark forest, walked along a path between fog-bound burial mounds or a track among mist-shrouded swamps.

She also felt that anxiety now – as she stood before the dark wall of forest – creeping in tingles over the back of her neck and drying her lips.

The road is well travelled, she repeated to herself, *quite rutted by wagons, trodden down by the hooves of horses and oxen. So what if the forest looks frightful? It's no desolate backwoods, it's a busy track to Dorian, leading through the last patch of forest to escape the axes and saws. Many people ride through here, many walk through here. I'll also pass through it. I'm not afraid.*

I'm Nimue verch Wledyr ap Gwyn.

Vyrva, Guado, Sibell, Brugge, Casterfurt, Mortara, Ivalo, Dorian, Anchor, Gors Velen.

She looked back to see if anybody was approaching. *It would be more pleasant to have company*, she thought. But the highway, to make matters worse, had chosen not to be well-frequented. It was quite simply deserted.

There was no choice. Nimue cleared her throat, adjusted the bundle on her shoulder and gripped her stick tightly. And strode into the forest.

Oaks, elms and ancient hornbeams interwoven together predominated and there were also pines and larches. Lower down there was dense undergrowth, hawthorns, filberts, bird cherries and honeysuckle entangled together. You would have expected it to teem with bird life, but a malevolent silence reigned there. Nimue walked with her eyes fixed on the ground. She sighed with relief when all of a sudden, a woodpecker drummed somewhere deep in the forest. *So, something does live here*, she thought, *I'm not completely alone*.

She stopped and suddenly turned around. She didn't see anybody or anything, but for a moment was certain that someone was following her. She sensed she was being watched. Secretly stalked. Fear constricted her throat and shivers ran down her back.

She speeded up. The forest, or so it seemed, had begun to thin out, had become lighter and greener, for birches began to predominate. *One more bend, then two more*, she thought feverishly, *a little more and the forest will* finish. *I'll put this forest behind me, along with whatever's prowling there. And I'll keep going.*

Vyrva, Guado, Sibell, Brugge . . .

She didn't even hear a rustle, but caught sight of a movement out of the corner of her eye. A grey, many-limbed and incredibly fast shape shot out of the thicket of ferns. Nimue screamed, seeing the snapping pincers as large as scythes. Legs covered in spines and bristles. Many eyes, surrounding the head like a crown.

She felt a sharp tug, which picked her up and threw her aside. She tumbled down on her back onto the springy branches of a filbert shrub, caught hold of them, ready to leap up and flee. She froze, looking at the wild dance taking place on the track.

The many-legged creature was hopping and whirling around incredibly quickly, brandishing its limbs and clanking its dreadful mandibles. And around it, even quicker, so quick that he was blurred, danced a man. Armed with two swords.

First one, then a second and finally a third limb was hacked off and flew into the air in front of Nimue, who was watching petrified with fear. The blows of the swords fell on the flat body, from which a green sticky substance was squirting. The monster struggled and flailed around, finally making a desperate leap and fleeing into the forest, bolting. It didn't get far. The man with the swords caught up with it, stepped on it and pinned it to the ground with simultaneous, powerful thrusts of both blades. The creature threshed the ground with its limbs, then finally lay still.

Nimue pressed her hands to her chest, trying hard to calm her pounding heart. She saw her rescuer kneel over the dead monster and use a knife to lever something from its carapace. Saw him wipe the two blades and sheath the swords into the scabbards on his back.

'Everything in order?'

Some time passed before Nimue realised he was talking to her. But in any case, she couldn't utter a word or get up from the hazel thicket. Her rescuer was in no hurry to pull her out of the bush, so she finally had to get out herself. Her legs were trembling so much she had difficulty standing. The dryness in her mouth persisted stubbornly.

'It was a rotten idea, trekking alone through the forest,' said her rescuer, coming over.

He pulled back his hood and his snow-white hair positively shone in the sylvan twilight. Nimue almost cried out, bringing her fists to her mouth in an involuntary movement. *It's impossible*, she thought, *it's absolutely impossible. I must be dreaming.*

'But from this moment,' continued the white-haired man, examining a blackened and tarnished metal plate in his hand. 'From this moment, it will be possible to travel this way in safety. And what do we have here? IDR UL Ex IX 0008 BETA. Ha! This one was missing from my collection. Number eight. But now I've settled the score. How are you feeling, girl? Oh, forgive me. Parched mouth, eh? Tongue as dry as a board? I know it, I know it. Have a sip.'

She took the canteen he handed her in trembling hands.

‘Where are we going?’

‘To Do . . . To Dor . . .’

‘Dor?’

‘Dor . . . Dorian. What was that? That thing . . . over there?’

‘A work of art. Masterpiece number eight. It’s actually not important what it was. What’s important is that it’s no more. But who are you? Where are you making for?’

She nodded her head and swallowed. And spoke. Astonished by her own courage.

‘I am . . . I’m Nimue verch Wledyr ap Gwyn. From Dorian I’m going to Anchor and from there to Gors Velen. And Aretuza, the school of sorceresses on the Isle of Thanedd.’

‘Oho. And where did you come from?’

‘From the village of Vyrva. Via Guado, Sibell, Brugge, Casterfurt—’

‘I know that route,’ he interrupted her. ‘You’ve truly trekked through half the world, O Nimue, daughter of Wledyr. They ought to give you credit for that during the entry examination in Aretuza. But they’re unlikely to. You’ve set yourself an ambitious route, O girl from the village of Vyrva. Very ambitious. Come with me.’

‘Very well . . .’ Nimue was still walking stiffly. ‘Good sir . . .?’

‘Yes?’

‘Thank you for saving me.’

‘The thanks are due to you. For a good few days I’ve been looking out for someone like you. For any travellers coming this way were in large groups, proud and armed, and our work-of-art number eight didn’t dare to attack anyone like that, it didn’t venture from its hideout. You lured it out. It was able to spot some easy meat, even at a great distance. Somebody travelling alone. And not very big. No offence meant.’

The edge of the forest was, as it turned out, just around the corner. The white-haired man’s horse – a bay mare – was waiting a little way further, beside a lone clump of trees.

‘It’s some forty miles from here to Dorian,’ said the white-haired man. ‘Three days’ march for you. Three and a half, including the rest of today. Are you aware of that?’

Nimue felt a sudden euphoria, eliminating the torpor and the other effects of terror. *It's a dream*, she thought. *I must be dreaming. Because I can't be awake.*

'What's the matter? Are you feeling well?'

Nimue plucked up her courage.

'That mare . . .' she said, so excited she was barely able to enunciate her words. 'That mare is called Roach. Because all your horses bear that name. For you are Geralt of Rivia. The Witcher Geralt of Rivia.'

He looked long at her. And said nothing. Nimue also said nothing, eyes fixed on the ground.

'What year is it?'

'One thousand three hundred . . .' she said, raising her astonished eyes. 'One thousand three hundred and seventy-three after the Revival.'

'If so—' the white-haired man wiped his face with his hand in his sleeve '—Geralt of Rivia has been dead for many years. He died a hundred and five years ago. But I think he would be happy, if . . . He'd be happy if people remembered him after all those hundred and five years. If they remembered who he was. Why, even if they remembered the name of his horse. Yes, I think, he would be happy . . . If he could know it. Come. I'll see you off.'

They walked on. Nimue bit her lip. Embarrassed, she decided not to say anything more.

'Ahead of us is a crossroads and the highway,' the white-haired man said, breaking the tense silence. 'The road to Dorian. You'll get there safely—'

'The Witcher Geralt didn't die!' Nimue blurted out. 'He only went away, went away to the Land of the Apple Trees. But he'll return . . . He'll return, because the legend says he will.'

'Legends. Fables. Fairy tales. Stories and romances. I might have guessed, Nimue from the village of Vyrva, who's going to the school for sorceresses on the Isle of Thanedd. You wouldn't have dared undertake such an insane quest had it not been for the legends and fairy tales you grew up on. But they're just fairy tales, Nimue. Just fairy tales. You've come too far from home not to understand that.'

'The Witcher will return from the beyond!' Nimue wasn't

giving up. ‘He’ll return to protect people, so that Evil will never hold sway again. As long as darkness exists, witchers will be necessary. And darkness still exists!’

He said nothing, looking away. He finally turned towards her. And smiled.

‘Darkness still exists,’ he agreed. ‘In spite of the progress being made which we’re told to believe will light up the gloom, eliminate threats and drive away fears. Until now, progress hasn’t achieved great success in that field. Until now, all progress has done is to persuade us that darkness is only a glimmering superstition, that there’s nothing to be afraid of. But it’s not true. There *are* things to be afraid of. Because darkness will always, always exist. And Evil will always rampage in the darkness, there will always be fangs and claws, killing and blood in the darkness. And witchers will always be necessary. And let’s hope they’ll always appear exactly where they’re needed. Answering the call for help. Rushing to where they are summoned. May they appear with sword in hand. A sword whose gleam will penetrate the darkness, a sword whose brightness disperses the gloom. A pretty fairy tale, isn’t it? And it ends well, as every fairy tale should.’

‘But . . .’ she stammered. ‘But it’s a hundred years . . . How is it possible for . . . ? How is it possible—?’

‘A future novice of Aretuza may not ask questions like that,’ he interrupted, still smiling. ‘A novice of a school where they teach that nothing is impossible. Because everything that’s impossible today may become possible tomorrow. A slogan like that should hang above the entrance to the school. Which will soon become your school. Fare you well, Nimue. Farewell. Here we part.’

‘But . . .’ She felt sudden relief, and her words gushed forth. ‘But I’d like to know . . . Know more. About Yennefer. About Ciri. About how that story really ended. I’ve read it . . . I know the legend. I know everything. About witchers. About Kaer Morhen. I even know the names of all the witcher Signs! Please, tell me—’

‘Here we part,’ he interrupted her gently. ‘The road to your destiny is before you. A quite different road is before me. The story goes on, the tale never ends. As far as the Signs are concerned . . . There is one you don’t know. It’s called the Somne. Look at my hand.’

She looked.

‘An illusion,’ she heard from somewhere, far away. ‘Everything is an illusion.’

‘I say, wench! Don’t sleep or you’ll be robbed!’

She jerked her head up. Rubbed her eyes. And sprang up from the ground.

‘Did I fall asleep? Was I sleeping?’

‘I should say!’ laughed a stout woman from the driver’s box of a wagon. ‘Like a log! Like a baby! I hailed you twice – nothing. I was about to get off the cart . . . Are you alone? Why are you looking around? Are you looking for someone?’

‘For a man . . . with white hair . . . He was here . . . Or maybe . . . I don’t know myself.’

‘I didn’t see anyone,’ replied the woman. The little heads of two children peered out from under the tarpaulin behind her.

‘I heed that you’re travelling,’ said the woman, indicating with her eyes Nimue’s bundle and stick. ‘I’m driving to Dorian. I’ll take you if you wish. If you’re going that way.’

‘Thanks,’ said Nimue, clambering up onto the box. ‘Thanks a hundredfold.’

‘That’s the way!’ The woman cracked the reins. ‘Then we’ll go! It’s more comfortable to ride than hoof it, isn’t? Oh, you must have been fair beat to doze off and lay down right beside the road. You were sleeping, I tell you—’

‘—like a log,’ Nimue sighed. ‘I know. I was weary and fell asleep. And what’s more, I had—’

‘Yes? What did you have?’

She looked back. Behind her was the black forest. Before her was the road, running between an avenue of willows. A road towards destiny.

The story goes on, she thought. *The story never ends.*

‘—a very strange dream.’

By Andrzej Sapkowski from Gollancz:

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